

ISSUE AREA FRAMEWORK SUMMARY
SOCIAL INCLUSION AND RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

PROMOTING INCLUSION AND RESPECT IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTS

Introduction

The mission of the Bernard van Leer Foundation is 'to develop and support programmes that create significant positive change for children up to the age of 8 who are growing up in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage'. Many young children who live in such circumstances come from demographic groups which routinely experience exclusion and disrespect.

'Social inclusion and respect for diversity' is one of three issue areas through which the Foundation addresses the essential needs and rights of young children. The others are *'Strengthening the care environment'*, which focuses on conditions that promote young children's physical, cognitive and social-emotional development, and *'Successful transitions: the continuum from home to school'*, which is about optimising young children's educational and learning opportunities.

The values of inclusion and respect play an important role within these two areas. But they – and associated values, such as democracy, participation, citizenship and belonging – have not traditionally been seen as issues for very young children. *'Social inclusion and respect for diversity'* specifically addresses the question of how these values can become a reality in young children's lives.

Historical context

The focus on *'Social inclusion and respect for diversity'* emerged from the Foundation's earlier work. From the 1960s and 1970s, the Foundation supported projects which focused on children growing up in indigenous communities (notably in Australia, Africa and Latin America) and children of migrant parents in multicultural societies (notably Europe and the United States).

During that time the Foundation's expanding knowledge about children's experiences of diversity and discrimination has become increasingly pertinent, as better connectivity and cheaper transportation have drawn the peoples of the world ever closer together. Migration has risen up the political agenda – both internal, with urban dwellers now outnumbering those who live rurally, and across borders, with the UN forecasting unprecedented growth in attempted movement from poor to rich countries.¹ Climate change is exacerbating the strain put on resources by global population growth, and violence is now recognised by the World Health Organisation as a significant public health issue.²

We live in what UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon has called "the age of mobility"; but, he adds, "rather than looking at potential developmental gains from migration, governments have been slow to adapt. The result is accelerating illegal migration, social tension, discrimination, loss of faith in government and empowerment of criminal networks." Ban Ki

¹ www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/03/15/wimm15.xml

² www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/pr73/en/

Moon asserts that migration can be “an enormous force for good”, and the keys to realising its benefits are “fundamental to our shared global humanity: tolerance, social acceptance, education and mutual openness to cultural differences”.³

Over several decades, the Foundation’s work in this area has attracted numerous descriptors, including multi-culturalism, inter-culturalism, equal opportunities, equity, anti-bias, anti-discrimination, social inclusion and respect for diversity. These terminologies have frequently evoked subtly different nuances of meaning across cultures and academic disciplines, but all have in common a focus on meeting the needs and rights and shaping the environments of young children living in diverse contexts.

Unpacking the terms

There is a great deal of conceptual overlap between ‘social inclusion’ and ‘respect for diversity’. They are symbiotic and mutually reinforcing. But there is nonetheless a difference in emphasis.

Social inclusion incorporates notions of citizenship, status and rights. It focuses on tackling structural discrimination including barriers which prevent individuals or groups from full and meaningful participation on the basis of ethnic background, political affiliation or socio-economic status.

Respect for diversity is about behaviours and attitudes. It goes beyond legal rights to encompass such issues as a secure sense of belonging and a feeling of being accepted and welcome.⁴

“Respect is an attitude of recognition -- as a matter of social behavior as much as of legal right -- of the needs of others who are different and unequal, in the street as well as in the court. It is an attitude of acknowledging positively the views of those whose interests lead them to disagree, and of recognizing the pain of another through empathy.”⁵

Social inclusion aims to ensure that all young children have fair and equal access to resources, services and facilities which are conducive to their development and wellbeing. Respect for diversity aims to ensure that young children are exposed to and develop positive attitudes to diverse social identities. This includes promoting such ideals as pro-social behaviours, open and responsive interactions, social awareness, empathy, perspective taking, negotiation, anger management, conflict management and conflict resolution – among relevant adults, as well as children.

Many cultures have words which usefully encapsulate the overall essence of social inclusion and respect for diversity. Examples include the Zulu philosophy of *ubuntu* – defined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as involving “a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished” – and the Spanish concept of *convivencia*, denoting peaceful and productive co-existence.⁶

³ www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/jul/10/comment.globalisation

⁴ Based on Parekh, B. (2000), *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Palgrave, Houndmills: New York (p. 324.)

⁵ Quoted from Sennett, R. (2003) *Respect: The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality*, Penguin Books: London (pp. 54-55).

⁶ Tutu quote taken from Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_(philosophy))

Rights-based approach

Like all of the Foundation's work, 'Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity' is firmly rooted in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and associated General Comment 7 (GC7) of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood*.

Indeed, the values promoted by social inclusion and respect for diversity lay the groundwork for a rights-based approach to life in general. They nurture in children a sense of self-identity as a positive agent of change both for themselves and their community, as well as the ability to consistently engage in the tension between the individual and collective interest through deliberation and negotiation.

Children's rights matter both in their own right and because of the lasting effects they have on children's development and the consequent outcomes for society. Children's rights are interdependent and indivisible. Certain provisions of the CRC and GC7 are, however, particularly noteworthy with regard to social inclusion and respect for diversity:

- Article 2 of the CRC addresses the right of all children to grow up in surroundings characterized by equality, free from any form of discrimination due to their 'race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status'. Paragraph 24 of GC7 identifies access to appropriate and effective services, including those for health, care and education, as especially important for those children at risk of discrimination.
- Elaborating on Article 12 of the CRC, the right to participation, GC7 notes the importance of 'respect for the views and feelings of the young child' and an understanding of young children as 'active participant[s]', emphasizing that this right should be anchored in children's daily lives both at home and in the community throughout the range of early childhood services (para. 14).
- Article 17 sets out the right of children to be exposed to 'information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources'. GC7 adds the aim that such material 'reflects the national and regional diversities of children's circumstances, culture and language'.
- Article 29 stipulates that education should be directed towards children developing respect for both 'his or her own cultural identity' and 'civilizations different from his or her own' in the spirit of 'understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples'. GC7 clarifies that 'education' should be conceived of broadly – that is, not excluding care – and advocates human rights education anchored in everyday issues with which children can identify (para. 33).
- Addressing Article 31, on children's right to play and to 'participate fully in cultural life', GC7 notes a shortage of opportunities for young children to meet and interact in children-centred, secure, supportive, stimulating and stress-free environments, especially in urban areas (para. 34).

It is important to note that the provisions of the CRC are formulated in terms of mandates to governments which have ratified the convention: that is, the CRC is not merely a wishlist but represents a commitment. Both civil society and national governments have roles to play in promoting an agenda of social inclusion and respect for diversity; in so far as this agenda is required by the CRC, state signatories have already undertaken responsibility to do so.

Problem statement

Today's globalised world is marked by societies which are either increasingly heterogenous or in which existing heterogeneity is impacting more on the public consciousness. Although this can provide young children with positive opportunities for cultural exploration and exchange, it can also create inequalities and discrimination. Fear and uncertainty about rapid social change can manifest as resentment towards perceived outsiders – sometimes in extreme form, with social exclusion expressed through violence – and a reluctance to engage positively with members of other demographic groups.

When people suffer exclusion or disrespect, this shapes how families and young children experience life. There is growing evidence that even very young children are affected by experiences of stigma and discrimination. As well as infringing their rights, the meaning they derive from such experiences has a negative impact on their forming sense of self-identity, and undermines their prospects of feeling a sense of belonging and citizenship as they grow older.

There is also growing evidence that the attitudes which underlie prejudice and bias are formed in the early years of life. When practice and policy do not sufficiently encourage young children to respect and empathise with others who are different from them, and do not value the principle of equal rights for all to participate in decision-making, this translates into weaker democracies and less robust social capital, both among children today and as those children grow up to form the next generation of adults.

Grantmaking activities

Social inclusion and respect for diversity often require extensive structural and cultural change, and we recognise that the activities we fund must always reflect the local political, economic and social contexts. Among these activities are:

- developing quality early childhood environments for all children;
- providing training and support for educators and other childcare professionals;
- awareness raising among all relevant parties,
- promoting the meaningful participation of families in decision making and service delivery;
- integrating projects and programmes within community networks;
- gathering evidence and documenting experiences and lessons learnt in ways that are easy to understand and to adapt to other situations; and
- developing and disseminating advocacy messages that promote the potential of early childhood programmes to contribute to cohesive and respectful societies.

A major initiative worthy of individual mention is the Joint Learning Initiative on Children and Ethnic Diversity (JLICED), a global network of leading researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. With the Foundation's support, JLICED will undertake research in partnership with local organisations to expand understanding of the ways in which racial and ethnic divisions and conflict impact upon the lives of young children and to develop an international knowledge base of what types of programs have been found to work for particular children and communities in specific contexts.

The learning agenda

JLICED is only one part of our broader commitment to a learning agenda, which involves conceiving of our activities through three strands: practice, knowledge and policy.

In one sense, these represent a continuum: by funding practice, we gain knowledge which we seek to use to influence policy, thereby seeking to maximise the impact of our grantmaking. But they also weave together into a greater whole, each reinforcing the others. Our partnerships may be devoted to one of these three strands or, combine elements of more than one.

Partnerships emphasising **practice** are those which have a direct impact on the lives of young children by providing or improving programmes and services. Through these partnerships we seek to learn:

- What do we know about early childhood programs and services in divided, unequal and/or violent societies and contexts?
- What do we know about strategies for influencing and facilitating social inclusion within early childhood environments?
- What processes are related to the creation of inclusive and respectful environments for young children?
- How can processes be generalized across settings and regions?

Partnerships emphasising **knowledge** are those which develop learning about what is effective, what is not, why, and to what extent lessons can be generalized. Through these partnerships we seek to learn:

- What knowledge is available or can be generated in relation to interventions which deflect development of prejudice and discrimination in young children?
- What knowledge is available or can be generated in relation to interventions which promote empathy in young children?
- What knowledge is available or can be generated about the relationship between early childhood programs and services and the ability to reduce violence and enhance social inclusion, social capital and social networks in societies?

Partnerships primarily emphasising **policy** are those which help to develop conditions under which public institutions, resources, programmes, services, decision-makers and employees can more effectively contribute to improving the quality of life or achieving the rights of young children. Through these partnerships we seek to learn:

- What kinds of policies are supportive of reduced violence and enhanced social inclusion and respect for diversity?
- What evidence, processes and strategies are successful in influencing these policies?

Key messages

Our ongoing commitment to learning should be seen in the context of an evolving knowledge base about this issue area.

Early childhood interventions which address structural inequalities and encourage positive identity formation and respectful behavior towards others can provide short- and longer-term benefits for young children and for society. Such interventions include the development of 'meeting places' and 'common spaces' in which equal participation is practised and valued.

Engaging young children in creating environments which are free from stigma and discrimination, and which discourage the development of bias and prejudice, not only addresses children's rights in the here and now. It also leads to the development of better societies. We believe that children who have experienced the values of social inclusion and

respect for diversity will grow into more engaged citizens of stronger democracies which have greater social cohesion and social capital, in turn creating the conditions for further progress towards poverty reduction and social justice.

The attitudes and behaviour of adults – community leaders, childcare professionals and parents – are critically important for achieving social change. When interventions involve parents, families and communities, they are more likely to be anchored in social contexts and effective in influencing young children and achieving wider social change.

In early childhood, therefore, we believe that all young children and their families should benefit from:

- access without discrimination to services and activities which further their wellbeing;
- opportunities for active and meaningful participation in such services and activities;
- developing a sense of belonging within their communities and the wider society;
- experiencing positive exposure to the many social identities within their environments;
- becoming aware of the effects of prejudice and learning to respect diversity;
- deepening their capacities for empathy by imaginative engagement (e.g., through stories, pictures and theatre) with other people's realities;
- learning the social skills of negotiation, perspective taking, anger management and conflict resolution.

Outcomes and indicators

To measure our effectiveness in translating our key messages into achievements in improving the lives of young children, we have formulated desired outcomes for the social inclusion and respect for diversity programme in both the medium term and the long term.

The medium-term outcome for social inclusion is: 'Programmes model meaningful participation, equity and inclusion for all children and families.'

The medium-term outcome for respect for diversity is: 'In everyday settings, the behaviour of young children and the adults around them reflect mutual respect and reciprocal understanding.'

We will measure our progress towards achieving these outcomes through formal assessments and evaluation studies, as part of the Foundation's commitment to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of its grantmaking. These assessments and studies will make use of indicators specific to each country programme and each individual grant. Examples of such indicators are, for social inclusion:

- There is an increase in the numbers of young children from socially excluded groups participating in programmes for young children;
- Major national organizations acknowledge issues for young children in socially excluded groups and take responsibility for them;
- Representatives of excluded groups are included on decision-making bodies related to the care and education of children;
- Programs for adults working with young children target issues and strategies related to enhanced social inclusion for children and families.

And, for respect for diversity:

- There is increased awareness of the benefits of developing early childhood services as 'meeting places' where diversities are welcomed and respected and where families and children interact freely, without constraining stereotypes;
- Strategies for developing and increasing meeting places are developed, reviewed, disseminated and implemented;
- More training programs address attitudes about respect for diversity in adults and emphasize the development of young children's abilities to take different perspectives, negotiate, empathize and solve problems;
- There is an increased availability of materials and use of activities for young children which communicate messages of respect for diversity.

The overall long-term outcome, which can also be seen as the guiding vision statement for the social inclusion and respect for diversity programme, is this: 'Children live in more equitable societies, and within environments that model and encourage mutual respect, empathy and conflict resolution.'