

Children Crossing Borders: Enhancing the Inclusion of Children in Pre-school Settings

Chris Pascal and Tony Bertram
Centre for Research in Early Childhood in Birmingham

1. Introduction

European nation states are confronted with increasing diversity within their communities and yet little research has been done on how this diversity is impacting on early childhood settings and how practice might respond positively and proactively to these changes. 2007 is the European Year for Diversity and Against Discrimination, with a mandate to deepen dialogues in order to enhance the development of strategies that enable each child and each family to participate in provisions of good quality, free from any form of discrimination.

The Children Crossing Borders study is a clear response to this dynamic context and aims to investigate how the early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems of five countries are serving the children of recent immigrants and of what recently migrated parents want for their children in ECEC settings. The five countries in this study (England, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States) have been chosen for their strikingly different approaches to serving children of immigrants. All five countries are democracies, but with significant differences in notions of citizenship, nation, federalism, public services, and civic responsibility and with very different systems of early childhood education.

The focus in the project is particularly on the children of those families whose presence in the host country is new, whose status is vulnerable, and who face the difficulties of overcoming cultural, linguistic, and sometimes racial and religious differences, between their home and host culture. It is these immigrants who are the subject of intense political and social debate in the EU countries and the US, and whose voices are most rarely heard.



For most young (3-5 years old) children of parents who have come from other countries and cultures, ECEC settings are the first context in which they come face to face with differences between the culture of home and the public culture of their new country. For parents who have recently immigrated to a new country, enrolling their child in an early childhood programme is the paradigmatic moment where cultural values of their home and adopted culture come into contact and, often, conflict. For countries with high rates of immigration, ECEC programs are key sites for enacting national goals for social inclusion and the creation of new citizens.

There is perhaps no social issue more challenging for the countries of the European Union, collectively and individually, than immigration. It is a key political issue that connects domestic to international policies, that is closely linked with urban poverty and related social problems, and that reflects core concerns about what it means to be a nation, a people, and a union. The treatment of immigrants has become even more salient in the post-911 climate of heightened concerns about national security, high rates of unemployment, and rising xenophobia.

The issue of immigration is closely tied to the issue of diversity. For all five of the countries in our study, newly arriving immigrants are a major source of cultural, linguistic, racial, and religious diversity. Our study speaks to and draws on the literature on diversity, but keeps as its focus the experiences of recently arrived immigrants. While there are some important similarities in the issues facing, for example, African-American and Mexican-immigrant parents as they place their children in preschool, there are also important differences.



This study is cross-cultural and cross-national in two important senses: it is concerned with five countries; and the research is being conducted by closely collaborating teams of researchers from these five countries. The core method of this study is straightforward, and follows the approach taken by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson in the 1089 seminal study, “Preschools in Three Cultures.” We have made videotapes of typical days in classrooms for three and four-year-olds in ECEC settings in each of the five countries, and then used these videotapes not (primarily) as data, but as tools to stimulate a multivocal, inter-cultural dialogue. The videotapes have been used as an interviewing cue to draw out the beliefs and concerns of parents and community leaders from immigrant communities, of teachers and administrators who work in programs that serve children of newly arriving immigrants, of children and of early childhood education experts and policy makers concerned with early childhood education and care. By showing the same set of videotapes to these key stakeholders in each of the five nations, we hope to highlight similarities and differences in how each nation approaches the promises and challenges of bringing immigrants into the fabric of society.

2. Project Aims

Our project has multiple aims. The first aim of our project is to give voice to the hopes, beliefs, and concerns of immigrant parents about the education and care of their young children. ECEC programs that serve children of immigrants, though generally well intended, are hampered by policy-makers’ and practitioners’ lack of knowledge of and consideration for parental perspectives. In our study, the voices of immigrant parents will introduce perspectives on the social, emotional, cognitive, and academic dimensions of child development that we anticipate will broaden and in some cases challenge Western European and American theory and best practice. The notions of normative child development and of best practice that guide early childhood education in Europe and North America are insufficiently informed by culture difference and unaware of their implicit middle-class Western values and assumptions.



A second aim of this project is to identify and explicate five models of working with children of immigrants in the hope that the countries participating in the study (as well as other countries) can learn from each other, not necessarily by directly borrowing so much as by being exposed to approaches that will expand the repertoire of the possible and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. The countries participating in this study, including the United States, which self-consciously defines itself as a land of immigrants, have much to gain from being exposed to a range of approaches. There is a critical shortage of studies on the experiences of children of immigrants in ECEC settings and on what immigrants from different cultures want from their children's ECEC programs. Within each of the countries in our study, discussions of immigration policy and more specifically about how early childhood programs should serve children of immigrants tend to become stuck in acrimonious debates, debates in which there is little new to say and little chance for changes of opinion. By introducing an appreciation for the differences in how the five countries in our study are approaching this question, we hope to breakdown the overly binary, adversarial thinking that characterizes debate on this topic and in this way to contribute to the possibility of more imaginative, helpful practices and approaches to dealing with diversity. We hope that our study will influence institutions and mechanisms that are shaping current practices in the education and care of young children.

Our third aim is to model a process for the parents and staff of ECEC settings to engage in dialogue about what is best for young children. It is our hope that the videotapes we produce in this study will eventually be used as tools for stimulating discussion among practitioners and parents about the means and end of early childhood education and care. By strengthening understanding between parents and teachers, our project will build greater articulation between the young child's worlds of home and school, and thereby make it a bit easier for young children to negotiate the differences they encounter in these two contexts.



Our fourth aim is to produce videotapes and accompanying materials that will be used as training materials for pre-service and in-service practitioners.

As these multiple aims suggest, audiences for this study will include scholars in a range of fields including education, child development, sociology, anthropology, and policy studies, as well as policy makers, community leaders, and early childhood practitioners (staff and administrators). The findings of this study will have implications for several key areas of policy in both the European Union and the United States, areas including social exclusion, child poverty, educational underachievement, and parental employment. These are all problems that are especially acute in immigrant communities, problems that studies have shown can be ameliorated by high quality, culturally responsive early childhood education and care programs.

The products of this study will include a series of research articles; a major book, intended not just for scholars but also for teachers, policy makers, and lay readers; a DVD; a website; and training materials.

3. Early Learning From the Project

We have been on a huge learning journey during the first two years of the Project. We have learned lessons about cross national working, the ethics of research with potentially vulnerable groups, and the fieldwork challenges of the technology based, visual imaging methodology. The second year of the Project has extended this learning, providing an enriching experience in terms of both personal, professional and research knowledge. It has also extended our understandings about the formation of diverse identities, and the political power of early childhood education settings due to their pivotal role in the construction of children's and family identities and sense of belonging.

The work has provided an opportunity to hear of national and trans-national activities in the field which has been enlightening as it enabled us to consider similarities and differences in ethos, policy and practice in pre-school settings, and to see the strategic and political drivers impacting on race and multi-strand equalities and inequalities in early years across Europe and even beyond. The equality field is an area of ongoing learning for us all and we are looking forward to the new challenges and excitement the next stages of this work will bring to gain an even deeper knowledge and understanding, which will inform and shape the future direction of policy and practice.

During the period of this fieldwork the team has faced several major challenges to which we have had to respond. These include:

1. There have been practical and methodological challenges to conducting the focus groups, for example, encouraging less confident participants to become involved and managing the more confident and aggressive ones from dominating the session. The role of interpreters, group size and keeping the discussion focused on the research topics.
2. Despite these challenges, the consensus from all five countries is that the method has worked well. In almost all cases the focus group discussions are interesting and are producing the kind

of data we need. The videos are working effectively to stimulate and provoke dialogue at the start and to lead into a rich discussions that often provide powerful individual testimonies of experience and perceptions.

3. Social and political events in each country have had a significant impact on the research. For example, national and global events and new laws impacting immigration policies have figured highly in the focus group discussions, e.g. the Iraq War, the London bombings, September 11th, the wearing of the Niqab, hijab or the veil, the riots in Paris and the burning and death of one of the Projects study children in Paris. These events were 'hot' items that respondents needed to talk about and also that caused us real ethical challenges in our research. For instance, the first focus group interview we held was on the morning after the London bombings and this shaped the dialogue enormously. The star child in the French film we were showing was killed in a Paris apartment fire and we were unsure for a long time as to whether we could use this film and the dialogue that flowed. The wearing of the veil became a hot political issue during our interviews as the English video is set in a largely veiled community with an assistant who wears the veil. These events were further stimulus and led to rich but challenging debates in the focus groups.

4. Emerging Lessons

4.1 Methodological Lessons

Our pilot trial with capturing children's voices has shown the importance and potential of including children in the project's methodology. The recent UNICEF Report (Bradshaw, 2007) on the well being of children in developed countries and the poor showing of English children's well being, has further highlighted the relevance of this newly emerging strand in the project. We have learned that:

1. the videos are a useful prompt for children's dialogue;
2. children are well aware of their conditions of life in the wider world as well as their pre-school;
3. we have to explore further methodological techniques to ensure all children can express themselves fully in the dialogues;
4. we have to take great care with the power relationships in the researcher/subject dyad to ensure the ethics of the method;
5. we have to trouble further the issue of children's rights to voice and responsiveness in the project;
6. building a trusting relationship with children to ensure open dialogue takes time and resource and needs significantly more investment than we have been able to make thus far;
7. we have effectively used a variety of narrative techniques with children that can be adapted with some more work for use in professional practice eg narrative boxes with objects, video reconstructions, drawings, photographs, listening posts, 'whispering groups', dramatic play, persona dolls, child guided tours of the pre-school;
8. researcher techniques need to be further developed eg use of eye contact, interpersonal cues, active listening, pacing, timing, venues, multiple languages of children, metacognitive opportunities.

In summary, we feel that our work in year 2 has shown the enormous potential of including children's voices in the project, and we have some important and sharp data from the respondents we have worked with so far. However, this work has also shown that to include children's voices properly, ethically and equitably, will require a significant additional investment in terms of time and research support.

4.2 Professional Lessons

Early collation and coding of the data has allowed us to begin to map some emerging professional concerns and findings that we can begin to mainstream into policy and practice. The deeper year 3 analysis will strengthen the professional lessons. We have learned that:

1. Nearly all newly parents want their children to be bilingual and want some bilingual support for their children, but they overwhelmingly want the emphasis to be on learning English.
2. All newly arrived parents want someone at their pre-school to speak their language so that they can communicate more easily with them.

3. Most newly arrived parents are confident that they can sustain their children's mother tongue within their home.
4. Many newly arrived parents want a more structured and academically focused curriculum.
5. Pre-schools often are willing to adjust their programmes to include cultural learning through celebrations, dress, food but so not tackle the deeper cultural and power differences.
6. Having members of staff from the local community is helpful but these staff are in a difficult situation and often marginalized from the pre-school and community groups through their mediating role.

4.3 Political Lessons

The project has generated data on a far wider sweep of experience than early childhood pre-school pedagogy and practice. The voices of these previously silenced parents and children are providing us with a fresh perspective on practice in the pre-schooling system. They are provoking change in a way that insiders often can't do as their voices challenge us to think, reform and change in a way that we had not expected. We have learned that:

1. Newly arrived parents experience pervasive racism and often poverty and express this strongly in dialogues which are attempting to focus on early childhood practice. They lack forums to express their lived experiences and say no-one listens or they feel silenced.
2. There is a lot of ignorance and stereotyping of newly arrived families in the host community.
3. Newly arrived parents don't necessarily get much help from others in their community.
4. There is a strong demand for more open dialogues from parents and practitioners in all communities.
5. There is a clear awareness of the inequity in the relationships between parents, practitioners and children and a desire to challenge this through more dialogue and training.

All of these lessons will feed into our next phase of work which is currently underway.