

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

*Chris Pascal and Tony Bertram introduce a cross-national research study that is providing unique insights into the experience and perspectives of migrant families with young children*

There is perhaps no social issue more challenging for the countries of the European Union than immigration, confronting them with increasing diversity. 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-9/11 climate, with heightened anxieties about national security and rising xenophobia.

For most young children of parents who have come from other countries and cultures, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services 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 come to a new country, enrolling their child in an early childhood programme also brings the cultural values of their home and adopted country into contact and, often, conflict. While 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, however, a critical shortage of studies on the experiences of children of immigrants in ECEC services and on what immigrants from different cultures want from these services. The *Children Crossing Borders* study is a response to this dynamic situation, researching into how the ECEC systems of five countries - England, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States - are serving the children of recent immigrants and what recently migrated parents want for their children. The five countries have been chosen for their strikingly different approaches to serving children of immigrants.

## **Aims and methods**

The research team is drawn from the five countries. We have a number of aims. First, to give voice to the hopes, beliefs, and concerns of immigrant parents about the education and care of their young children, introducing perspectives that we anticipate will broaden and in some cases challenge Western European and American theory and best practice. Second, to identify different models of working with children of immigrants in the hope that countries can learn from each other by being exposed to approaches that will expand the repertoire of the possible and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. Third, to model a process for the parents and staff of ECEC settings to engage in dialogue about what is best for young children. Finally, we aim to produce videotapes and accompanying materials that will be used as training materials for practitioners.

The core method of this study follows the approach taken by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson in their earlier seminal study, "Preschools in Three Cultures." We have made videotapes of typical days 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 are used as a cue to draw out, in focus groups, the beliefs and concerns of children, parents and community leaders from immigrant communities, of teachers and administrators who work in settings that serve children of newly arrived immigrants, and of ECEC experts and policy makers. 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.

During the first two years of the project, the team has faced several major challenges. Despite these challenges, the consensus from all five countries is that the method has worked well. The videos are stimulating rich discussions that often provide powerful individual testimonies and perspectives. Social and political events in each country have also had a significant impact on the research. For example, 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 it had provoked. 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; this led to rich but challenging debates in the focus groups.

## **Emerging Lessons**

### *For methods*

In our initial work on capturing children's voices we have learned that:

- the videos are a useful prompt for children's dialogue;
- children are well aware of their conditions of life in the wider world as well as in their pre-schools;
- we have to explore further techniques to ensure all children can express themselves fully in the dialogues;
- we have to take great care with the power relationships in the researcher/subject dyad;
- 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.

We feel that our work to date has shown the enormous potential of including children's voices in the project. 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.

### *For professionals*

Early analysis has allowed us to begin to identify some emerging issues that we can begin to mainstream into policy and practice. We have learned that:

- Nearly all newly arrived 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 the language of their new country.

- All parents want someone at their pre-school to speak their language so that they can communicate more easily with them.
- Most parents are confident that they can sustain their children's mother tongue within their home.
- Many parents want a more structured and academically focused curriculum.
- Pre-schools often are willing to adjust their programmes to include cultural learning through celebrations, dress, food etc - but do not tackle the deeper cultural and power differences.
- Having members of staff from the local community is helpful but these staff are in a difficult situation and often marginalized from both pre-school and community groups through their mediating role.

### *Political Lessons*

The project has generated data that goes well beyond ECEC services and practice. We have learned that:

- 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.
- There is much ignorance and stereotyping of newly arrived families in the host community.
- Newly arrived parents don't necessarily get much help from others in their community.
- There is a strong demand for more open dialogues from parents and practitioners in all communities.
- 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.

These lessons will feed into the next phase of the study, which is currently underway. But it is already clear that this study will have implications for

several key areas of policy, including social exclusion, child poverty, educational underachievement, and parental employment.

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