Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity.
A Framework for Early Childhood Programs

Dr Jacqueline Hayden
Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Netherlands

Dr Oscar Odena
Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

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Abstract
This paper outlines the current landscape affecting Early Childhood policy and practice. The importance of Social Inclusion (SI) and Respect for Diversity (RfD) is analysed within a global perspective. Several premises regarding SI and RfD are examined, including: diversity and discrimination as global realities affecting all children; the mounting evidence of the development of ethnic identities and prejudice from an early age; the contribution of Early Years interventions to social cohesion; and the negative effect of non-intervention. In the second half of the paper the three program areas of the Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF) are outlined, as well as the Foundation's specific Framework for SI and RfD. From the need to gather evidence from successful programs the authors present the first phase of a new Joint Learning Initiative (JLI) on Children and Ethnic Diversity. The methodology used to draw together knowledge form previous programs is discussed. Ultimately this initiative will lead to building a 'network of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners able to share good practice and to use research evidence' to advocate for the development of effective Early Childhood diversity programs (Connolly, 2007).

1. Introduction: a conducive landscape

Several discourses for Early Childhood (EC) have influenced and continue to influence policy makers and practitioners. These discourses include, amongst others, the following ideas and developments:

- changes in the perceived role of women (e.g. female workforce participation);
- perceived need for compensatory experiences to specifically address children who fail at school;

- increasing the efficacy of the school system by focusing on readiness - including pre-literacy and numeracy;
- addressing support needs for (specific groups of) children and their families;
- using EC as an entry point for community development;
- and understanding EC as a way to address macro social issues, e.g. social cohesion.

In addition, the current landscape affecting the EC sector is characterized by several cross-national trends:

- Globalisation - rapid spread of ideas, western hegemony.
- Neo-liberalism - reduction in state/government interventions, unequal distribution.
- Economic rationalism - benefits in terms of financial outcomes.
- Children's rights - locus of authority devolved, focus on child's autonomy.
- Diversity *versus* outcomes: rapid change - migration, displacement, conflict, war.

2. Premises regarding SI and RfD

Four premises regarding SI and RfD are examined in this section, including: (2.1) diversity and discrimination as global realities affecting all children; (2.2) the mounting evidence of the development of ethnic identities and prejudice from an early age; (2.3) the contribution of Early Years interventions to social cohesion; and (2.4) the negative effect of non-intervention.

2.1 Premise One. A global reality: 'diversity' affects all children

From the UN Report of Secretary General 2006 we can observe that there are currently twenty-two countries affected by war/conflict (e.g. Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Mano River and Great Lakes region of Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechen Republic, Burundi, Cote D'Ivoire, Democratic republic of Congo, Haiti, Liberia, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, Chad, Columbia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Uganda). Other environments are marked by deep division and fear, including Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Turkey, Croatia, Sri Lanka, Timor East, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and others. A further group of border areas are affected by forced displacement of individuals, cross border raids and unpredictable dislocations (e.g. Mexico, Chad, Thailand, Cambodia and Tibet).

Other countries and regions have been identified as having underlying divisions/increased migration. In these regions no apparent armed conflict exists, but diversity is a source of bias and discrimination. Children may be subject to stigma because of their ethnic, religious or other cultural inheritance or they may become perpetrators of prejudice and hate. European countries, the USA, Canada, Australasia and the UK are examples of this (UN Report of the Secretary General, 2006).

Children in all this countries are first hand witnesses and/or victims of violence and discrimination (for particular case studies from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chad, Colombia, Nepal, Northern Ireland, Palestine and USA refer to Connolly and Hayden, 2007).

2.2 Premise Two. Mounting evidence of the development of ethnic identities and prejudice from an early age

Connolly (2007: 50), summarising findings form recent studies, observes that research over the last half a century 'has shown consistently that children can become aware of racial differences from about the age of two and that they are capable of developing negative attitudes and prejudices about these from about the age of three onwards'. In the context of Northern Ireland, a recent study highlighted the strong tendency for young children to begin developing preferences for symbols of their own 'Catholic' or 'Protestant' group well before being aware of the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' (Connolly *et al.*, 2002). A third of six year olds participating in this study were aware of belonging to one side of the division, and one in six children made prejudiced remarks about those belonging to the other side.

2.3 Premise Three. The contribution of Early Years interventions to social cohesion

It is possible to increase young children's ability to recognise instances of exclusion. For instance, Connolly *et al.* (2006) dealt with the deep divisions that exist in Northern Ireland through encouraging children's awareness of the cultures and traditions associated with their own and the other main community, as well as encouraging positive attitudes towards the other main community. To this aim they used curricular resources and media messages aimed at increasing children's respect for cultural, physical and racial differences (further information on this project is available at www.mifc-pii.org)

2.4 Premise Four. The negative effect of non-intervention

Research has also demonstrated that young children are active in developing their own attitudes towards ethnicity (e.g. Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001; Lewis, 2003; Connolly and Healy, 2004). Young children are constantly making a meaning and, therefore, non-intervention has potential negative outcomes:

> *A focus on facilitating SI and RfD for young children and their families is seen as a way to counter forces of exclusion, voicelessness, vulnerability and inequities* (summarized from Freiler and Zarnke's [2002: viii-ix] Foreword to the Laidlaw Foundation's working paper series)

3. A framework for SI and RfD

The Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF) specific Framework for SI and RfD is developed from the Foundation's mission:

To develop and support programmes that create significant positive change for children up to the age of eight who are growing up in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage (BvLF, 2007)

The Foundation's three Issue Areas are outlined as follows:
- 'Strengthening the Care Environment': focuses on conditions that promote young children's physical, cognitive and social-emotional development.
- 'Successful Transitions: the Continuum from Home to School': ensures that young children realize the opportunities generated through formal education (strengthening schools, enhancing access).
- 'Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity': facilitates the promotion of inclusion and respect as a reality in young children's lives.

The Framework and the Foundation's mission, which are available online at www.bernardvanleer.org, have a rights-based approach emerging from Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This article supports the right of all children to grow up in surroundings that are characterized by equality and respect for diversity, free from any form of discrimination due to their *'race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status'.*

Early life is understood as a critical period during which *all* young children (and their families) will benefit from:
- access without discrimination;
- meaningful participation;
- developing a sense of belonging within their communities and the wider society;
- positive exposure to the many social identities;
- becoming aware of the effects of prejudice and learning to respect diversity;
- deepening their capacities for empathy by imaginative engagement with other people's realities;
- learning the social skills of negotiation, perspective taking, anger management and conflict resolution.

To make the 'SI and RfD' Issue Area operational, activities supported by the Foundation are guided by 'Knowledge', 'Practice' and 'Policy and advocacy' questions. For example:
- What evidence is available or can be generated in relation to interventions which deflect development of prejudice and discrimination in young children?
- What evidence is available or can be generated about the relationship between early childhood programs and services and the ability to address enhanced social inclusion in societies? (Knowledge questions)

- 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 and families? (Practice questions)
- What kinds of polices are supportive of enhanced social inclusion and respect for diversity?
- What evidence, processes and strategies are successful in influencing policies? (Policy and advocacy)

Finally, in all contexts, the 'SI and RfD' area work needs to support *inclusiveness and mutual respect* through
- the development of quality early childhood environments;
- training and support to educators and other childcare professionals;
- awareness raising with all relevant parties;
- the meaningful participation of families in decision making and service delivery;
- integration of projects and programs into community networks;
- evidence gathering and documentation of experiences and lessons learnt;
- the development and dissemination of advocacy messages that acknowledge and promote the potential of early childhood programs to contribute to cohesive and respectful societies (Evidence base).

4. Enhancing the evidence base: The Joint Learning Initiative on Children and Ethnic Diversity. Step one: Scoping the field

> *Social inclusion and respect for diversity within any situation or context do not take hold by happenstance* (summarised from Friendly and Lero, 2002)

In order to contribute to the Framework's need to 'gather evidence' from successful programs and to 'develop advocacy' on the potential of EC programs, in a way that will influence policy makers, BvLF is supporting a new Joint Learning Initiative (JLI) on Children and Ethnic Diversity. The JLI is being coordinated from Queen's University Belfast - more information on the aims of the JLI and on the role and value of research for EC programs can be found in the June 2007 issue of *Early Childhood Matters*, pp. 50-54. The first phase of the JLI is a scoping exercise that draws together knowledge form previous programs using a detailed search protocol. In this section the methodology employed during the scoping exercise is examined.

Compared to a (more) traditional approach to reviewing existing literature, developing a detailed scoping protocol has clear advantages. Some underlying principles of doing this are that the issues to be explored and the criteria to appraise the studies reviewed are clearly set from the outset. Also a protocol is more explicit, transparent and can be used collaboratively. Other additional advantages include:

- more clarity in reporting search strategies than in standard academic reviews (e.g. criteria for including/excluding studies);
- policy makers and professionals are less likely to misread research for their own purposes;
- possibility of replication at a later date;
- easily accountable;
- easy to update.

Three research questions were addressed and, for the sake of brevity, we will consider the two main ones here:

- What research has been published to date on young children's acquisition and development of ethnic attitudes and identities?
- What research has been published to date that describes and/or evaluates early childhood programmes that include a focus on ethnic diversity and that aim to promote social inclusion, mutual respect and/or pro-social behaviours amongst children within and/or outside settings?

The inclusion criteria comprised clearly defined instructions. For instance, publications had to be original empirical research (qualitative or quantitative), thus omitting opinion/theoretical publications and reviews; they had to be centred on children aged 0-8 years; and they needed to include a focus on either acquisition/development of ethnic attitudes or diversity education programs aimed at ethnic inclusion/respect/pro-social behaviours. 'Ethnic' and 'Ethnicity' were used form the outset in a generic sense to refer to people's group identities, based upon one or more of the following: race, nationality, religion, language and/or shared history.

International databases in English and Spanish were searched in the first phase of the JLI (e.g. *ERIC*, *PsycINFO*, *Dialnet* [in Spanish], the BvLF Projects Database, etc.). For all of the research databases used, a keyword search was conducted using combinations of the following terms:

Age	**Diversity**	**Programme**	*Goal*
early-childhood early-years preschool young children	cultur$ ethnic$ race racial	curricul$ initiative intervention program$	*anti-bias cohesion empathy inclusion prejudice respect*

Each combination included a term drawn from 'Age', 'Diversity' and 'Programme', thus representing a total of 64 unique combinations of terms used. For example, the first few keyword searches were based upon:

1. early-childhood AND cultur$ AND curricul$

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2. early-childhood AND cultur$ AND initiative
3. early-childhood AND cultur$ AND intervention
4. early-childhood AND cultur$ AND program$
5. … and so on

Searches using the above combinations produced titles with and without the keywords from *'Goal'*. If at this stage the number of documents was too large, a second search was undertaken within the documents found using each of the six *'Goal'* keywords. In the opposite case scenario (i.e. no found documents) the terms from 'Age' were combined solely with 'Diversity' and/or *'Goal'* keywords, in order to be less restrictive.

Different databases use slightly different keywords to represent children's age (e.g. the *Australian Education Index* employs 'early-childhood-education' instead of early years). Additional/alternative keywords such as 'Identity-Formation' and 'Childhood-Attitudes' were used in combination with 'Social-Bias' and 'Bias'. In all cases a record of all used combinations was kept, including the number of documents retrieved and omitted. This detailed record of keywords and results will be attached to the first phase Report. The table below, for example, summarises the documents retrieved from *ERIC* until 17 August 2007:

	Total number
Documents retrieved	1047
Documents omitted	925
Documents included (with Abstract)	122
Documents included (without Abstract)	0
Total number of documents without repetitions (from other databases)	**63**

5. Conclusions

Currently the emerging data regarding the first question is being analysed and organised by geographical location, ethnic categories and authors. The literature identified in relation to the second research question is being organised into cross-categories of focus (i.e. race, ethnicity, culture, pro-social behaviour) by approach (description/analysis, actual evaluation of effectiveness of educational programmes).

From this exercise, influential researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in EC will be drawn together for the next phases of the JLI. Ultimately, this initiative will lead to the building of a network able to share good practice and to use research evidence' to advocate for the development of effective EC diversity programs:

> *Comprehensive early childhood care is key to creating a world characterized by hope and change rather than by deprivation and despair and to building countries that are thriving and free* (UNICEF, 2001)

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