

Freeing young children from the shadows of history

Early childhood programmes in two divided societies: Northern Ireland and Israel

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Children do not choose to be born into societies with a tragic history that undermines social cohesion. Where there is such a history, children grow up in an atmosphere in which they learn suspicion and fear of other communities within the borders of their own country. This includes fear of their peers who belong to these communities, children they may have never met because of social and political distances. This article focuses on experiences in Northern Ireland and Israel, and demonstrates that lessons can be learned across contexts.

Lessons from Northern Ireland

Five key elements have been identified that encourage inclusiveness and openness in young children's environments despite major social divisions, based on the Media Initiative for Children in Northern Ireland (Connolly et al. 2006).

1. *Partnerships forged between different organisations around a common vision.* In Northern Ireland, the partners were the national Early Years Organization (NIPPA), which adopts a non-sectarian position, a range of voluntary and statutory agencies and the USA-based Peace Initiatives Institute.
2. *Curricular materials and resources developed for use by pre-school educators.* The curricular materials developed in connection with the media initiative fitted well into the Northern Ireland pre-school curriculum on personal, social and emotional development.
3. *Alliances with parents and links to children's homes.* Letters sent to parents and guardians suggested how families could support the programme through activities and conversations. The letters also addressed parental concern about raising sensitive issues with young children.
4. *A media initiative that addressed diversity in its broadest sense, with a focus beyond that of*

the Catholic-Protestant divide. Three one-minute cartoons featured four children in a park setting. Positive messages were communicated about playing well together despite disability (represented by one child's corrective eye patch), race (exemplified by a child from the Chinese community in Northern Ireland), and sectarian divisions (symbolised by two children wearing the soccer shirts of rival football teams associated with the religious divide).

5. *Evaluative research to investigate the effects of the programme on young children.* 'Before and after' comparisons in five settings demonstrated that the children exposed to the media initiative registered a significant increase in their ability to recognise instances of exclusion and to empathise with exclusion, whereas children in the control group who had not been exposed to the programme showed no such increase.

Relating the Northern Ireland experience to Israel

The Bernard van Leer Foundation has been working for several decades in Israel and is interested in relating this experience to findings from elsewhere. The five lessons learned in Northern Ireland are strongly supported by the Foundation's experience in Israel and could prove useful elsewhere as well.



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Partnerships around a common vision

In the Foundation's experience, despite what may seem like a macro-political deadlock in the Middle East, there is a readiness for positive change at the grassroots that arises out of a yearning for peace and stability. People fervently wish that the youngest members of society might benefit from such stability. "We do not want our children to suffer these troubles," as one father put it when he explained why he sent his child to one of the few Jewish-Arab schools rather than the more usual segregated schools. Partnerships that support Jewish-Arab schools bring together parents from both communities who would like a different future for their children, teachers who are keen to use education for social change, the civil society organisation Hand in Hand that has built up expertise in bilingual and multicultural education, municipalities that are prepared to support an integrated school, and funding agencies.

Comprehensive pre-school training programmes that support openness to diversity

Positive change in young children's environments can be initiated in pre-schools, where children and parents can be approached in groups and teachers are motivated as well as formally trained to influence young pupils' lives for the better. Schools and pre-

schools can also influence educational authorities and policy makers.

In a divided society, asking educators of young children to raise issues around diversity in a constructive manner is not a simple conversation. The Northern Ireland experience suggests that teachers feel more comfortable discussing issues surrounding differences and the past with parents and children if they have already been given the opportunity to explore their own attitudes and beliefs.

In Northern Ireland, "asking the early years educators to address this issue was inviting them to break through what had developed into a societal norm of silence and avoidance" (Connolly et al. 2006). 'Breaking the silence' is also a vital first step

in working with pre-school educators in Israel. One of the Foundation's partner organisations has found drama techniques to be useful in encouraging educators to confront their fears and address stereotypes about other communities. Skilled facilitators working with relatively small heterogeneous groups of educators have proved effective, although it may take a few sessions before the ice of denial begins to thaw within individuals and between them.

The availability of appropriate materials helped to prepare teachers in Northern Ireland to talk about diversity with young children. These included hand puppets, jigsaws, feelings cubes, lotto games and posters. Similarly, projects in Israel have generated imaginative materials to help teachers talk about emotions, attitudes and behaviour with young children. Four-year-olds have been given 'feelings drawers' – paper-covered matchboxes holding drawings that record their feelings (since they cannot yet write). They can share these drawings and feelings with others or keep them private.

In Israel and Northern Ireland, teachers express relief and appreciation when they receive training and materials that help them with difficult subjects. A project evaluation in Israel revealed, however,

that although teachers feel strengthened by these enhanced capacities, they are unsure about whether and to what extent they can draw on support from parents and from the educational authorities. Consequently, the current phase of the project is addressing this uncertainty by holding persuasive workshops for parents and lobbying the Ministry of Education to recognise the teacher training conducted by the project.

Engaging meaningfully with parents

“How can we talk to our children about prejudice and discrimination?” asks a booklet specially prepared to help parents in Northern Ireland (Connolly 2002). Some answers are to “be open and relaxed” “ask questions and listen rather than give lectures” and “encourage our children to think through the consequences of prejudice and discrimination.”

Experience shows that although pre-schools and schools are good places to initiate change, parental involvement is crucial for positive outcomes. Projects that focus on educators in the pilot phase generally learn from evaluations that they need to engage more directly with parents, for example by holding regular workshops with them. In Northern Ireland, NIPPA has engaged parents in interactive workshops (similar to those held for teachers) at which they explore the issues of openness to diversity that are addressed in the pre-school.

Children do take messages home about activities at school, and these can help to engage their parents and influence social change. In one case, a Bedouin father made the long trek to school from his unrecognised village in the Negev desert to substantiate what his daughter had reported to him about the ‘democracy education’ sessions.

Parents can act as prime movers of change. A book of oral histories from families who choose to send their children to Jewish–Arab schools illustrates parents’ motivations to act as agents of change. For example:

“I carry this difficult history. But there is another people here that we must co-exist with. On the one hand, it is important to me that my daughters know their true history. We visit our destroyed

villages – al-Mansura, Iqrit, Suhmata. We hold on to the keys that their grandfather has kept for over 60 years. On the other hand, we look for ways to live alongside Jews respectfully and equally. I chose a bilingual school because I am for Arab–Jewish harmony. I also want my daughters to demand their rights and hold their heads high.” (Mendelson and Khalaf 2006)

Use of the mass media to raise sensitive issues in a positive and appealing way

In Israel, it is unusual for Arab and Jewish children to mix. They tend to live separate lives and are fearful and suspicious of each other. The television series *Sesame Stories* was a bold initiative to create a common electronic space for children from polarized communities.

“Sesame Stories is designed to help 4- to 7-year-olds in Israel, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza to appreciate diversity and develop mutual respect... [through] animated versions of children’s stories drawn from the ethnic and religious traditions of each respective society, illustrating core themes of acceptance, friendship, and appreciation of similarities and differences between individuals.” (Michael Cohen Group 2005)

The Bernard van Leer Foundation supported outreach activities to link this shared electronic space to the realities of children in Israel through structured activities with their teachers and parents. Materials were developed in Hebrew and Arabic, including an educational CD-ROM, an interactive poster, activity pages and teachers’ kits, all underpinned by training and workshops for teachers.

The effects of viewing *Sesame Stories* were evaluated using a pre-test, post-test design that included children in Israeli pre-schools, both Jewish and Arab. Children were divided into experimental and control groups, and the former viewed *Sesame Stories* three times a week for eight consecutive weeks. Children who viewed the shows developed a more extensive awareness of the importance of friendship and interpersonal obligation than those who did not (Sesame Workshop 2005).

Of special interest is the influence of *Sesame Stories* on children’s moral reasoning, a concept that relates

children's judgements (e.g. is a specific behaviour right or wrong?) to their justifications (why is it right or wrong?). The evaluation involved "comprehensive measurements of children's understanding of the characters as well as story comprehension, social goals, moral concepts and conflict resolution judgements" (Sesame Workshop 2005).

Here are two key insights:

"These findings demonstrate that Israeli-Jewish children generally understood the wrongfulness of exclusion, and gave appropriate moral reasons, such as appeals to the *inclusion* of others to ensure equal access and *pro-social behaviour* of the majority towards the minority, for why exclusion is wrong. While these findings are similar to findings reported for us samples... these were unexpected given the level of conflict and intergroup tension that many children in Israel are exposed to as a function of the societal conflict. Researchers... have shown that children exposed to violence often justify exclusion on the basis of retaliation and retribution. These reasons were not used in this sample." (p. 25–26)

"The findings for the sample of Arab children in Israel were compelling. Children's pro-social reasons for justifications increased after viewing the show. This is important because peer relations and friendships are key factors in the developmental processes of moral development. Children who recognize the necessity of treating friends in a fair and just manner have acquired the fundamental principles of morality, that is mutual respect and fairness. It is particularly poignant that Arab children's pro-social justifications for friendship increased as a function of viewing the show. Arab children in Israel generally experience higher levels of exposure to violence and discrimination. Thus, the findings that these children had pro-social judgements and that their justifications increased as a function of the show was rather dramatic. Rather than rely on strategies of retribution or retaliation, children referred to friendship and fairness concepts to evaluate peer conflict." (p. 40)

Evaluative research

The example of evaluation research from Israel given above is similar both in method and findings

to that of the Northern Ireland study. Evaluation is important to improve project performance and to enhance general understanding of how children's social and emotional development can be influenced. The evaluations described in this paper both used the pre-test, post-test design. However, other approaches can be complementary. For example, an ongoing ethnographic study of Jewish–Arab schools (Bekerman, in progress) is yielding valuable insights through close observation of young children in class and the playground. The findings suggest that children aged 6 or so from polarised groups can unlearn the discrimination that their environments have scripted into them. They are well aware of differences but can relate to each other beyond these differences.

Conclusion

The five lessons learned in Northern Ireland are strongly supported by the Foundation's experience in Israel. The findings from the Media Initiative for Children in Northern Ireland were based on four one-minute messages to children delivered frontally through the media. These findings have been validated with reference to diffuse messages directed towards young children more obliquely in Israel where, sadly, the troubles are not yet in the past.

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