

The framework for the Foundation

Promoting social inclusion and respect for diversity in young children's environments

The values of social inclusion and respect for diversity have always been central to the Bernard van Leer Foundation's mission, with its focus on socially and economically disadvantaged young children. These values also play an important role in our other two 'issue areas' ("Strengthening the care environment" and "Successful transitions: the continuum from home to school"). So why have we felt the need to devote to these values an issue area of their own?

The answer comes in two parts. First, the pace of social change is intensifying: all around the world today, societies are changing ever more rapidly and becoming increasingly diversified. Social change often has the capacity to seem threatening to those attached to the status quo; it can lead to resentment and fear of perceived outsiders, resulting in attitudes that range from mild prejudice to acute stigma. Even when it stops short of violence, the discrimination that results can easily become entrenched within social structures.

Second, there is growing evidence that the values of social inclusion and respect for diversity are more applicable to young children than has previously been appreciated. We now understand more about how young children make meaning from experiences of stigma and discrimination – and how the attitudes which underlie prejudice and bias are formed in the early years of life. Targeted interventions during the early years have been shown to deflect the development of bias and prejudice in very young children.

The two strands of social inclusion and respect for diversity are closely intertwined. Social inclusion

is about citizenship, status and rights. Respect for diversity is about belonging and mutual acceptance. The two strands have a symbiotic relationship, reinforcing each other and, together reflecting the ideal that all citizens contribute to and participate meaningfully in their environments, enjoy full citizenship and develop a secure sense of belonging.

The two strands have different angles of approach. Social inclusion programmes tackle structural discrimination. This often involves barriers based on socio-economic standing, political beliefs, ethnicity and other characteristics, which prevent young children from having equal and fair access to resources, services and facilities.

Respect for diversity programmes are aimed at promoting positive attitudes and recognising the needs of those who are different. This goes beyond legal rights. It refers to the way that children and adults interact on a daily basis. Through a focus on respect for diversity, we aim to promote pro-social behaviours; open and responsive interactions and social awareness – including awareness of the effects of prejudice and discrimination. Respect for diversity incorporates imaginative engagement with other people's realities (through, for example, storytelling, pictures and theatre). Other components include the development of the skills involved in perspective taking, negotiation, anger management and conflict resolution.

Our work on social inclusion and respect for diversity fits within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which supports the right of all children to grow up in surroundings characterized by equality, free from



Photo: Courtesy Institut für den Situationsansatz (ISTA)

Exposing children to respectful environments early in life facilitates the development of positive long-term outcomes

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” (Article 2).

Despite the risks of inequality and discrimination, the increasing heterogeneity of societies can also provide young children with positive opportunities for cultural exploration and exchange. We believe that exposing children to inclusive and respectful environments early in life facilitates the development of positive and potentially long-term outcomes.

By working with community leaders, childcare professionals, parents, and children, we can create ‘meeting places’ and ‘common spaces’ where equal participation and respect for diversity are reflected and valued. This can help counteract the immediate effects of discrimination and stigma against young children and their families, and in the longer term can contribute to more integrated and socially cohesive societies. As well as having a positive effect

on young children’s development, such ‘meeting places’ and ‘common spaces’ can serve as models of social inclusion and provide a basis from which structural barriers can be addressed.

As with all the Foundation’s work, we operate on a continuum that spans practice, knowledge and policy. We focus on supporting the development of positive early childhood environments; targeted training for adults within these environments; awareness raising about the needs of young children; promoting the meaningful participation of families in decision-making and service delivery; and integrating projects and programmers within community networks.

We recognise that early childhood policies are related to political, economic and social reforms – and must be anchored within their social context. It is only through engagement with parents, families and communities that effective social transformation can be achieved.

We will be gathering and documenting experiences and lessons learned from our grantmaking to further our understanding about how this issue area impacts upon the well-being of young children. Knowledge generation includes analyses of programs to reduce discrimination and enhance mutual esteem. The issue area has incorporated a Joint Learning Initiative on Children and Ethnic Divisions (JLI) as a strategy for mapping how the goals of social inclusion and respect for diversity plays out in early childhood programs and services. The JLI will assess current early childhood interventions and will develop and test innovative approaches for promoting inclusiveness and positive attitudes towards diversity in very young children and those who influence their near and far environments.

The knowledge generated through our work will be used to advocate and influence policy makers and decision makers about the potential of early childhood programmes to contribute to cohesive and respectful societies.

In the long term, our guiding vision is the promotion of more equitable societies where all citizens have opportunities for meaningful participation and inclusion, and where all children enjoy and contribute to positive interactions, empathy and respect.