

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2009
EXCLUSIVE ONLINE MATERIAL

**Harnessing indigenous knowledge in childrearing
for a more inclusive society by Maite Onochie
Quintanilla**



Early childhood is the fastest and most important period of human development. Recent neurological studies prove, with solid evidence, that the quality of support and attention children receive during these first years has a significant effect on their cerebral development, their behaviour and their learning during the subsequent years of their lives.¹ These new discoveries show that when encouraged to play, children question and investigate, advancing their social, emotional, physical and intellectual development, as full actors in their own development.

However, according to the 2007 Lancet Report, more than 200 million children in the world under the age of 5 do not receive the attention they need to grow up physically healthy, mentally alert and emotionally stable. Owing to a poor diet, deficient health and learning atmospheres that do not offer sufficient stimuli, many children begin their schooling late, perform badly in school, and do not develop to their full potential, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.²

Along with this, despite the fact that there exists a series of clearly identifiable phases of physical, cognitive and emotional change and development through which every child passes, these processes of development are strongly interwoven with the cultural representation of childhood which every society establishes. If this dynamic relationship between the biological and the cultural is not respected, the social-

¹ Mustard J.F 2006 *Early Child Development and Experienced-based Brain Development: The Scientific Underpinnings of the Importance of Early Child Development in a Globalized World*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution

² *The Lancet* 2007 – *Child Development in Developing Countries*. Vol. 369, January 6 2007 www.thelancet.com

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emotional development of the child negatively affected. Precisely because it is developed during the formative years of their lives, a child's ethnic identity serves as a reference point in their adult lives.

In the specific case of education, the process of transition young children experience from home to educational programmes, from preschool then onwards to primary education, involves an array of cognitive and emotional interactions which, when facilitated in a quality fashion, and with respect and appraisal of the rich culture of those children belonging to an indigenous group, result in improved child development and learning.

As such, it is vital to carry out studies which provide broader information on the knowledge and practises of childrearing amongst indigenous peoples, therefore contributing to the construction of intercultural approaches for social services directed towards indigenous children.

In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, it is precisely the indigenous peoples – around 10 percent of the entire population of the region, between 40 and 50 million people – who live in the most poverty, exclusion and inequality, which is a product of, among other things, the scarcity of health services and education during early childhood. UNICEF is working with organisations and indigenous leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean, promoting the development of local programs and national public policies which promote multiculturalism and the participation of indigenous peoples in the field of early childhood development. Below are two examples of the diversity of possible initiatives based on intercultural interaction, dialogue and relations.

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Venezuela

In 2002 UNICEF spearheaded an ethno-anthropological study dedicated to deepening the knowledge of early childhood development from the indigenous perspective, contributing thus to the compilation of knowledge and guidelines on childrearing amongst six indigenous peoples (Jivi, Piaroa, Ye'kuana, Añu, Wayuu and Warao) in the country, based around important themes such as pregnancy and birth, the phases of development, diet, gender roles, rites of passage and educational processes, among others.

This study represented an advance specifically because it respected and guaranteed the “free, informed and prior consent” of the indigenous groups and communities involved in the research, and their active participation in the process of forming the research objectives and deciding on how results would be used.

At the request of the indigenous people that participated in the process, a book was published with all the theoretical and methodological aspects and a series of ethnographical monographs for each of the six indigenous peoples included in the investigation, to serve as a reference in the communities for mothers, fathers, teachers, health workers and other public functionaries who work in early childhood services.

Chile

TXÜR TXEMÜAIÑ (growing up together) is the name of the Guide to Pregnancy and Birth for the Mapuche population that the Chilean Department of Planning through the system *Chile Crece Contigo* elaborated with UNICEF in 2008. Since January 2009 the guide has been dispersed across all health services in the region, and to all pregnant Mapuche women.

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Besides providing biomedical information, the educational guide recovers, recognises and promotes the customs, beliefs and practices of the Mapuche people relating to the health and care of the mother during pregnancy, birth and post-partum, and the health and growth of children from the perspective of the Mapuche world view. This material also seeks to favour the exchange of knowledge, offering valuable mutual learning to improve the cultural relevance of policies directed towards early childhood.

The work of gathering knowledge on their own Mapuche culture was carried out using a technical process whose principal emphasis was to maintain the necessary respect and offer sufficient time and space for the reflection and sharing of the knowledge that would be in the guide to pregnancy and birth. The idea was to develop a product whose content would be pertinent to the everyday lives of pregnant Mapuche women and their families and above all promote that children be born and develop within the framework of their own culture.

Conclusion

By recognizing indigenous communities as active participants in the process of investigation and development of educational materials, these studies represent a new model for improving and expanding crucial health and early childhood development services. Particularly for children entering school for the first time, creating programs that value cultural identity can smooth the transition from home to school, instill a positive sense of self, provide the right start to education and the fundamental tools required for children to reach their full potential.