European Early Childhood Education Research Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/recr20

Othered voices: asylum-seeking mothers and early years education

Judy Whitmarsh a

a University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, UK

Available online: 08 Dec 2011

To cite this article: Judy Whitmarsh (2011): Othered voices: asylum-seeking mothers and early years education, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 19:4, 535-551

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2011.623540

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Othered voices: asylum-seeking mothers and early years education

Judy Whitmarsh*

University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, UK

ABSTRACT: Strengthening the home-school partnership is a strategy to raise achievement levels and to engage ‘hard-to-reach’ parents with education in the UK, however this political ideal has been critiqued as exclusive and based on a white, middle class model. This article explores how six asylum-seeking mothers manage their children’s early years education, with a specific focus on the concept of parent-partnership. Asylum-seekers in the UK are stigmatised in the media and one of the most marginalised groups in society. The mothers participated in a three-hour group interview with questions, ranking cards and discussion interpreted into the home languages. Findings highlight tensions in language learning, a lack of appropriate cultural resources, perceptions of teachers as experts, and differing values as desired attributes for their children. The implications of these findings extend our knowledge of an under-researched group of mothers and young children and, if replicated, may inform future early years practice.

RÉSUMÉ: Renforcer le partenariat maison-école est une stratégie pour élever les niveaux de réussite et impliquer, dans l’éducation, les parents difficiles à atteindre, au Royaume-Uni. Cependant cet idéal politique a été jugé excluant et basé sur le modèle bourgeois et blanc. Cet article analyse comment six mères demandeuses d’asile gèrent l’éducation pré-primaire de leurs enfants, en se centrant sur le concept de partenariat avec les parents. Les demandeurs d’asile, au Royaume-Uni, sont stigmatisés dans les médias et constituent l’un des groupes les plus marginalisés de la société britannique. Les mères ont participé à un entretien collectif de trois heures, comprenant des questions, des cartes à classer et une discussion, avec interprétation dans leur langue maternelle. Les résultats soulignent les tensions dans l’apprentissage de la langue, un manque de ressources culturelles appropriées, une perception des enseignants comme experts et des valeurs autres désirées pour leurs enfants. Les implications de ces résultats étendent nos connaissances d’un groupe, peu étudié jusqu’ici, de mères et de jeunes enfants. Des répliques pourraient à l’avenir bénéficier à la pratique éducative dans le pré-primaire.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Die Zusammenarbeit zwischen Schulen und Eltern zu stärken ist eine Strategie im Vereinigten Königreich, um zu erreichen, dass sich Eltern, die schwer zu erreichen sind, mehr für die Erziehung ihrer Kinder interessieren. Jedoch hat man dieses politisches Wunschbild als exklusiv und bürgerlich kritisiert. Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie sechs asylsuchende Mütter an der frühkindlichen Bildung ihrer Kinder arbeiten und konzentriert sich ausdrücklich auf die Zusammenarbeit mit Eltern. Asylbewerber werden in den britischen Medien stigmatisiert und gehören zu den am stärksten vernachlässigten
Gruppen in der Gesellschaft. Die Mütter nahmen an einem dreistündigen
Gruppeninterview teil, wobei die Fragen und Diskussionsbeiträge in ihre
Muttersprache übersetzt wurden. Die Forschungsergebnisse zeigen, dass die Mütter
Schwierigkeiten beim Erlernen der Sprache haben, über unzureichende kulturelle
Ressourcen verfügen, die Lehrkräfte als Experten betrachten und andersartige
Werte und Zielvorstellungen für ihre Kinder aufweisen. Die Schlussfolgerungen
aus diesen Forschungsergebnissen erweitern unsere Kenntnisse über eine Gruppe
von Müttern und Kindern, die nicht ausreichend erforscht wurde, und könnten die
zukünftige Praxis in der Frühpädagogik beeinflussen, wenn sie sich bestätigen.

RESUMEN: Fortalecer la relación escuela-familia es una estrategia para subir el
nivel de rendimiento escolar y ayudar a los padres ‘indiferentes’ a participar en
la educación, en el Reino Unido; sin embargo se critica este ideal político por ser
exclusivo y basado en un modelo de la clase blanca y media. Este artículo
considera como seis madres solicitantes de asilo manejan los primeros años de la
educación de sus hijos, centrándose especialmente en el concepto de alianza con
los padres. En el Reino Unido los medios de comunicación estigmatizan los
solicitantes de asilo que son uno de los grupos más marginados de la sociedad.
Los madres tomaron parte en una entrevista de grupo de tres horas, con
preguntas, tarjetas donde tuvieron que clasificar una serie de opciones, y
discusión interpretada a su lengua materna. Las conclusiones destacan tensiones
en aprender idiomas, una falta de recursos culturales apropiados, maestros
considerados como expertos y valores distintos como atributos anhelados para
sus hijos. Las implicaciones de estas conclusiones amplían nuestros
conocimientos de un grupo de madres y niños poco investigado y, si hay réplica,
pueden influir en la práctica de la educación de primeros años en el futuro.

Keywords: asylum-seeking mothers; partnership; early years education

Introduction

On a freezing January day, Maryam and I took the lift to the seventh floor of a high-rise
block of flats in a large city in central England. The surrounding area is notorious for its
depivation and high gun crime rates. While Sara made us welcome and put the kettle on
to boil, we played with her two children. Sara had invited eight mothers to the interview,
of whom five arrived gradually over the next hour. Trying out appropriate greetings in
Farsi and Arabic broke the ice and we all relaxed together. The small room was packed
with babies and children and mothers passing around tea, coffee, squash and the cake
Sara had made for the occasion; the event took on a social atmosphere, interspersed
with feeding babies, children playing and constant refreshments. Four of the mothers
were from Afghanistan, one from Iran, and one from Morocco (married to a Somali);
Maryam, the interpreter, is Iranian. (From field journal)

The excerpt from the field journal (above) sets the scene for this paper which explores
how a small group of asylum-seeking mothers manage their children’s early years edu-
cation, particularly in relation to parent-education partnerships. This research was orig-
inally part of a larger study,1 however, the findings in relation to this group of asylum-
seeking mothers merited closer consideration and greater in-depth analysis. Asylum-
seekers in the UK are, by their very location, people who cross boundaries and
borders in order to seek refugee status;2 they inhabit multiple subject positions (famil-
ial, social, professional, educational, cultural and political) and are subject to, or stand
outside, many of the dominant discourses of western society. Moreover, public dis-
course, encouraged by media coverage, sustains hostility and negative feelings
towards asylum-seekers who are frequently perceived as ‘bogus’ (Giner 2007;
Moore and Clifford 2007). They are at risk of social exclusion, subject to poor housing, deprivation, disadvantage and poverty (Hughes and Beirens 2007) and among the most marginalised groups in the UK (Reacroft 2008).

Refugees from Afghanistan and Iran are consistently among the highest number of applicants for asylum in the UK (Refugee Council 2009) and their children form one of the larger groups of refugee children in Britain (Rutter 2003). While some research has been conducted with the largest groups of refugee families in London (for an overview, see Rutter and Jones 1998), there appears to be little research into the needs of smaller ethnic groups. This study appears to be one of the first to explore the perceptions of Afghan, Iranian and Moroccan/Somali asylum-seeking families, albeit on a small scale.

The lives of the asylum-seeking mothers in this study are complex as they seek to belong, to adapt and to nurture a safe space for their families; meanwhile, dominant discourses of race, gender, class, religion and immigration stigmatise them as ‘Other’. Despite increasing interest in those considered marginalised, as Lincoln (1993, 29) argues ‘there is still a paucity of research on those whose voices have been silent’. Frank (2005, 111) suggests that ‘Narratability means that events and lives are affirmed as being worth telling and thus worth living’. This paper affirms the mothers’ stories as worth telling.

**Asylum and early years education**

Asylum seekers are those who flee their own country, crossing an international boundary as a result of human rights abuses or war for example, and then lodge a claim for asylum status in another country (DfES 2004). Asylum has a high political profile in Britain; however, there is only a small body of literature and research relating to children aged under eight years from asylum-seeking families (Rutter 2003, 15). Although numbers are difficult to estimate, Reacroft (2008) suggests that there could be a total of 110,000 children in the UK whose parents are subject to immigration control via asylum claims.

For these children, a supportive early years environment can contribute to alleviating some of their complex problems and enhancing their lives (Hyder 2001) by increasing language skills and enabling family access to support services. Refugees however have unequal access to, and are under-represented in, early years provision (Rutter 2003). Asylum-seeking families may be dispersed at short notice to areas of the country where they have no social or familial links, thus joining a waiting list for high-quality early years provision becomes impossible; poverty and lack of English speaking skills may make access problematic (Rutter 2003).

Noting the importance of home–school liaison, Hughes and Beirens (2007, 267) found that school personnel often perceive this as ‘difficult to achieve with refugee and asylum-seeking parents’, resulting from parents’ unfamiliarity with the education system, poor English-speaking skills, and/or previous experiences leaving parents suspicious of authority in the UK (DfES 2004).

**Partnership with parents**

Partnership with parents is a major plank of education policy in the UK and western Europe (Hujala et al. 2009); it is one of the five main aims of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfES 2007, 7). Recent publications (DCSF 2008, 2009a, b; Hujala et al. 2009) emphasise the positive outcomes for children when parents become partners in their education, however ‘There is little universal agreement on what parental
involvement is’ (DCSF 2008, 3) and no common understanding of its meaning among educators (Carréon, Drake, and Barton 2005). It is generally acknowledged that parent partnership includes both involvement in the life of the school (such as classroom help, accompanying trips, acting as school governor) and supporting education at home: reading to children, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, and assistance with homework (DCSF 2008). The concept of parent-partnership is however contested and the current model critiqued as classed and gendered and racialised (Levine-Rasky 2009; Crozier and Davies 2007; Edwards and Alldred 2000; Lareau and Shumar 1996; Lareau 1987).

Much research into parental involvement in education has typically focused on involvement in school-initiated activities and on children of statutory school age (see Driessen, Smit, and Sleegers 2005; Edwards and Alldred 2000; Epstein 1996; Lareau 1987). However others (Achpal, Goldman, and Rohner 2007; Crozier and Davies 2007; Reay 2005) argue that defining a ‘good’ parent-partner by participation in such activities represents a dominant discourse of white, middle class motherhood. Young (1999) claims that typologies of parent-partnership lead to norms of white, middle class expectation and therefore operate as a discourse of exclusion.

However, despite challenges to the partnership concept, it represents an ideal supported by policy and much research and thus underpins some of the questions asked during this study. For, as Taylor (2006, 249) notes ‘Education partnership vested in young children’s learning implies common cause, shared understandings, defined roles and reciprocal actions by those engaged’; the article explores the extent to which, within this group of mothers, understandings are shared, roles are defined, and actions reciprocal in the common cause of their children’s education.

Home–school partnership may be a specifically western ideal although, as Hujala et al. (2009, 73) find, there are cultural differences even across western Europe in teachers’ expectations of the ‘values and significance of parent–teacher partnerships’. The concept of partnership may not be readily transferrable outside a western context so the literature on home–school partnership practice was unpicked to identify culturally polyvalent concepts to inform the research question:

- How do asylum-seeking mothers manage their relationship with early years education, particularly in relation to partnership?

From these concepts the following questions emerged to guide the group interview with the mothers:

1. Why does the child attend pre-school?
2. How was the pre-school chosen?
3. How welcome did you feel when you first attended?
4. Do you participate in any activities (class help; trips; parent–teacher meetings)?
5. If your child has a problem at home, can you discuss it with the teacher?
6. If your child has an educational problem, can you discuss it with the teacher?
7. What attributes do you want your child to gain from pre-school?

**Theoretical constructs**

Hamilton and Moore (2004) suggest that the theoretical constructs of pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration support consideration of the complex lives of
refugees. Drawing on this theoretical perspective adds richness and depth to the analysis of the findings.

Pre-migration factors relate to the characteristics and experiences prior to leaving the home country (parental professional and educational status, housing, health and wellbeing). Trans-migration factors may include traumatic flight, illegal border crossing, refugee camps, or time spent in hiding. Post-migration factors may include time spent in holding centres, dispersal to unknown areas, loss of family members, bereavement, health issues such as post-traumatic stress, poverty, housing, characteristics of schools and teachers and adaptation to the new environment.

Migration, for asylum-seeking families, almost inevitably includes traumatic experiences; displacement is one of the most challenging and significant traumatic losses experienced (Frater-Mathieson 2004) therefore questions must be sensitive and appropriate. No details are therefore given of the mothers’ asylum status or flight to the UK.

Methodology

Meeting the mothers

Maryam, the interpreter, shared a house during her asylum process with a young Afghan woman, Sara, who is now married with two small children. Sara agreed to invite asylum-seeking friends with a child attending pre-school; thus the majority of participants were Dari/Farsi speakers but Sara also courteously included Fatima, a close neighbour. The demographic details of the mothers are detailed in Table 1, below.

In contrast to many refugee groups, these mothers had all completed secondary education and two had studied at university. The mothers all had a child in a nursery or reception class and all the children have siblings; the mean age of the child was 3.9 years. Five of the families spoke Dari/Farsi (similar languages and generally understood by each group) although many of the mothers also used English. Fatima spoke Arabic, French and English.

Methods

The snowball technique is particularly appropriate for accessing transient refugee communities (Rutter 2003; Omadian 2000). Rutter (2003) however warns that such sampling may lead to bias since the group is constructed from a small social network. This is a valid point for this research and therefore no generalisations will

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Home language</th>
<th>Years of mother in fulltime education</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Age of child at pre-school (years: months)</th>
<th>Length of time in UK (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Dari</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mina</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Dari</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niloufar</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Dari/Farsi</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjan</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Dari</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorri</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Farsi</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Arabic/French</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
be made from the findings; although the participants may constitute a very small sampling frame, they represent three different countries, and a variety of social, cultural, educational and migratory backgrounds.

Access to refugee groups for research can be problematic (Hughes and Beirens 2007; Omadian 2000) since they are often distrustful of authority. My existing relationship with Maryam and Sara enabled not just access to the group, but also that the trust, crucial to the success of any interview, was already established. Access is the first hurdle; however, as Shah (2004) suggests, getting on with the participants requires a shared knowledge of social norms and conventions, even a shared cultural identity, to enhance trust. The insider/outsider position of the interviewer has been much debated (from Oakley 1981 onwards); it is sufficient here to note that I share gender and motherhood with the participants, and had lived with the asylum process for four years, thus while perhaps not an insider, I felt an accepted guest in the mothers’ world.

A semi-structured group interview was the most appropriate method for the research since time and financial constraints prevented individual interviews. The group interaction results from discussion and triggers rich data, especially when aspects of people’s behaviour are studied (Punch 2008). The methods were consistent across the four groups of mothers in the original sample.

Following Achpal, Goldman and Rohner (2007), a ranking task was used for three questions (Q1, Q2 and Q7, see page 538) using pre-designed cards (Appendices 1, 2, and 3) translated into the home language. The cards for Questions 1 and 2 (Appendices 1 and 2) drew on the literature around attendance at, and barriers to, pre-school. The cards (Appendix 3) for Question 7 (parental desired attributes for children) drew on eight major domains of developmental competences of pre-school children:

- Social skills with adults;
- Social skills with peers;
- Pre-academic skills;
- Creative/self-expression skills;
- Physical skills;
- Self-help skills;
- Emotional–affective skills;

From the above domains and other literature (see Jensen 2009; Hair et al. 2006; Pietrowski, Botso, and Matthews 2000) an example of a competence was drawn (for example, from the domain ‘Pre-academic skills’, the card stated ‘To speak, read and write in good English’). Mothers were asked to rank the three most/least important attributes for their children.

The questions and ranking cards were piloted with a focus group of seven mothers, of mixed ethnicity at a children’s centre in a similarly disadvantaged area. A few changes were made to the cards to increase clarity.

**Ethics**

This research received ethical consent from the education faculty at the sponsoring university, however a number of additional issues were considered.

Ahearn (2000, 56) notes that, for some groups, the signed consent form can be seen as a government trick into disclosure of ‘something that could be used against them’;
would asking the mothers to sign a form trigger a loss of trust? After discussion with Maryam, we created a simplified version of a consent form (see Appendix 4) translated into Farsi/Dari. The interview was not recorded because of difficulties with background noise (eight adults and six children present in a small space) and the mothers’ articulated distrust of recording.

All identifying features have been changed and pseudonyms used to protect the mothers’ confidentiality and anonymity; they were also made aware of the proposed dissemination of the research and were delighted to have their voices represented.

**Data analysis**

Field notes were recorded immediately after the interview. The data notes and field notes were then read and re-read before being coded descriptively, by topic, and then analytically (Punch 2008); memos were developed and tentative trends emerged from the data. The data and findings were checked with Maryam to ensure a reliable interpretation of the mothers’ perceptions. The findings were then integrated with the theoretical constructs and the literature.

**Constraints**

The number of participants is small but the findings offer a snapshot of an under-researched group whose perceptions may lead us to question our existing assumptions and trigger further research with a larger sample.

As part of a larger study, the structuring of the interviews therefore needed to remain consistent across the greater sample, however a less structured format would have allowed deeper exploration of within-group issues perceived as important. Moreover, while questioning the mothers about a contested and racialised discourse, such as partnership, contributed to answering the research questions, it did not allow for a deeper analysis of how the mothers construct their own meaning of partnership; planned further research with a larger sample of asylum-seeking mothers will focus on this.

**Findings and discussion**

*Why pre-school?*

The mothers were asked to rank their first three choices in order of importance (for card choices, see Appendix 1). They decided on:

1. To learn English.
2. To learn skills for school readiness (e.g., reading, writing, number).
3. To gain confidence.

The mothers all perceived a good knowledge of English as a way for their children to integrate and to succeed in the UK. Fatima however raised a different issue: ‘I’m not afraid my children don’t speak English, I’m more afraid my son don’t speak Arabic’. For Fatima, loss of cultural identity runs parallel to the desire for her children to learn English; she claims that her son prefers to speak English at home and will not reply to her in Arabic. Asylum-seekers have been forced to leave their homeland yet the desire to maintain links is strong. There are however obvious tensions between the
need to integrate and speak English, to become part of this society, and the opposing need to retain a sense of cultural identity and to protect links with the home country, whatever the reason for flight. As Crozier and Davies (2007, 307) note, those who cannot speak English ‘are seen to be disengaging themselves, and remaining outside’; thus these mothers negotiate a complex identity transition, remaining Othered by their home language yet proud of their cultural identity. For those who are part of an excluded group, ‘authenticity is harder to attain, because it is incompatible with either total belonging or total unbelonging, unless the created self-identity changes accordingly’ (Griffiths 1992, 8).

Post-migration, families take time to become acculturated and develop a hybrid identity and this can be a painful process (Anderson 2004). Fatima’s narrative demonstrates a dissonance between her language and culture, and the need for her son to adapt and integrate. For Fatima’s son, the discontinuity between home and school may be even greater if his marginalised position in an asylum-seeking family is public knowledge. As Rich and Davis (2007) found, bilingual young children actively seek to create a sense of coherence between family world and school world; if the home language and practices are perceived to have no or low status (see page 543) in the pre-school setting, the child may feel under pressure to assimilate and conform to the higher status language and practices of the host society. Thus for Fatima and her family, gaining legitimacy in the UK is a juggling act, requiring the assimilation of new English characteristics into an existing cultural identity.

Choosing a setting

The next question asked mothers to rank the three most important reasons for choosing a specific nursery/setting. Levine-Rasky (2009) argues that school choice emerges from parental expectations about the opportunities offered in the school, preferences for school types, school rules, and curricular emphases. She suggests that parents exercise power by developing strategies to secure the most appropriate and rewarding placement for the child. The asylum-seeking mothers were however perplexed by this question, stating that they had no choice about a nursery; they had been sent three choices of school for their older children and chose whichever school first accepted the older child. If the school had a pre-school, then the younger children attended. The concept of an informed choice appeared alien to them, since they had no transport (other than public services) and difficulty communicating with staff, interpreting the school literature, or understanding that choice existed.

The asylum process limits the choices available to claimants: they are not allowed to work, to hold a bank account or to decide where to live. It is not surprising that these mothers have low self-efficacy (Vidali and Adams 2006) and little expectation of choice in education.

Welcome

Asked how welcomed they had felt at their children’s early years settings, they responded:

On the door, there is a big picture of welcomes and it says ‘Persians welcome’ but there are no Farsi/Dari speakers in the nursery. (Dorri)

Teachers are warm and staff is lovely and they welcome you with a smile. (Marjan)
Since over 70% of children of asylum-seekers come from homes where English is not spoken, good practice (DfES 2004, 6) states that each educational setting should have a language policy, including greeting parents’ in their own language, finding out how children indicate basic needs, having some resources in the home language, and where possible, a bilingual worker. Signs should also be made in relevant languages. As Dorri observed, there is a welcome sign in Farsi but this appears merely a token to the mothers. Although the mothers initially felt welcomed when they arrived at the setting, there was no follow-on from this and no mother was aware of any resources in their home language. Niloufar stated: ‘When child was crying, no one knew how to comfort them because no one spoke Dari’. Marjan continued: ‘How hard it was for my kids at first when they couldn’t talk to staff’.

Dorri then contributed a story about her son, Ali, and his early days in reception: ‘Ali tried to understand the history project but none of it made any sense to him. It was not the history he knew. And he got into trouble because he got very angry because he couldn’t do it’.

Ali’s anger can be easily understood, especially when we realise that he probably did not have the language skills to express his frustration. The exploration of language among the mothers triggered an unexpected discussion: the mothers spoke of their feelings of envy since resources are available in some languages but not others: ‘The nursery uses just two languages: English and Urdu. Why is Urdu more important than Dari?’ (Mina).

Speaking of feelings of neglect when it came to the translation and provision of home-culture resources, this group of mothers also felt that their children were disadvantaged by the perceived poor English skills of some of the staff.

All the staff in the nursery, they Pakistani or Bengali, so their English is not good and I don’t understand the accent. (Marjann)

We want to have English speakers in the nursery so the children learn good English. (Niloufar)

The last two comments, supported by the whole group, may reflect a racialised discourse; the mothers wanted ‘good English’ spoken to their children and perceived this as potentially coming from native English speakers but there is no evidence that the nursery staff are not native speakers, which raises some interesting questions: did the provision of Urdu and other multilingual resources suggest to the mothers that the staff are not competent speakers of English? Do the mothers perceive ‘White’ as ‘English’ and therefore ‘not-White’ staff as ‘not-English’? Is there an underlying racial discourse discriminating against south-Asian staff underpinning the asylum-seeking mothers’ narratives? As Anderson (2004, 78) observes ‘All cultural groups and individuals have some level of prejudice about other groups’.

The provision of resources in what may be majority languages in the settings, has contributed to a feeling of neglect among these mothers who claim that there is little understanding of their culture and that they are placed in a homogenous group as Asian, with no reference to the history and culture of their home countries. This also has the effect of lowering the status of the home language and thus perhaps adds to the discontinuity felt by children such as Fatima’s son (see page 542). It is important that refugees are not perceived as a ‘monolithic community’ but their educational, social, religious and cultural differences should be acknowledged (Loewen 2004, 48).
Participation

The literature suggests that participation in education is crucial to active parent partnership and enhances good outcomes for the child (DCSF 2008, 2009a; Lee and Bowen 2006; DfES 2004; Edwards and Alldred 2000; Epstein 1996; Lareau 1987). The mothers were asked if they helped out in the setting or attended meetings with teachers to discuss the child’s progress. According to the literature, these are indicators of partnership with education.

Two mothers (Niloufar and Mina) had volunteered to help in the classroom on an occasional basis. Five of the six mothers had attended meetings with teachers, although they acknowledged their language difficulty. Dorri cited a sad tale: her son had brought home some work to do on the English alphabet, however he was unsure of the pronunciation. Dorri asked his teacher for further explanation, whereupon the teacher responded ‘But you must know how to do it. You must know the alphabet’. Dorri felt so ashamed that she could not help her child that she took the work to college (where she studies English) and obtained help from her tutor but also decided not to attend future meetings with her child’s teacher. This not only prevented Dorri from supporting her son’s early education, it also added to her feelings of marginalisation and lowered her self-esteem.

Pre-migration, Dorri attended university in Iran yet here in England she felt a failure; Kirova (2006) emphasises how learning the language is a form of cultural empowerment which supports identity formation. For Dorri, there is a poignant tension between her pre-migration identity as a graduate and her perceived post-migration identity as an inadequate English speaker, which has resulted in Dorri’s exclusion from involvement in education. Dorri, like Fatima’s son, may be trying to reduce the dissonance in her own identity formation and this voluntary exclusion enables her to maintain a more coherent sense of self-identity, in tune with her pre-migration educational experiences.

The role of the ‘teacher’

Two questions explored this issue of the teacher’s role and the parental role in education: firstly, the mothers were asked ‘if you had a problem at home (for example with the child’s eating habits or perhaps bed-wetting) would you be able to discuss it with the nursery teacher?; secondly, ‘if you thought the teacher was not doing enough to help your child educationally, would you feel able to talk to her about it’.

Fatima responded instantly to the first question: ‘If it’s at home it’s my job. I have to sort it out’.

The mothers agreed together that their role included preparing the child for school while the teacher is perceived as the expert in educational matters. Others (see Levine-Rasky 2009; Walker and MacLure 2005; Lareau and Shumar 1996) have found similar classed, gendered and ethnic perceptions of the teacher as expert and which invest the teacher with power, inhibiting relations of partnership. Adams and Kirova (2006) state that parents may come from a culture in which it is inappropriate to question the teacher or school authorities do not seek parents’ views. This is not however perhaps as clear-cut as it may seem, for, remembering Dorri’s earlier story, it is very obvious that the mothers are trying to support their children educationally at home, by, for example, helping with the previously unknown alphabet. The teachers are nevertheless perceived by these mothers as experts in education. Others (see for example Achpal, Goldman,
and Rohner 2007; Crozier and Davies 2007; Brooker 2002; Lareau and Shumar 1996) have found a similar cross-cultural conception of the ‘teacher as expert’. Levine-Rasky (2009) shows how, even across Europe, the meaning of ‘school involvement’ may be differently interpreted and understood.

**Beliefs and values**

From cards (Appendix 3), the mothers ranked the three most important attributes they wished their child to achieve from early education. They chose:

1. To be obedient, well behaved and follow rules of family and society.
2. To have respect and loyalty for parents and family.
3. To know right from wrong, to be honest.

As Achpal, Goldman and Rohner (2007) found, parents (whether European-American or Puerto-Rican) attached importance to pro-social skills such as being well-behaved and respect for others, thus it is unsurprising that for the asylum-seeking mothers these skills have similar significance. Omadian (2000) suggests that in collective societies such as Afghanistan, individualism is discouraged and respect for elders encouraged. However it is worth noting that respect and loyalty were also the second choice of a further two groups (n = 4) of parents in the original, larger, study, suggesting that this may be an attribute desired by many mothers, regardless of their country of birth. Following societal rules may have greater significance also for asylum-seekers for whom any potential transgression of the law may result in detention and/or deportation. As relative newcomers to a society which looks upon them with suspicion, hostility and fear of terrorism (Giner 2007), instilling in young children the rules of family, society and good behaviour are crucial to survival. Furthermore, pre and trans-migration trauma and loss, together with a lack of an extended family network, may contribute to a need and desire to nurture and protect a family identity perceived as threatened.

The three least important attributes identified by the mothers:

1. To be able to express feelings through music or dance.
2. To be good at ball games and sport.
3. To be able to make one’s own decisions, to be independent minded.

Making one’s own decisions, or autonomy, the mothers identified as the least desired attribute for their children, stating vehemently: ‘In our culture we don’t want our children to feel in control, only when they are adult. Until they are 18 they have to behave for the parents’.

The mothers were astounded when I suggested that western pre-school settings encourage autonomy and support children in independent decision-making; as Hujala et al. (2009, 60) state, in a study of parent-partnership in five European countries, ‘The main goal of co-operation [parent-setting] during early childhood is to empower the child as a conscious agent of her/his own life’. However, societies which are family-orientated may place more significance on inter-dependence within the family, the authority of the extended family and the collective promotion of a group identity (Achpal, Goldman, and Rohner 2007; Lahman and Park 2004; Rabain-Jamin 1991). Moreover, Adams and Kirova (2006) note that many immigrants fear they will lose
control of their children if the children become acculturated to the new society. Dachyshyn (2006) found that refugee parents experienced problems in knowing how to discipline their children in a western society; they struggled to raise children without family and neighbourly support, feared authority interference if they used traditional methods of discipline such as spanking, and were unsure what constituted child abuse.

The children of the asylum-seeking mothers may well thus experience discontinuity between the expectations of home and of pre-school for decision-making and problem-solving tasks and this may create a ripple effect in the family. Starting school is a major transition for any child; if there are differences between the expectations of home and of school, this may also hinder the adaptation of the child to the host society (Hamilton 2004). This is a topic which needs much further research to explore how diverse parents perceive the need for autonomy and independent decision-making in the early years. For, if there is a mismatch of expectations, it will affect the child, the family and the setting.

Conclusion
This cameo of the perceptions of asylum-seeking mothers, termed by educators as ‘hard-to-reach’ (Hughes and Beirens 2007), contributes to our knowledge of this under-researched group and may counter some stereotypical assumptions.

The article explored whether mothers shared understanding, defined roles, and reciprocated in their engagement with pre-school. The findings suggest that these mothers have worked hard to try to understand what is required of them as parent-partners, helping in the classroom, attending parents’ meetings, and trying to support learning in the home, however a number of tensions have arisen: firstly, the provision of resources in other minority languages, together with the lack of resources in, and speakers of, their home language has led the mothers to perceive their culture as devalued and inclusion as a token gesture. Moreover, as Lahman and Park (2004, 132) argue ‘lumping the family into a vast culture that may not account for or represent the whole of who they are’ can contribute to a racist and stereotypical discursive pedagogy within the classroom, despite apparent efforts towards inclusion. Applying good practice (DfES 2004) within the early years environment by expanding the resources to include a wider range of languages and working with mothers who could become a valued resource themselves would reduce this problem and enable greater continuity between home and pre-school.

Secondly, an underpinning, possibly racialized, discourse causes the mothers to worry that their children are not learning ‘good English’. Thirdly, the mothers perceive teachers as the experts in children’s education, therefore they are less likely to engage with a western model of white, middle class partnership, however they make strenuous efforts to support their children’s education; in Dorri’s case, an unfortunate response from the teacher may lead in future to being termed ‘hard-to-reach’. The reasons for Dorri’s self-exclusion suggest that it is the teacher perhaps, rather than Dorri, who is ‘hard-to-reach’. Finally, while developing skills of autonomy, independence and decision-making underpin a western philosophy and pedagogy of early years education, the mothers view this as the least desirable attribute for their children. This finding needs further research to confirm it in a larger sample and to explore how differing pedagogical values can be accommodated within the early years classroom.

Considering the theoretical constructs of migration highlights the complexities of familial re-settlement. As children acculturate, particularly where their social status
and home culture are stigmatised or devalued, they may choose to legitimate their new identity by only speaking English. This creates tensions for a mother and may be perceived as a threat to her cultural identity, which may itself be ambivalent or fragmented following forced migration.

As the demographic details of the mothers show, all the mothers have completed secondary education and two have studied at university. Although asylum-seekers live in very disadvantaged circumstances, as this paper shows, these mothers are far from the stereotypical young, uneducated, illiterate, criminal, asylum-seeker portrayed in the media. For the mothers, their pre-migration education and social experiences are juxtaposed with their post-migration developing identities, pathologised at the boundaries of UK society; creating a successful relationship with the early years settings will depend on how the settings responds to differing understandings and expectations of power and partnership. As Vandenbroeck, Roets, and Snoek (2009, 212) argue, a welcoming early years setting in which staff ‘recognise and respect the difference of immigrant mothers explicitly’ can support the development for the mothers of a hybrid identity which consists of ‘and/and rather than either/or’ (211). Acknowledging and valuing multiple perspectives of partnership, which may not necessarily conform to existing conceptual models of home-school partnership, may enable asylum-seeking mothers to engage further with their child’s education and improve outcomes for the child, the family and the setting. While remaining wary of extrapolating generalisations, the findings warrant further research to explore their generalisability.

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Dr Jane O’Connor for her suggestions.

Notes

1. The original study explored perceptions of home-pre-school partnership among four diverse groups of mothers (n = 35) in a range of settings: a children’s centre, a reception class of a primary school, the pre-school of an independent school (fee-paying) and the asylum-seeking mothers.

2. A refugee is a person who has left the home country to escape persecution; asylum-seekers are those who seek refugee status in another country (Rutter and Jones 1998).

References


Rich, S., and L. Davis. 2007. Insights into the strategic ways in which two bilingual children in the early years seek to negotiate the competing demands on their identity in their home and school worlds. *International Journal of Early Years Education* 15, no. 1: 35–47.


Appendix 1

Interview question: why do you want your child to attend nursery/pre-school?
Each possible response was translated into Farsi/Dari and Arabic and printed on a separate card.

Mothers were asked to rank the first three reasons in order of importance to them.

- To learn English
- To learn respect for adults
- To give mother free time
- To give mother time to look after other children
- To get a good education
- To learn skills ready for school, e.g., reading
- To gain confidence and mix with other children

Appendix 2

Interview question: why did you choose that specific nursery/pre-school?
Each possible response was translated into Farsi/Dari and Arabic and printed on a separate card.

Mothers were asked to rank the first three reasons in order of importance to them.

- Easy to get to
- Hours fit in with my life
- They could take my child immediately
- I could afford it
- I liked the staff
- Staff have good qualifications
- I thought my child would be happy there
- Friends said it was a good nursery
- It will give my child a good education

Appendix 3

Interview question: which of these are the three most/least important skills you want for your child?
Each possible response was translated into Farsi/Dari and Arabic and printed on a separate card.

Mothers were asked to rank the three most important to them, and the three least important.

- To speak, read and write in good English
- To have respect and loyalty for parents and family
- To be able to play well and co-operate with others
- To be obedient, well-behaved and follow rules of family and society
- To make good friendships
- To be able to make one’s own decisions, to be independent-minded
- To know right from wrong; to be honest
- To feel in control of your own life
- To finish tasks, even if difficult
- To have good manners
- To have plenty of money
- To do well at school
- To be confident and happy most of the time
- To be able to express feelings through music or dance
- To be good at ball games and sports
Appendix 4
Consen form:

This research is conducted by Dr Judy Whitmarsh of the University of Wolverhampton.

I promise that:
(1) I will not give your details to anyone else.
(2) I will hide any information that may identify you.
(3) I will check with you that I have understood correctly what you tell me.

Signed……………………………………

Date……………………………………

The next part is for you to sign:
I am happy to talk to Judy and for Maryam* to interpret when needed.
I understand that Judy will use some of the information I give in a report which may be published.
I understand that my name, where I live, and any other details will be changed so that I cannot be identified in the report.

Signed……………………………………

Date……………………………………

*Maryam is a pseudonym for this paper.