

# UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING CHILDREN FROM ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

By Nairn Walker

*Four years ago, Nairn presented to our Early Childhood Education Conference, about inter-generational poverty and some of the implications it has for children in our services and for us as practitioners. The following article is a brief synopsis of some of the material she offered participants. This year, her focus will be on social and emotional well-being of children and carers irrespective of age and socio-economic background, because as Nairn says, 'no matter how old we are or how much money we do or don't have, we're human beings first!'*

Growing up in a remote mountain village in Bolivia, Alejandro acquired a wealth of information and skills to help him be successful in his environment. Adopted at

age five by a couple living in Abu Dhabi, you might imagine some of the changes and new ways of being he experienced. Although still a worthy task, crafting belts as he'd done at home no longer had a place. While he still processed thought in his native tongue, there was no-one around that understood him, and he had to learn an entirely new language to have his needs met. The people looked different. They did not interact in ways familiar to him. They seemed to place value on strange things.

While the contrasts in Alejandro's example are extreme, it is in many ways no less of a challenge for children and adults from households of inter-generational poverty in Australia having to navigate the world of middle class in childcare, school and the broader community. The fact that

different cultures exist by economic class in our country often goes unnoticed and sometimes even denied, and yet its impact on how we view the world, make decisions and interact with others is profound.

In middle class, decision making tends to be based on work, achievement and material security, and this is what helps a person be successful in that culture or environment. In generational poverty, however, there is often an unpredictable level of security, and so to be successful, choices tend to be made around survival, entertainment and relationships, and how these things will be impacted (Payne, 1995).

Like Bolivia and Abu Dhabi, every culture has benefits and drawbacks, and none is necessarily better than another. So, too, the cultures of middle class and poverty have advantages and disadvantages. What becomes important for me as a child from a background of generational poverty then, is that I develop enough skills and understanding of the culture of middle class so that I can be successful there too; so that I have choice.

Currently in Australia, this is not always the case, and so my actions can be completely misinterpreted by middle-class practitioners. I'll do things that make perfect sense in my world, just as Alejandro crafts his belts, but they do not seem to fit in the context of middle class. So I might laugh when I'm in trouble, and I may have the latest i-pod and a mobile phone but no money for an excursion.

And the carers and teachers do strange things too: everything is very serious and they don't like it when their stories are interrupted. They use big words that don't mean anything and their eyes go funny when they're angry... just as the ways of adults in Arabia are strange to Alejandro.

How then, can we help children with whom we work to understand and be successful in the world of middle class? And should we? I don't believe we have any right to *change* children or force people to adopt a culture they do not like,

"How can we help children with whom we work to understand and be successful in the world of middle class? And should we? I don't believe we have any right to change children or force people to adopt a culture they do not like, but I do believe we have a professional responsibility to provide choice", Nairn Walker.



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but I do believe we have a professional responsibility to provide *choice*. If we do not, we're setting many families up to fail in our systems that, fair or not, tend to operate on middle-class norms and values.

There are many fabulous things happening in children's services right now at many different levels. Following are just three ways educators and allied professionals can support children from a background of generational disadvantage to be successful in both cultures:

**1) Teach people the 'hidden rules'** (or unspoken social cueing mechanisms) typical of Middle Class, and learn those characteristic of Generational Poverty. These let you know whether you fit in or not and are associated with manners and intelligence. Ruby Payne's book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* is a great resource with lots of examples. Respect, for instance, is often earned through effort and ethics in Middle Class, and yet this plays a minor role in Generational Poverty, where personal strength is usually much more important a quality required to survive. Show any kind of fear or weakness here, then, and you're likely to lose respect, so a

completely different skill set is required in each environment to reflect exactly the same quality. If we understand what these hidden rules are then, we can much more easily develop understanding, connectedness and achieve positive outcomes for everyone.

**2) Mediate** between the physical, non-verbal reality and the abstract constructs that middle class often use to represent the concrete world. This is a powerful strategy that builds meta-cognition and impulse control. Growing up in generational poverty with a focus on non-verbal communication means that I'll often not listen for the words too much, and focus only on the here and now. I might not therefore see cause and effect or understand 'why' something's important where a middle class child who's been immersed in formal register and abstract thinking will recognise a direct connection.

For example, after being frustrated by a number of children 'not getting' the importance of covering their mouths when coughing and sneezing despite numerous demonstrations, explanations and reminders, an early childhood

educator was recently delighted with the instant difference in behaviour after mediating. Using (concrete) blue paint to represent (abstract) germs, she began by coughing on her hand, splattering it with blue paint to show the children where the germs would likely land, even though they couldn't see them. She then proceeded to pat one child on the arm, pick up a pencil, touch the table, build some blocks, high-five another child and so on, leaving a trail of blue-paint-germs in her wake. Following this concrete demonstration, abstract conversations that had previously had a negligible effect in the learning area now made perfect sense to these three and four year olds.

Over a period of weeks before, these same children had continued to use small watering cans as trumpets, despite quite detailed individual conversations about the potential consequences of such actions during a time where gastro and 'flu were already affecting attendance. The educators reflected, however, that these explanations had been abstract, and even though the concrete demonstration had been much shorter in duration than some of these lengthier exchanges, it had an immediate and sustained impact on both children's understanding, impulse control and their behaviour.

'Rules', then, are a classic example of something that is abstract... they're what I have to do with my body at the non-verbal level, and any mediation is likely to make a difference in how they are regarded and adhered to.

Mediation:

- WHAT I want you to do is...
- WHY I want you to do it (as concretely and non-verbally as possible, as per the above example), and
- HOW I'd like you to do it – with concrete instructions – can often make an enormous difference both for children and their parents in terms of understanding and engaging, and for

(continued on page 16)

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us as practitioners developing positive and productive relationships and learning outcomes.

Think of little Bolivian Alejandro from his goat herding village trying to get his head around thriving in a technologically advanced mega-city in the Middle East... why does this action even matter, and how do I do it!?!?

**3) Use Adult Voice whenever possible.**

The voice of the negotiator, the *Adult Voice* identified in Transactional Analysis builds relationships of mutual respect with children, parents and colleagues. Rather than instruct or use power ‘over’, this voice invites. It asks: ‘What’s your plan?’ It says, ‘I want you to pack up those blocks’, rather than, ‘You need to’, ‘You should...’ or ‘Because I said so!’ which is the *Parent Voice*; much more likely to cause fractured relationships and build hostility.

Parent voice is important sometimes for protection and often necessary to stop a behaviour, but if you are wanting a child or parent to *change* a behaviour that is causing challenge, using Adult Voice is the key.

It requires that as an educator, I take responsibility for myself and my actions. ‘*I need you to listen carefully*’ is me owning what I need. Saying to a child that ‘*You need to listen carefully*’ is me trying to make the child own something they may not be committed to or even interested in... he or she may be much happier completely ignoring me. Using *Adult Voice* then, consciously or unconsciously, provides a very powerful tool to build and maintain relationships of mutual respect, fundamental to emotional attachment and function for children and adults, and to effective learning.

Payne’s text also explores this strategy in more detail, as do Transactional Analysis authors Eric Berne and Claude Steiner in a number of their books including *Scripts People Live* and *I’m OK, You’re OK*.

**In conclusion, then...** working with children and their families from generational poverty can cause enormous challenge and frustration for people who’ve been immersed in a world of middle class if these cultural differences are not recognised and accommodated.

It can also be an incredibly rewarding journey with untold joys for everyone involved. Just as Abu Dhabi may well seem intimidating and overwhelming for a little village boy from Bolivia, it also holds many secrets and wonders for him to discover.

I trust this material might support you in unlocking the richness of cultural diversity for both you and the children and families with whom you work.

Nairn Walker, Trainer and Consultant, Social Solutions... educating for a positive now.  
info@socialsolutions.com.au

Nairn Walker will be delivering her keynote presentation at the 2014 Early Childhood Education Conference, *Together we grow – preparing children for life* on Saturday 31 May. To register for the conference or for more information go to [www.togetherwegrow.com.au](http://www.togetherwegrow.com.au)

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