Empowerment Approach for Adults Working and Living with Children.

Critical interaction with knowledge – heritage and modern

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Introduction

In the last few years, there has been a remarkable progress in the field of early childhood, an increased concern and awareness for children and childhood in general and the importance of early childhood in particular as it concerns the cerebral development. Therefore, the field of early childhood care and development (ECCD) demands worldwide attention. Studies have demonstrated how efficient it is for society as a whole to invest in ECCD.

ECCD is about recognizing that the child's education is the interaction with his/her environment, especially people and knowledge. The child's interaction with others (children and adults) stimulates, encourages and supports his/her learning process. Hence, we need to appreciate and respect the parents' and the larger family's role in enriching the child's environment, developing the child's cultural identity, mother tongue and own values, which are crucial to his/her development.

In the last few years, there has been a remarkable positive trend in this field and increased awareness of the importance of the holistic integrated approach to ECCD and the crucial cooperation between all stakeholders, especially between the family and the organization. This is strengthened by the fact that the child is one entity whose essential faculties affect each other, and that the child's attitude towards learning is inclusive and he/she does not differentiate between various kinds of knowledge. The child is a natural learner from his/her experiences and surroundings. The adults and the environment play an important role not in his/her teaching but in creating opportunities and enabling learning. Most of the programs addressing adults working and living with children commonly ignore that their own knowledge was accumulated through their formal or informal learning and through their life experiences. Therefore, we searched for the best way to work with adults who are working and living with children (fathers, mothers, caregivers, teachers, grandparents, etc.). How do we value their role with children? How and what is the best way to support them in their vital role?

The development of the empowerment approach

We reviewed available approaches and the different assumptions behind them before we developed our own. We realized that our assumption that if adults had the right information they would change their behavior, has proven to be wrong. The assumption that there are experts who know the solution to all problems has also been proven wrong.

Our experience with groups of adults demonstrated the need for a different approach.

The basic principles in working with adults are that
- they have the ability to make decisions related to their development,
- they have knowledge acquired in their lives through formal and informal settings,
- they have attitudes, values and beliefs that need to be taken into consideration.

Therefore, it is not sufficient to present the adults with information, which could remain theoretical and not be internalized if it does not correspond with the value system (beliefs and attitudes) and the personal interest of the adult. Newly internalized information requires new skills and therefore our approach relates also to information, values, beliefs, attitudes, and skills.

Our basic assumptions are:

- **Each person has a basic power** (knowledge). This contradicts the widely expressed idea that there are two groups: the experts who have the knowledge and wisdom acquired through academic studies and the ignorant others. The empowerment approach changes this perspective and respects knowledge equally, whether gained through academic studies, learned from popular wisdom (heritage knowledge) or gained in life experiences. All knowledge is dealt with critically and may be reformulated and renewed.
- **The power is in our hands**: there is a need to build a non-hierarchical model of dealing with others. Most of the models in our society are hierarchical. This is a challenging process that needs to be addressed by the staff and the participants and demands new ground rules in the group. This has the potential to develop new ways of dealing with authority in our community and develop a new understanding of power, i.e., power with and not power over. And it opens the door to celebrate each individual's power as a capacity to empower others.
- The empowerment processes could be facilitated by others but the real actor is the individual. The facilitator will open the door but the person decides whether to enter or not.

- The learning is personal and according to each one's own rhythm. There is no empowerment without active participation. The empowerment approach makes the individual the center of the activity and without his/her motivation and active participation no learning will occur.
- The methods used are part of the active learning methods such as dialog, presenting case studies and learning from them, analysis of the reality, photos, films, other documents, field trips etc.

Critical interaction with knowledge – heritage and modernization

In learning processes, participating adults are often there to receive new information. They do not receive opportunities to share their knowledge and if such opportunities exist, then the knowledge will be taken into consideration based on its resource. Information gained through formal studies is most likely to be appreciated more than those which are learned from heritage or life experiences. This reflects the "political hierarchy of knowledge" which appreciates the written knowledge more than the heritage knowledge which is passed through socialization and/or the individual knowledge gained from life experiences.

The "political hierarchy of knowledge" reflects hegemony too. Our empowerment approach relates to all knowledge critically. Therefore, the unwritten heritage knowledge related to ECCD, which is normally "women's knowledge" in our society because of their traditional roles as caregivers, is worthy of our interest and needs to be studied and critiqued, the same as other resources of knowledge in ECCD.

Most of the employees in ECCD are women. Women in our society have lots of power and heritage knowledge related to ECCD. Therefore, we saw the importance of integrating the heritage knowledge of the women and incorporating it in our training. We build upon this knowledge and relate to it as any other knowledge known to us in ECCD.

Mixing between the heritage and the modern is an approach that we developed in Al-Tufula center. The heritage in this case is our rich cultural heritage knowledge related to ECCD that is passed through socialization between the generations, and the modern is all the professional knowledge that was developed in the world. This approach is based on the notion that "one who has no past, has no present and no future to belong to". The developing process needed a critical approach to both the heritage and professional knowledge.

Steps:

Begin with the participants:

Since most of the groups we work with are women, we begin by collecting what they know about ECCD. Asking questions about knowing proved to be difficult since most of this knowledge is not considered "knowing". Therefore we had to ask: what do you do with children? Such questions brought out much information that we collected and categorized into stories, songs, games, behaviors, beliefs, etc., to be able to come back to later. Collecting life experiences explicated the heritage knowledge that is owned by the participant. We needed to collect other knowledge about ECCD from books and audio-visual resources and make them accessible to all. The participants were invited to enrich these resources. In this process participants realized that there are different resources on knowledge and there is no hierarchy of knowledge. Her knowledge and the facilitator's knowledge and other participants' knowledge are equally appreciated.

Critical interaction with the value system of the participant

It is important to be aware of the differences in the group although we are all from the same culture. Sometimes we discover differences between the participants or the facilitator: these differences have to be respected and we have to be sensitive to the pluralism in the group. We need to maintain the dialog between all participants. Therefore it is important to explore the value system of each group and not make assumptions based on our previous knowledge.   In this way we ensure the collective learning processes. Rich experience enriches the group and widens the possibilities for learning.

Regain confidence in our own heritage:

The following stage was to review different categories, for example the games. We asked questions such as "when do we play such a game with the child?" At which stage of his/her life? The answers normally are "at a certain age", so we ask: why? And when the answer is that it's what my mother or grandmother did? We ask: is this by chance? Why don't we play with the child all these games from the first day? We continue this kind of questioning until we relate this with the psychological development of the child. Then we ask: do we know if developmental psychology could explain this? Such a process enables the participants to regain confidence in themselves and in the heritage, knowledge used by their mothers and grandmothers.

This process was necessary because many of the Palestinian citizens of Israel internalized inferiority through cultural colonization and adopted the colonizer's approach to the Palestinian culture. As a homeland minority, they suffer from the psychology of oppression after many years of discrimination. Many have lost trust in

themselves, especially the collective self (they lost the trust in anything that is Arab or Palestinian). They have lost faith in their own knowledge, especially the heritage knowledge. This prohibited their critical approach to other cultures that supported either conservatism or the rejection of all inherited cultural elements, having internalized the colonial approach to their own culture; that is inferiority. In other scenarios, they have been supported to dealing with this culture as folklore and not as heritage knowledge, which could be transformed and further developed.

Critical approach

The first condition to develop the ability to deal critically with our own and others' heritage knowledge is to know this knowledge with all its positive and negative components, to feel proud of belonging to this culture and be willing to transform it in order to maintain it. We needed to adopt the principles of the liberating pedagogy to regain confidence in the collective identity and strengthen the critical approach. This process began by regaining confidence in the heritage knowledge in order to claim ownership of it. After owning the culture and naming the heritage knowledge as such, we had to develop the critical thinking. Most of the participants had rich experiences and we supported them to bring these to the group. We supported her to trust her experiences and knowledge and to review them critically. A critical review of heritage could only be done if you know your heritage and feel proud of it; only then you can liberate yourself from others 'perceptions of this heritage. When we found contradictions between the different resources, we conducted further research on the information and in this process, we made differentiation between what is considered information, gossip, stories, and theory. Through this process, the critical thinking is strengthened.

Develop your own knowledge

Critical review of the heritage components raises a lot of questions and creates change in our beliefs and habits. Some of our actions and habits are not explainable. In such cases, we ask questions such as "is this habit dangerous?" Such a question causes the individual to be responsible for his/her behavior. Critical review of all knowledge enables you to develop your own knowledge which is constantly expanding. In critically reviewing our heritage knowledge, we continue evolving in accordance with the newly learned knowledge; this is for us the synthesis between heritage and modern knowledge.

The main condition for the ability to deal critically with our own cultural and other cultures is to liberate ourselves from the cultural colonialism and to get to know our culture with its positive and negative sides, feel proud, take ownership and act with responsibility. This is the basis of cultural sensitivity and respecting other cultures.

Developing resources based on heritage and modern knowledge

Since its establishment in 1989, Al-Tufula center has used different strategies and developed programs aimed at developing the infrastructure for ECCD in our community. One of these strategies remains to develop Arabic Resources for early childhood professionals, parents, and children.

We began in areas that were denied to our children, although they are part of their basic rights. One example: the child's right to develop his/her identity, to belong to a family and be proud of being a member of the community received extra attention, because of our status as part of the Palestinian national minority and as citizens within a state that defines itself as a Jewish and democratic state. Therefore we had this approach on our first priorities.

Examples from our resources that reflect this approach:

Mokagha: Diary for parents and children in the first year of a child's life.
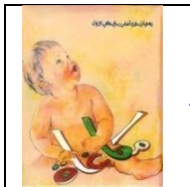
Here Hannan Karkaby Geraisey worked together with a popular poet and Al-Tufula staff to produce this diary that reflects the approach. For example, many resources were written on the importance of attachment for the development of the emotional intelligence. In our heritage we found many idioms that state the same. The diary brings one message from both knowledges.

Together with the diary a CD with the traditional songs presented in a new medium and music by Reem Bana

Siham Badarne and Alia Safadi in their book " Adatan waltegzia" reviewed all habits and customs related to Palestinian food and analyzed them in accordance to professional knowledge. They explain some of these habits and the way they function, presenting the readers with the information needed to decide on their further use.
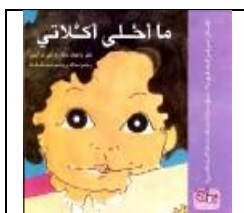
Here Hannan Karkaby Geraisy presents a daily healthy menu for the child using a traditional. New words are introduced to accompany the drawings of Reem Kandalaft that present different Palestinian foods.

Collecting and documenting the heritage related to age from birth to 3 use different parts of the Palestinian community, is what Nabila Espanioly and Majeda Ellabuiny did in this book "Min Alnakab libisan". The CD has some songs with new wording that suits our values and some with new music.