

# Winner of the 1998 Poster Competition



Once again the Poster Competition produced an excellent collection of high quality photographs and drawings, many of which offered tantalising insights into the world of early childhood. Many thanks to all of you who took the trouble to send in entries. We have included several in this edition; and look forward to featuring many others in future editions of *Early Childhood Matters* and in other Foundation publications.

Copies of the poster are available free from the Foundation.

Namibia: a tense moment during a consultation process  
Family Support in ECD Project  
photo: Paula Nimpuno-Parente

# Early Childhood Matters

the bulletin of the Bernard van Leer Foundation

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Foundation

*Effectiveness for children*

*Reaching for the moon*

*Real engagement by children*

*Tapping a key resource*

*Driving a car for the first time*

*Peru: Children's Parliaments – hearing children*

*India: Bal Sansad – Children's Parliaments*

*The Bernard van Leer Foundation 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary*

*Early Childhood Matters* continues the *Newsletter*. It is published three times a year in February, June and October, by the

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If you are interested in contributing to *Early Childhood Matters*, please contact the Editor for a preliminary discussion and to obtain a copy of our 'Guide for Authors'. Contributions must be related to early childhood development and should draw on direct practical experience with young children, their families and communities. Please note that the Foundation does not pay for contributions because *Early Childhood Matters* is generally distributed free of charge. Please also note that we allow free copying for non-commercial purposes.

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Cover photo: Portugal: children in their own world,  
Photo: Jean-Luc Ray  
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Photo inside front cover: China: on Teacher's Day the children present their drawings to express what they feel for their teachers, Kindergarten in Guiyang City, Guizhou province Field Study on ECD Perceptions Project  
China National Institute for Educational Research, Hebei Province (Entry for the 1998 Poster Competition)

As well as *Early Childhood Matters* the Foundation produces a wide range of publications about early childhood development. All are available – free of charge for single copies – to organisations or individuals interested in this field.

A publications list is also available: please contact the Foundation at the addresses shown on the back cover.



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# Effectiveness for Children

*Under the general title of ‘Effectiveness for whom?’ the next few editions of Early Childhood Matters will consider elements of what makes early childhood development (ECD) programmes effective for different stakeholders and actors. In this, it will be drawing from, and contributing to, the Effectiveness Initiative, a major new undertaking by the Foundation and a number of partner organisations about effectiveness in ECD programmes. To launch the series, this edition considers ‘Effectiveness for Children’ by reviewing ideas and programmes of work that seek the views of children, and that value children as contributors to, and participants in, all aspects of ECD.*

Taken as a whole, the articles challenge the idea of putting together programmes with little or no direct input from the children themselves, and without an understanding of how individual children experience childhood. They demonstrate the value of knowing what young children think, see, believe, want or need; discovering how they interpret or understand their experiences; and being aware of how they respond internally to events, happenings and programme activities. Within the articles are examples of young children contributing ideas, solutions, criticisms and ways forward; and of their initiatives becoming a focus of interest and development within programmes.

In researching for this edition, it became clear that relatively little work is being done to get at the ideas, perceptions and experiences of children under eight years, or to discover their responses to early childhood programmes.

This has left a gap:

A cursory analysis of data on children suggests that, aside from some information on health ... and education, most development agencies do not as a rule collect much information about children and childhoods. Much of what has been compiled is written by adults rather than by children themselves and reflects a paternalistic attitude on the part of adults who feel that they know about children and childhoods because they have themselves gone through childhood. There is very little [distinct and separated] data on children’s lives and relatively little is actually known about children’s lives<sup>1</sup>.

Yet we need such data. For example, without trying to find out what is really happening inside children’s heads, we cannot presume to judge how well they are performing:

What constitutes a personal achievement for a two year old may be quite different from what is defined as such by an adult experimenter ... The experimenter who puts a puzzle in front of a child most likely defines success as completion of the puzzle. But a two year old may make a circle or a train out of the puzzle pieces and evaluate her accomplishment in terms of that goal. For these reasons, observing children in situations in which success is defined by an adult provides limited evidence on young toddlers’ reactions to achievements<sup>2</sup>.

Failing to be aware of such inner responses constitutes a failure to support that child adequately. It also indicates a more general failure to recognise and build on children’s abilities and interests, the range of which – lamentably – continues to surprise most of us. This range can include the ability of children as young as three to deal constructively with



Turkey: an expert in communicating with children ... and her son  
MOCEF  
(Entry for the 1998 Poster Competition)

philosophical concepts<sup>3</sup> and that of children of seven to grapple successfully with political issues<sup>4</sup>. The consequence of this kind of failure is that programmes are not as effective as they could be.

#### Childhood and children's views

Underpinning each article are beliefs drawn from extensive experience. These include: that holistic development promotes confident and creative participation; that children will show what they can do if given the opportunity; and that children are natural analysers and problem solvers.

In the first article, Dr S Anandalakshmy questions the limited nature of some ECD programmes. She uses an ancient Tamil text from India to justify a move away from programmes that concentrate only on cognitive development, language development, hygiene,

cleanliness, nutrition and so on; or that are valued only for visible and quantifiable results – for example, better performance in primary school. She calls for programmes to take the concept of 'holistic' seriously by developing what she calls the 'Nine Cs' – Competence, Communication, Creativity, Confidence, Curiosity, Control, Conviviality, Compassion and Cooperation (page 7).

Next, Kathy Bartlett reviews children's participation in programmes, as she sees it after more than 20 years in the field. She postulates explanations for the limited experience that programmes seem to have in this area, surveys a range of approaches to finding out what is going on inside children's heads, and poses a series of questions that invite discussion about how to make further progress (page 12).

David Tolfree and Martin Woodhead set out the arguments for practitioners and policy makers finding out what children see, think, feel and believe. Then they suggest practical ways forward with young children. In this, they draw on their pioneering efforts in not only getting at this knowledge, but also in recognising and taking advantage of children's ability to work with it themselves as they analyse their situations and come up with practical ideas. In line with their age, cultural background and development opportunities, children are shown to be resourceful and valuable partners (page 19).

Some of the pitfalls and complexities of preparing childcare workers to help children express themselves are covered in the article by Drs Jorien Meerdink

(page 24). She advocates a child-driven approach in which the development needs of children are established with the help of children themselves. The article describes and discusses how teachers and childcare workers were trained to elicit information from young children by asking open questions. It also shows that children often coped with this exercise much better than did the trainees.

Two of the articles discuss Children's Parliaments, one in India, the other in Peru. In each, young children experience processes of debate and discussion, and see how problems are tackled and solutions proposed. However, in many other ways they are very different.

The Children's Parliaments in Peru are a tool in a programme designed to enhance children's resilience. The key idea is that they directly enable children to express themselves through showing what makes them happy and sad, and what their hopes are for the future. A child-determined agenda is thereby established, and a programme of appropriate work is put together to build on the happy, eliminate the sad and help children move towards realising their hopes. Expressing, analysing and taking action are seen as a preparation for participating successfully in the democratic processes of their societies. The project has also developed new approaches specifically to enable young children to express themselves, based on creative use of drawings and other pictorial aids (page 30).

In India, the Children's Parliaments have developed naturally within a wider programme of interventions, all of which include a focus on child development.

There is considerable formality: there are political parties, elections and ministers with responsibility for areas of interest that mirror those of the implementing project. This can be seen as a preparation for possible participation in formal democratic processes later in life (page 37).

In the context of the topic of this edition, it is worth repeating that children are very good at finding things out from each other. The October 1998 edition of *Early Childhood Matters* featured an article from Zimbabwe about Child Researchers who interview young children in appropriate ways about developmentally significant topics in their communities.

#### An unfinished job

In bringing this edition together, the biggest problem was finding enough examples of appropriate practice with children under eight. While some of the articles deal specifically with that age group, others are about groups of children from four years to twelve or older. In these, there often seems to be no specific provision for young children, apparently because their passive involvement is considered enough at this stage: they are learning how others express themselves, contribute and participate. Later this will bear fruit. Another gap is the lack of direct discussion here about how to judge the value of what children express in relation to other data and considerations.

Finally, the most important experts are not represented in this edition: parents. In the coming months the Foundation hopes to carry out a small initiative designed to help parents express themselves and exchange views internationally about many topics – including communication with their children. I expect to feature the outcomes in a future edition.

Overall, while this edition demonstrates the importance of inclusive, child-centred approaches, it also shows that much still has to be learned: this is an undeveloped area and only tentative results are emerging. We will return to these aspects of ‘Effectiveness for Children’ regularly.

#### In the next edition

The next edition of *Early Childhood Matters* continues the theme of ‘Effectiveness for Whom?’ by considering what makes ECD programmes effective in the eyes of policy and decision makers. I want to explore two key areas: 1. why it is effective to support ECD in general; and 2. what it is that makes ECD programmes effective. I am interested in both major articles and short pieces that may be anecdotal. Some possible questions about the first area include:

- Why do you support ECD programmes?
- Have any particular experiences made you

change your mind about the importance of ECD programmes? What were they?

- What factors influence you in deciding to allocate resources to ECD programmes instead of competing programmes?

Some possible questions about the second area include:

- What elements make a programme effective for you?
- How do you assess whether a programme is effective?
- What outcomes do you look for?
- What mechanisms and instruments do you use to measure impact?
- How do you assess whether you are getting value for money?

Please do contact me before the middle of March 1999 so we can develop ideas together.

*Jim Smale*  
Editor

1. Leelham Singh and H Roy Trivedy, *Approaches to Child Participation: a discussion paper*, (1996) Save the Children Fund (UK) India Office, New Delhi, India.

2. Stipek D, Recchia S, McClintic S, Self-evaluation in young children; (1992) *Monographs for the Society for Research in Child Development*, Serial No 226, Vol 97, No 1; Society for Research in Child Development, University of Chicago Journals Division, Chicago, USA; p 23.

3. Sigurbórsdóttir I, Philosophy With Children In Foldaborg; Development project in Foldaborg, a pre-school in Reykjavik, Iceland, for children from 1-6 years' in *OMEP International Journal of Early Childhood*, Volume 30, No 1; (1998) omepe World Organisation for Early Childhood and Education, dcdpe Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1A 0HH, England.

4. “Auto’s zijn vies” Ook kinderen zijn politiek bewust’ (‘Cars are dirty’ Children are also politically aware) in *NRC* 19 September 1998, The Netherlands.



Dr S Anandalakshmy

*For Dr S Anandalakshmy, teaching has been a vocation, a profession, a passion. After setting up and starting a lively and innovative school in Madras, she moved to New Delhi to teach at Lady Irwin College. She established the Post-Graduate Department of Child Development – which offered a rigorous and people-friendly course to young women – and was Director of the college from 1983 to 1991. She was also involved in the Mobile Creches (a voluntary organisation for the families of labourers on construction sites in Delhi and*

*Bombay) from its inception, serving as Chairperson for six years.*

*In this article she argues that, if early childhood development programmes are to be effective for children, they have to be holistic, and profoundly child centred. That includes positively supporting healthy emotional development in young children. To make her case, she draws on an ancient Tamil text and on a recent best-selling book from the USA: Emotional Intelligence<sup>1</sup>.*

## *Reaching for the moon*

An ancient Tamil text talks of reaching for the moon as it discusses one stage of early childhood development. The moon is both metaphor and symbol and has many layers of meaning. 'Reaching for the moon' alludes to gaining humour, capriciousness and dream-state. I link this to the need of children for a healthy emotional development, something that is best considered in the gentle light of the moon with its fuzzy boundaries, rather than in the harsh light of the sun. The light of the moon allows the development of the child's sense of self to be given sympathetic support in

differing and shifting blends at varied moments: hard edged certainty is inappropriate.

When one sets up a daycare centre or preschool, one starts with providing a safe environment with trusted caregivers, following a programme that includes hygiene, health and supplementary nutrition, and moves on to include play. In the course of growing up in the company of others, children learn listening, responding, speaking, communicating intent, seeking to know, exploring, trying out, establishing social

India: a bubbling child-centred preschool  
Taking Care of our Children Project  
SEWA  
photo: Gerry Salole  
(Entry for the 1998 Poster Competition)



# Pillai Tamizh: stages of infancy and early childhood

Infancy and early childhood are divided into 10 phases that include: babbling and listening to lullabies; crawling; clapping hands; and walking. At 18 months,



children enter the Moon Phase, when they become more aware of their environment, find the full moon beautiful and long for it to come down to earth as a playmate. Mothers join in the game and plead with the moon to come down and play with their children. The moon is obstinate and does not comply! Mothers try gentle persuasion, flattery, anger, a threat to find another moon, and so on. Subtly they are also indicating to their children different kinds

of punishment for non-compliance. The norms and rules are articulated playfully; adults and children together enjoy the pretence and the fantasy.

India: creative activities build up the Cs  
photo: Liane Gertsch

contact. These are intrinsic to childhood, children do them naturally.

However, while hygiene and health, and the development of cognitive and language abilities are usually specifically included in the preschool programme, the emotional development of children is often left out. My view is that the immense potential that young children have can only be developed into power and strength if there is affection from those who spend time with children; if all activities are exciting and enjoyable; and if challenges are stimulating and unthreatening. For me, play, playfulness and a sense of fun are of the essence. Together with these, warmth and a non-judgemental attitude to both competence and incompetence, constitute the 'primordial soup' from which the central self of children emerges, a central self that depends on the expression and cultivation of healthy emotions.

I also believe that healthy emotional development is the basis for the future system of children that, among other things, will help them to avoid psychological problems, to handle situations better, and to fare well academically and in interpersonal relationships. It will also help them to deal with success and to treat negative experiences without a sense of personal humiliation or failure. But this has to be actively supported, first because it may not develop naturally even under optimal conditions; and secondly because, when it is developed in the early years, it helps psychological health throughout life.

## Making a good soup

Based on my experiences with young children over many years, I have developed a recipe for that primordial soup mentioned earlier. Into it go myth, song and verse, fun, fantasy and humour. People may argue that myth is irrelevant to young children. But myth is the collective unconscious of a people, to use a Jungian<sup>2</sup> phrase – within our culture, it's what we all believe. By using this myth in playing with their children, mothers anchor children to their culture and to the cognitive idiom of their people. This enables a contextualising of self, while the make-believe element encourages creativity and imagination.

For their part, dance and music are full of the kinds of metaphors that reflect what we all take for granted as our cultural reality. They make an early impact on children; and what is learned through dance, or music, or through verses, is also learned better – and provides a lot of enjoyment.

In turn, fantasy and imagination open up whole new worlds for children. This does not stop them developing a keen sense of reality, nor does it confuse them. The secret is not to replace reality, nor to overwhelm them with fantasy. Observe what happens if you make a drawing of a baby and show it to children: they'll pretend to be a baby and 'cry' or lovingly pat the drawing. They know it's not a real baby, it is fantasy play in which they engage happily.

### Seasoning the soup

There is so much fun when you deal in the undefined, or add extra elements to something, or playfully juxtapose two unlikely things. Children have a natural sense of humour: as young as two and three, I have seen them creating their own jokes and laughing at them – they know a joke from serious stuff.

Away down south where bananas grow  
A grasshopper stepped on an elephant's toe  
The elephant said with tears in his eyes  
'Pick on somebody your own size.'

Children do see the point of this little rhyme, and when they laugh, you understand how humour is one of the most human aspects of human beings. We, as adults, use humour hesitantly with children because we are a little too serious about what we do.

### Rationalising the recipe

A nourishing soup is necessarily complex. Rationalise this recipe and you reduce its goodness. For example, some people stress the need for a scientific temperament and argue for a more mechanistic approach. But science is full of questions; uncertainty is of the essence; and creativity and imagination are the most valuable faculties for the creative scientist and the inventor. Artistic and scientific activities are not necessarily pursued by totally different sorts of people: creativity and imagination are important to both and have the same source. That means that they need the same kind of nourishment. It also means

that we must not focus on the obviously useful at the expense of those lovely 'useless' activities that relate to fantasy. I defend the useless – that which is not immediately useful – and I claim that there is a great advantage in a large horizon of information, experiences and so on. We need a wide sweep that encompasses, rather than a narrow neck that restricts.

### The wrong soup?

One has to answer seriously the counter arguments of those who stress legitimate priorities such as health, hygiene and nutrition. My suggestion is that the imparting of those services should include the fostering of emotional development. It is in no sense a question of either/or. Similarly, preparation for primary schools is an important objective but it is not a question of preschools either emphasising cognitive development and measurable achievements or supporting only healthy emotional development. They can keep in mind wider foci: what children need to be, to know, to be capable of in life. For example, if language and verbalisation are on the agenda, the context selected for the work could easily include social conversation, feelings and compassion for those in pain.

This approach may appear to cause conflict at key times – for example, at the time of transition from preschool to a formal primary school. Primary school teachers know that children who attend child-centred preschools tend to be happy, self-confident and ebullient: they are forever exploring and doing new

things and coming up with wonderful new ideas and pieces of work. In short, they don't look as if they will do well in such areas as formal tests. Teachers need to recognise and build on the fact that these children are actually very well equipped to deal with any situation that they encounter, and to succeed in tests or examinations or anything else.

The implication is that the formal system must be more child friendly, and must continue the preschool initiated support of the development of the central self. At the same time, it must resist attempts to impose the adult dichotomy of work and play on children. For children, work is playing with things, playing with peers, playing at roles. Playing requires no external motivation: children love challenges and they love to play, and thereby to work, to learn, to know.

### What exactly must this soup nourish?

A couple of years ago, I read a book called *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman and I realised afresh that the 20th century has been a celebration of left brain functions: language; cognition; and numeracy. At the same time there has been an inadvertent neglect of the right brain functions: creativity; imagination; intuition and so on. Although there has been virtually an explosion of knowledge in several fields, insights about human development do not seem to have kept pace and we have engendered 'emotional illiteracy' (Goleman's term for a lack of emotional development). In contrast, the categories of infancy and early childhood developed in the Tamil

# Play



India: busy learning nothing really  
photo: Dr S. Anandalakshmy

The mother comes at noon to take him home  
Asking earnestly what has he learned today.  
What has he learned? Nothing really,  
If you don't count growing up and learning  
to live.

Tumbling over, laughing  
Repeating sounds, repeating words  
Doing everything just one more time  
Until the mastery  
Gives a sense of personhood.

The fear of tigers that eat up children  
Is conquered when the child becomes a tiger,  
Growling and prowling.

In the far corner of the room cuddling a doll,  
Playing at baby and mother,  
Both roles at once,  
Understanding love.

Being a bus driver,  
taking people on  
Giving tickets and taking change  
Stopping for oil  
Steering away into the future.

tradition reflect the importance of nurturing, and of affectionate and playful interaction between children and their parents. For me, finding the Tamil tradition was like finding an amber gemstone washed up by the tide: it sharpened my perceptions about ourselves and about the young of our species.

The soup that I am steadily revealing the recipe for, nourishes exactly those attributes in children that together indicate healthy emotional development and show that the central self is in place. I call them the 'Nine Cs': Competence, Communication and Creativity; Confidence, Curiosity and Control; and Conviviality, Compassion and Cooperation. You will notice that I have grouped them in threes.

The first group consists of Competence, Communication and Creativity. The resources and opportunities required for fostering these are usually found in good preschools – for instance, materials and space for art, provision and opportunities for the development of speaking and listening, and opportunities for the development of basic competence. Most teachers and parents accept these as necessary for children. Moreover, there are tangible – or at least measurable – aspects to them.

The second group is directly related to healthy emotional development: Confidence, Curiosity and Control. However, they may not be provided for. Confidence would be welcomed in most places but its absence may go unnoticed. Similarly, when children do not show Curiosity, teachers don't necessarily feel the need to

comment or react – in some cultures, Curiosity may even be considered bad manners! On the other hand, the absence of Control will generate attention.

Conviviality, Compassion and Cooperation – the third set of attributes – are also central to healthy emotional development, but may be invisible or absent because they are not identified as needing conscious cultivation. They only develop in interactions with others, especially the peer group. We assume, perhaps, that these will emerge as the by-products of the highly individualised preschool agenda, but that assumption may be wrong. The preschool must not only be child centred, it must be children centred.

How can these attributes be developed? It's not a matter of saying 'OK, it's now 10 in the morning so we'll have a go at giving children warm and positive personalities'. The moon metaphor gives us the feel of the approach; and this should be complemented by teachers acting as themselves, as fellow human beings. Then their guidance will emerge naturally and it will be the right sort of guidance. The settings will also develop slowly. These may be the ones that children already share with their teachers, with just a little emphasis here, or taking advantage of something that is naturally occurring there. Or they may not have a physical existence: they may only be created in the minds of the children.

One can also make things lively: that will help simply because children are happy. Find the fun, laugh a bit, make these natural day to day elements in the

environment that children experience. In addition, the nine Cs develop through play; through interaction; through children talking; through realising how they feel; through knowing that their concerns are taken into account; through using their imagination; through being aware of the needs of others; and so on. Preschool children are not too young for this.

Let me illustrate how to support the development of Compassion. We consider this as abstract and difficult but only because we try to protect young children from knowing too much about sad things. Yet young children do feel compassion and want to express it. For example, one of my former students lost her mother but still went to work in her preschool. She was naturally very sad and one child sensed this and brought a favourite toy and just placed it on her lap. So Compassion was there and was expressed tenderly.

One way to approach the development of Compassion is by helping children become aware of others, who they are, who their siblings are, and so on: Compassion starts with a sense of other people. Children themselves are a great source of this information: their own names, their family, their own history, and so on. Work like this needs to be done more consciously – but it only takes a little thinking or rethinking on the teacher's part. It is also a matter of taking advantage of situations that arise, or of using fantasy and creativity to enable children to experience and analyse suitable incidents or situations. For example, when one of the children is absent from school for a while, get the others to find out why. Upon return the child should be given the chance to tell the others about the reasons for being absent.

#### Digesting the soup

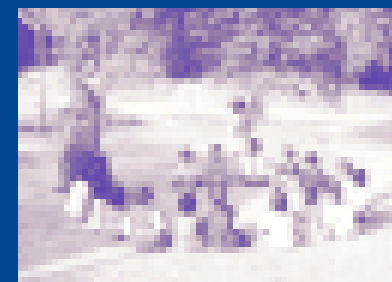
I have observed many good preschools where, typically, each child is received warmly, there is a well-planned schedule of activities, the children's artwork is up on the walls, and there is a word for the parents who come to take the children home. Yet, even when everything seems right, I have found that most communication from the teachers consists of instructions to the children. Only a small portion goes into actual conversation. There is almost no communication in the reciprocal sense of the word and the opinions of children are seldom solicited.

There is no manual or handbook to move from this situation to one that naturally and effectively supports the emotional development of young children, that helps to give them that central self. But I hope I have shown how the preschool teacher can help to navigate the child's moon landing! ○

1. Goleman D, *Emotional Intelligence*; (1995) Bantam Books, New York, USA.

2. Carl Jung was a Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist who founded analytical psychology. He proposed and developed concepts such as extrovert and introvert personalities, archetypes and the collective unconscious.

## Emotional soup



India: seasoning the soup  
photo: Dr S Anandalakshmy

My neighbour's granddaughter is very bright and strong willed. One day, her grandmother said to her 'You know, it's not good for children to get angry', and the three year old replied 'Is it ok for big people to get angry?'. Such a comment could only have emerged because she had self-assurance and complete trust in the adult. I would predict that she can handle the anger of other people better than children who meekly obey and resent authority. Adults around her will have to shift their perceptions: if they think of a child as 'only a child' they lose some insight. They have to accept firmly that a child is a person.

# Real engagement by children

Kathy Bartlett

*Kathy Bartlett has been involved for nearly 20 years in programmes for children during their early years. Initially she worked as a preschool to lower primary school teacher in California. From there she worked in Honduras for a local NGO which set up 'family centres' to provide preschool education for young children in rural Choluteca. Later, in Costa Rica, she undertook her PhD research exploring rural working women's strategies for childcare and also worked as a trainer for the US Peace Corps' Integrated ECD Programme which was run in cooperation with local health, education and social welfare departments. Since 1992, she has been working for the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) as Programme Officer for Education with particular responsibility for the AKF's Young Children and the Family portfolio of projects.*

Young children are the key individuals – the direct beneficiaries – in ECD programmes, often alongside those who care for them, perhaps as part of the same family and community. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child includes participation as one of children's rights and, based on hundreds of project experiences from around the world, there is general agreement that ECD programmes are more likely to be effective and sustainable when participation by all the stakeholders – especially parents, other family and community members – is enabled and encouraged. By participation I mean a real

engagement, according to age/ability, in all stages and levels of a programme, from conceptualisation, through operation to evaluation. I also mean this engagement to include the confident expressions of views, perceptions, feelings, ideas, reactions and so on.

In this article, I want to share a few questions and ideas on whether and how we, as ECD workers, advocates, supervisors, researchers, donors, and so on, understand and take account of that real engagement; how this is defined by various stakeholders; and how these

concepts interact and influence what happens in a 'real life' ECD programme.

I have been thinking about these matters as a result of the project reports and evaluations from different countries I have read or written over the years. Such reports often include important information on changes in children including their growth and weight, cognitive and social development, and so on. But they tend to pay inadequate attention to what is happening within children and to their views – including feedback about how they experience programmes.

In addition, discussions with those most closely involved in ECD projects – such as caregivers or supervisors – show a wide range of responses regarding what they describe as children's participation. Many bring up the more 'conventional' kinds of participation such as attending, or taking part in activities. But it isn't clear that they are thinking about participation in the sense of real engagement.



Uganda: *watch and I'll show you what I mean*  
photo: Jean-Luc Ray  
© The Aga Khan Foundation



#### The problems ...

Part of the problem at present seems to be a lack of appropriate tools and/or methods for capturing a broader definition for participation by children that signifies real engagement. There is also the very real dilemma of the lack of many ECD workers' time to record and reflect observations as well as document discussions with parents and families related to the children's involvement and interest. Finally, there may be a need for additional skills (and follow-up encouragement and support) so that those who work directly with children become more confident in using a wider variety of methods for hearing and documenting children's views, feelings and voices. Those interested and concerned (children, parents, ECD workers, NGOs and others up to government,

donors, researchers, and so on) need a better picture and sense of what 'effective' ECD programmes accomplish and achieve. This means that there is also a need to find examples of methods and tools used to monitor children and the nature and quality of their participation; and a need to work towards documenting the process of children's participation in creative ways.

A further critical point to raise, for broader debate, is the degree to which value is placed on children's views and reactions being captured and set alongside adult views to try to gain a fuller understanding of whether a project is 'effective' or not.

There are also questions about different rules and accepted ways for interacting with adults or children across cultures. What happens when real engagement by children conflicts with the views of those (who may be outsiders) who promote ECD projects? What about parental or community aspirations for children that conflict with what NGOs might believe 'best' or 'right'. Some parents press for teachers or ECD workers or teachers to teach children to read and write at a very early age. They want this because they are keen for their children to enter and succeed in primary school. They also are aware that there may be 'entrance' exams that will test these skills. Those of us who advocate for appropriate early childhood programmes – those that promote learning by doing, trying, exploring and playing – can find ourselves on opposite sides from parents and/or those who set

primary entrance exams. But I would claim that there is growing evidence that formal and direct teaching for very young children can undermine their longer-term development and their confidence in themselves as learners.

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*millions of children begin to work at early ages and therefore participate by bringing in income to households*

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Related to the broader discourse on children's participation – although perhaps separate – is the reality that millions of children begin to work at early ages and therefore participate by bringing in income to households. Many are also expected to take on certain household responsibilities: gathering water or firewood, caring for younger siblings, cooking and cleaning, taking care of animals, and so on.

I have seen three or four year olds 'in charge' of their smaller brothers and sisters, including having the smaller one slung on their hips. The point for me is that in many communities young children do participate – often actively – yet when it comes to finding out how they view their responsibilities (or involvement in ECD programmes) many of us think it is not possible.



India: children have a different outlook ...  
photo: Jean-Luc Ray  
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### ... and some ways forward

Part of the challenge in ECD is that we are dealing with children under eight years of age. We might still learn some lessons from the growing numbers of examples used with older children and adolescents: for example, in recent years there has been increased attention to hearing the views of school children – a necessary part of that real engagement I discussed earlier.

Child-to-Child programmes have pioneered an approach that promotes reflection on experiences, active participation, and decision making by children. There is a tremendous amount of documentation showing children really engaged as leaders and as doers in the fight for health education and promotion at home, in communities and in schools.

Another example can be found in *I dreamed I had a girl in my pocket*, a recent publication describing the work of Wendy Ewald, a photographer who brought instant cameras to India and worked with children over the course of months on photography.<sup>1</sup> She asked children to take pictures that meant something to them. The publication is remarkable. Pictures of friends, family members of all ages and themselves at work, play and rest, celebrating marriage (including their own), in conversation. It also has landscapes and animals and their homes. Since each photo has an explanation by the child who took the photo, the rationale for selection provides an insight into their thinking and perception of their world.

CHETNA'S Child Resource Centre in India, provides further examples through their 'Children in Charge for Change' initiative.<sup>2</sup> This programme is documenting what different NGOs in India are already doing *vis-à-vis* children's participation, again in the sense of real engagement. CHETNA describes this as a 'child focused programme that builds on a realistic assessment of children's abilities and capacities, ensures participation of children in planning, implementing and evaluating programmes, emphasises a facilitating role for adults, deals with problems/issues in an inter-sectoral way and views the child in the context of his or her family and community.'

One enterprise that is documented in this initiative – Bal Sansad (Children's Parliaments) – is featured on page 37 of this edition of *Early Childhood Matters*.

The same source also reminds us that children's participation is dependent on adults' ability to provide opportunities and offers some suggestions for enabling participation:

- giving voice to children's feelings and concerns;
- children taking part in planning and implementation and assessment of programmes; and
- children taking decisions, according to their maturity and capacities.



This last point is highly pertinent for those of us in the field of ECD, since we work with infants, toddlers, preschoolers and those in lower primary school. Infants and very young toddlers and preschoolers are not able to describe their thoughts in ‘adult-speak’, although their emotional, physical and verbal reactions (giggles, cries, silent watching, rigid body/limbs, babbling, cooing, screaming) can be indicative, if not absolutely clear. When individual reactions repeat themselves in patterns, we have further clues.

Using photos and video cameras to record what happens could supplement and complement documentation and reports. In addition, methods such as Participatory Learning and Action (or Participatory Rapid Appraisals) may be useful to weave in children’s views on their participation<sup>3</sup>. We can also compare what young children convey to us with what we learn from primary caregivers, family members (including siblings), ECD workers and others, about their observations and interactions with children. This helps to build a mosaic of perspectives

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*When individual reactions repeat themselves in patterns, we have further clues.*

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on what children might experience in specific ECD programmes over time and across contexts.

Looking back with children can also be useful. I had a conversation with a preschool trainer in Kenya where AKF supports both a community based preschool programme and a separate primary school improvement programme. The trainer shared that she had visited the children who had ‘graduated’ the previous year and were now in grade one of primary school to see whether and how many were enrolled. She asked the children what they thought of their new school. Some of the children said they were getting on well. Others expressed longing for their old preschool and teacher – who did not hit them, who let them choose activities and play, and so on. How seriously do we take such statements as children make one of the many transitions that can come along in life? In this case, the information from the children was not necessarily fed back to the primary school, although to some extent it was discussed with preschool teachers. In retrospect, I see such feedback as useful for programme changes – on both sides – if there can be fuller discussions amongst the project teams, teachers and parents.

We should keep in mind one of the underlying principles of ECD programming: that young children are intimately joined to and depend on those who live around them. Therefore, how children experience their own involvement in ECD programmes might, at least in part, be linked to how and how well their



India: *hey Mum, tell me what your scribbles mean*  
photo: Jean-Luc Ray  
© The Aga Khan Foundation

main caregivers and family members are enabled and encouraged to participate in ECD programmes themselves. We will need to gain a better understanding of some of the dynamics involved here. But, if mothers and fathers feel involved, have opportunities to learn, develop and make decisions about their lives; and if sisters and brothers enjoy learning and know they can study as well as continue with their other economic or household responsibilities, what does this do for the infants and younger children in these homes and communities? Might it not change the way in which children experience whatever ECD effort is being implemented? If parents and siblings (or others) who care for them are supported, can a virtuous cycle be created – or is this unrealistic?

My hope is that by working with others involved in ECD work, it might be possible – over time – to develop, identify and fine-tune methods that illustrate and reflect a more holistic understanding of young children's participation in ECD programmes. It will be critical that these be diverse and flexible so that the various groups of individuals, with different experiential and educational background, might select and be able to use them. It will be useful to hear about work that is being done in this area and to begin to pull it together to share with others. For example, Save the Children (UK) has some interesting publications related to this area from its field experiences internationally. The Bernard van Leer Foundation, in collaboration with other members of

the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development's consortium of partners, is in the early stages of a three-year 'Effectiveness Initiative' which may provide an opportunity to identify what others are already doing.

While I do not have complete responses to some of the points I have raised, I am becoming more and more conscious of how easily children, particularly any hint of their voice and opinion, can slip out of focus when we discuss effectiveness in ECD. But if we lose those, then we restrict their real engagement. I believe we can do more, especially if we share what has or hasn't worked in different contexts. To end, here are a few of the benefits CHETNA offers to encourage us to give space to children and their participation:

- 1 It empowers children. The greatest benefit to children is that it builds capacities and confidence, enriches them and makes them more responsible.
- 2 It is a process of socialisation. Children learn that, just as they have a voice, so do others and that differing views demand the same respect for all.
- 3 It gives children a voice and the freedom to express themselves. ○



1. Ewald, W and the children of Vichya village, *I dreamed I had a girl in my pocket*; (1996) Umbra Editions Inc/Double Take Books; New York/Durham, North Carolina. *This project was organised under the auspices of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, India.*

2. Further information and materials on 'Children in Charge for Change' can be obtained from: CHETNA, The Centre for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness: Lilavatiben Labhai's Bungalow, Civil camp Road, Shahibaug, Ahmedabad - 380 004, Gujarat, India. Excerpts taken from the pamphlet 'Children in Charge for Change': From Being to Becoming (1997).

3. For further information about how these methods have been adapted previously, see *the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development's Notebook* no 20, 1997. See also the International Institute for Environmental Development's 'PLA Notes' series, published from London, England.

AKF and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, amongst other donors, contributed to CHETNA's Children in Charge for Change project. AKF has also supported the Child-to-Child Trust and other Child-to-Child projects in South Asia and East Africa.



# *Tapping a key resource*

David Tolfree is a freelance consultant with a particular interest in children in difficult circumstances.

Martin Woodhead is a developmental psychologist at the Open University, United Kingdom, and coordinator of the MA course in Child Development. His recent work has concentrated on cultural aspects of child development and children's rights.

In this article they argue for practitioners, researchers and policy makers in early childhood development (ECD) to listen to children. They then discuss processes of working with children that acknowledge the extraordinary capacity that children have for trying to make sense of their situation and find ways of dealing with it. For clarity, the article is set out in three sections: 'We should listen to children because ...'; 'How to do it' and 'Special factors'.

David Tolfree and Martin Woodhead

Ethiopia: group work with shoeshine boys  
photo: Martin Woodhead

## The boomerang of kindness

With a group of children who were facing the dangers of attacks by Muslim and Croat forces in Banja Luca, Bosnia, the use of playful techniques freed the emotional expression of children – which itself helps to promote development and problem solving. It also seemed to unlock their capacity for very creative thinking and positive ideas. They came up with the ‘Boomerang of kindness’. The idea was that throwing out a boomerang of kindness meant that kindness came back to them too.<sup>1</sup>

### *We should listen to children because ...*

#### *... it helps their development*

Eliciting children’s views is validating and empowering. It is important in itself for adults to reveal their ignorance to children and ask children what they think. Listening must not wait until children are able to join in adult conversations. It should begin at birth, and be adapted to their developing capacities for communication and participation in their social world.

#### *... we need to avoid assumptions*

Pre-conceptions about what children think, want and need in particular contexts; assumptions about features of childhood that are often assumed to be universal; and labelling children and then making broad assumptions about them, make us less effective.

#### *... what they experience may be different from what we intend or expect*

We can learn what their real preoccupations are rather than what adults think or hope they might be. In one country in Africa for example, we enabled a group of working children to compile a newsletter about the educational programme they were in. One recurring theme was physical punishment – something that none of the staff had mentioned to us.

#### *... they can change the ways in which we view ourselves as adults*

Recognising children’s competencies and their ability to contribute, helps break down the boundaries between the worlds of adults and children. It helps adults to reflect on the limitations of their understandings of children’s worlds. Children, like adults, are social actors trying to make sense of situations they find themselves in.

#### *... they have something to say*

In their own terms, children think deeply, are very sensitive and aware, and are concerned about what they are doing, why they are doing it and how to make sense of it. They also have considerable ability in articulating their ideas, concerns, opinions, beliefs and feelings – although this will depend on their age, their cultural context and their educational experiences.

#### *... they are valuable partners*

Children can be powerful social actors with something to offer to their wider families and communities. For example, because of armed conflict, many parents in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia became frozen emotionally and were depressed. That inhibited their ability to see what was happening in their children and respond to it. In workshops conducted by an organisation called Zdravo da Ste<sup>2</sup> to promote the development of refugee children living in centres in Serbia, the children could sometimes recover their capacity for emotional expression more quickly than could the adults. Some children could even be seen trying to draw their own parents into self-expression.

#### *... they can help us understand their unique perspectives*

There’s no simple cause and effect relationship between certain types of events and certain types of behavioural or emotional reactions in children or adults. They’re mediated through a whole range of different variables – the individual family, community, the wider context, cultural factors and so on. To understand the impact of particular circumstances, there is no substitute for finding out from individual children how each of them is reacting.



Ethiopia: role play by childstreet vendors  
photo: Martin Woodhead

*... they can help us shape policy and practice*

Children – the principal stakeholders – rarely get heard in policy debate or in discussions about what is best practice. This has been especially true in recent international actions to eliminate child labour: some of those involved seemed reluctant to include representatives of working children within their discussions. This can lead to ineffective or even harmful interventions.

*... they should be an important part of any evaluation study*

Evaluations generally measure children's behaviour, abilities and social adjustment but frequently bypass children's experience, ideas and opinions. For example, evaluating education according to an input-output model often involves judging the curriculum and teaching in terms of children's performance in tests and examinations. But it is important to include how children perceive the teaching and learning processes, and the dynamics of the relationships between teachers and pupils, and pupils and pupils.

**How to do it**

Working with children is a creative process that occurs within a particular kind of setting, in a particular relationship and a particular context. It's not so much a matter of eliciting children's pre-formed ideas and opinions, it's much more a question of enabling them to explore the ways in which they perceive the world and communicate their ideas in ways that are meaningful for them.

*The setting*

A supposedly neutral setting may have different connotations for children according to their past experiences. Adults have to understand what these might be for children and take account of them. In general, children need to feel safe and reasonably comfortable in a setting that isn't too distracting.

*The relationship*

Children are trying to make sense of the adult who is asking them questions. They will be affected and may be inhibited according to how they understand the power relationships in the situation. They may put an adult in a certain category – parent, teacher, priest, employer, customer – and adapt what they say according to what they believe is safe. This means we may have to interpret what children say in the light of what we think they think about us. Very often, formal or informal research with children is done one-to-one, adult and child. But we have to ask 'What does it mean to children to have a one-to-one encounter with a stranger?' Although childcare

workers will have closer relationships with children than researchers and policy makers, those relationships will still inhibit certain types of conversation.

*Communicating ...*

Children don't always readily express themselves in ways that adults might prefer or expect. For example, it may be very important to create settings and modes of communication that don't rely on language.

*... through drawing/mapping*

Drawings are widely used in participatory work with children, as are mapping techniques. Both can help children lead the adult through their daily lives. In Ethiopia, Bangladesh, The Philippines and Central America, we asked working children to draw the 'important people' in their lives as a starting point for talking about parents' expectations of children<sup>3</sup>. In the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, drawings were used as a means to help children communicate their feelings and understandings about violence, loss and separation. The drawings expressed what talking or listening conventionally might not have revealed.

*... through sorting and ranking games*

If children are asked directly to talk about their lives at home, at school, or at work, they may seem to have nothing to say, or offer an evasive reply such as 'All right' or 'OK'. Instead, we asked working children to sort and rank picture cards depicting themselves alongside other children, doing different kinds of



Bangladesh: a mapping exercise  
Children's Day  
Martin Woodhead collection

work. They had no difficulty making comparisons and articulating the relative cost-benefits of different children's lives. For another activity, we used cards of 'happy' and 'sad' faces to find out how children experienced life at school.

#### *... through drama, music and dance*

In Sweden<sup>4</sup> work with children from a refugee background included dance, drama and music in a kind of workshop setting. In Zimbabwe<sup>5</sup> we came across childcare workers using a traditional dance with children but adapting it to include references to particular issues they were grappling with, such as their experiences with conflict and their hope to return to a peaceful Mozambique.

#### *... through role-play*

Role-play about a situation can enable children to spontaneously express all sorts of things they might not consciously have thought about but can now express in ways that are acceptable to them. Issues emerge and, through discussion and interpretation, thoughts and feelings can be articulated.

#### *... through groupwork*

It can be much more effective to work with children in group situations rather than through individual conversations. Group work can provide a richer, more creative process of communication. In a sense the adult – by asking permission to join in a peer group encounter – is setting a context in which children feel at ease with each other. Groups also have the advantage that they give children a greater feeling of safety: they are less imposing/exposing than for children on their own. Finally, children in groups stimulate each other.

#### *... from child to child*

It's not just adults who can communicate with children. Some very interesting work is being done, especially by Save the Children UK<sup>6</sup>. They invited children to do research with children. Children know what the issues are from their point of view, and therefore know which are the most relevant. They can also elicit information from other children that adults can't. Particularly stunning is a piece of work that a group of children did into children leaving institutional care. Because the interviewers had also left care, there was a kind of empathy there

that somehow unlocked greater honesty (or at least a very different perspective) than might have been created if adults had been asking the questions.

#### **Special factors**

##### *Invisible children*

Difficult circumstances can impact on children's ability to communicate. Play, for example, can be inhibited, children become silent and unresponsive, they may be depressed or withdrawn, and may not even be seen in the public places that fieldworkers often take as the starting point for their studies. Communication with these invisible children is important, not just in finding out what they think and feel and so on, but also in helping them break out of the vicious circle of depression and, frequently, exclusion.

##### *The impact of cultural differences*

Different cultural 'currencies' of communication are important. In some countries children seemed to relate most easily to visual representations – drawings and picture games. In others, oral methods such as role-play, little dramas or discussions were better. There are often powerful cultural rules that shape what children feel comfortable about sharing, and with whom. In Sudan, for example, we found that people don't talk about personal and painful issues with anybody except those within their very closest circle of family and friends. There are also rules about expression of feelings. For example, it would be a source of huge embarrassment and shame to children if they cried in front of a stranger.

Such conventions vary within societies – notably according to children’s age and gender – and they also change from one generation to another. It is also essential to be aware that different cultures have different languages of feelings.

#### *Reliability of approaches, processes and responses*

Successful approaches must ensure that children both feel safe to talk and actually are safe to talk. Encounters must be reflexive and dynamic with children and adult reacting to each other – it’s not a question of the adult being a passive observer, asking the questions and writing down the answers. Adults must also be facilitators, self-consciously aware of how they are shaping the situation to help children to express themselves. Until all of this is working well, children tend to skew their responses to what they think adults want to hear.

#### *Informed consent/ethical issues*

It isn’t sufficient merely to gain children’s consent. What does it mean to obtain children’s informed consent? In research, for example, what do they think they are consenting to? Do they understand how the information is going to be used – what, for example, do they assume about the information getting back to people who are in positions of power and authority?

We also have to consider their ability to understand the implications of giving that consent, the possible consequences of their participation, as well as the requirements for seeking the consent of adults (parents, teachers and so on). Clear conventions for carrying out

research involving children apply within many countries but may vary between countries. There may also be other issues to bear in mind. For example, if children are living away from parents or in minority groups or conflict situations, parents may be suspicious of an outsider who wants to talk with their children.

It is also essential to have a clear policy and procedure for responding appropriately to children who disclose information that you feel you have a moral obligation to do something about. How do you determine where confidentiality has limits? And how can you deal with that without putting children into a more vulnerable position?

#### *Shedding power*

It is essential to shed some of the power and domination that you might expect to exert over children and to show that you regard what they say as important. It is also necessary to be willing to expose yourself to real expressions of pain and distress.

#### **Talk to children – it pays**

Our experience shows that the reason for talking to children is clear: all stakeholders gain. However, this is not something to be undertaken lightly and there are pitfalls. But there are already a number of well-proven ways of working with children in ways that are both fair to the children and rewarding to the listener. It takes time, it takes skill, it isn’t easy. It’s very frustrating when it doesn’t work and very rewarding when it does. ○

1. See Tolfree D, *Restoring Playfulness*, (1996) Rädä Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden.

2. Tolfree D, as above.

3. See Woodhead M, *Children’s Perspectives on their Working Lives: A Participatory Study in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua*; (1998) Rädä Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden.

4. Tolfree D, as above.

5. ‘Makwaya: dancing with hope’ video; *Save the Children* (USA).

6. West A and others, *You’re on your own: young people’s research on leaving care*; (1995) *Save the Children* (UK), London.

David Tolfree’s publications include *Roof and Roots: The Care of Separated Children in the Developing World* (1995) Arena, Aldershot, England; *Residential Care for Children and Alternatives Approaches to Care in Developing Countries* (1995) *Save the Children*, London, England; *Restoring Playfulness* (1996) Rädä Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden; and *Old Enough to Work, Old Enough to Have a Say* (1998) Rädä Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden.

Martin Woodhead’s publications on childhood issues include *In Search of the Rainbow: Pathways to Quality in Large-scale Programmes for Young Disadvantaged Children* (1996) Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague; *Children’s Perspectives on their Working Lives: A Participatory Study in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua* (1998) Rädä Barnen, Stockholm, Sweden; and (as co-editor) *Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood* (1998) Routledge, London.



# *Driving a car for the first time:*

*teachers, caregivers and a child-driven approach*

Jorien Meerdink

*Drs Jorien Meerdink is a social historian who worked as a teacher and researcher and then, in 1989, founded the Wetenschappelijke Educatieve en Sociaal-Kulturele Projekten (WESP - Scientific, Educational and Socio-cultural Research). She is Project Manager of the Foundation-supported Young Children's Views project that is investigating ways of training teachers and others to find out about young children's opinions and views through interviews based on open questions. The project has developed training materials and a syllabus that provides a methodology, and is now working on a manual that will provide a theoretical basis for this sort of work.*



### Effectiveness according to children

Usually it is adults who decide what is best for children, as they research effectiveness, and as they provide care, education, and special projects. In our child-driven methodology and, more specifically, in our project 'Young Children's Views', we try to let children judge. We argue in favour of a shift in emphasis: 'effectiveness **according** to children' instead of 'effectiveness **for** children'.

There are many assumptions about, and prejudices against, using children as a source of information about their own situation; and there are many

arguments against interviewing them. Often heard are:

- that children, especially young children, can't express themselves;
- that their life experience is too limited for them to be aware of alternatives and judge their situation; and
- that they are unable to have differentiated opinions, are too self-centred, and live in a world of magic and fantasy.

The result is that adults tend to have one-way communications with children: teaching them things instead of learning from them; and testing and checking their own hypotheses. Also, they use their own agenda and interests. One caregiver stated: 'I don't ask about what the child wants to say, but about what **I** want to hear'.

In the early nineties, childcare institutions in The Netherlands decided that they wanted to work in a client-centred way. To do this, they needed to let 'demand' be judged by children themselves. Various questionnaires for children about their satisfaction were in fact developed, but were never systematically used. WESP therefore developed and implemented a child-driven methodology in cooperation with a large number of children and some childcare facilities. It involved asking children of eight years and older open questions about their opinions and experiences, training caregivers and teachers (the

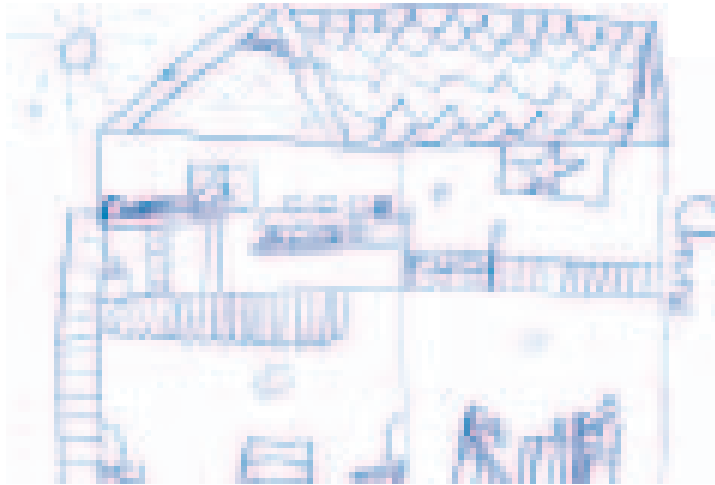
'suppliers') to perform such interviews, and using the acquired information to improve the 'product'. The rationale for using caregivers as interviewers – which proved to be right – is that they would feel more committed to the outcomes. A side effect (if not the main effect), was that the interview experience made them better listeners in their daily communication with children.

The value of the interviews based on open questions was soon revealed: it turned out that children are splendid informants, if taken seriously. They even express clearly defined 'quality criteria' that are often the opposite of what adults think that children find important. This shows that thinking **for** children can be a serious threat to understanding them fully.

Other effects occurred on three levels: the quality of care became more child-centred and anticipated children's needs; the quality of institutions improved in terms of environment, rules, client participation and so on; and the workers themselves took children more seriously, listened to them, kept their promises, gave them more time, and so on.

### Young Children's Views

An ambitious project called Young Children's Views is now underway in a small town in The Netherlands. It is coordinated by the town council and the aim is to help disadvantaged children and/or children at risk, by bringing schools and care institutions together, and improving their communication and networks.



The Netherlands: my house  
Anne

Included in this work is the creation of a tool, a 'listening method', through which the voices of children aged four to eight can be heard, and problem situations spotted and prevented. This is being developed by WESP. The project consists of:

- carrying out a literature study on what is known about verbal communication with children;
- developing a prototype tool for interviewing four to eight year old children about their school experiences;
- developing a child oriented interview training;
- training four teachers and caregivers;
- interviewing 25 young school children, about half of whom belong to the target group;
- reporting on what children liked and did not like, as well as on the agenda and interests of children; and
- developing a listening model for use in education.

The project is ambitious in the sense that there is hardly any existing expertise on interviewing young children. Another challenge is developing a system that makes the best use of the information given by the child, and transmitting that information from school to caregivers and *vice versa*.

We are currently in the middle of the interview training, and many conclusions can already be drawn. One interesting one is that children are very, very cooperative during the interviews and actually help the insecure trainees!

#### That first car drive

After reading the syllabus and the questionnaire, the trainees found themselves in an awkward position. They had to think about all this new information – which included leading questions, closed and open questions, questions from the agenda and interests of the child – while simultaneously using the tape recorder, **and** the questionnaire, **and** trying to cope with tools that were obtrusive because they were being used for the first time. The normal had become abnormal, so of course they reacted. Trainees said:

*If I had to ask the way to the railway station, I wouldn't know how.*

*I don't want to lose my natural way of speaking with children because of this training.*

Analysing their first interview they were still indignant. They found it confrontational to interview a child without knowing anything about that child beforehand while using a questionnaire made by someone else, and being required to pursue what the child has said, rather than what they wanted to know.

*I realised that I had to empty myself of all prior knowledge in order to make a new way of listening possible. It felt terrible.*

All trainees concluded that it is hard to ask open questions and avoid 'helping' or 'leading' questions. Facts are easier to ask about than feelings but elicit

much less information: children may tell complete stories in response to a question such as 'How did it feel?'.  
  
They also concluded that they are clearly diffident about asking questions on the home situation or other difficult matters. This is not because children aren't open on the subject or aren't willing to talk about emotions. If interviewers take the initiative, children give as many 'keys' to their private situations as to their school ones. Instead, it is because the trainees themselves feel impertinent and blocked; they don't know what to do with the information and are afraid to burden the child too much. So, although the questionnaire contains as many questions about the home situation as about the 'safer' school one, interviewers hardly asked about parents or problems at home in their first interviews.

After the second interview the trainees decided to put away the questionnaire and let themselves be guided by the children. Making real contact turned out to be the best basis for acquiring information. Meanwhile, however, the trainees were so busy with themselves that they had a hard time paying attention to, or even looking at, the child. One trainee (a very experienced communications trainer), felt that he couldn't really get in touch with the children because he felt trapped in the constraints of having to do a technically good interview and to behave as required:

*Perhaps there is something lacking in my communication with children in general. I have lost that sense of wonder that I feel when I see nature. Perhaps if I can regain that feeling with a child, then I can start making real contact again.*

He and the trainer agreed that one of the preconditions for that is to put out of his head, not only the formal interview questionnaire, but also all the other implicit agendas he has when talking with children. These agendas range from a diagnosis of learning problems to advice about these.



The Netherlands: you adults made this table too high for us

Two trainees had been rather overwhelmed by the child's desire to play. They participated actively in the games but then couldn't make the switch back to the interview. One of them discovered that playing a memory game with realistic photo cards produced quite a few stories on the shown subjects. Another interviewer had 'panicked' when the child asked him to play a game, and had answered that he didn't like games. The child accepted this, gave him a small role in drawing a picture, played mostly by himself and, in the meantime, gave the interviewer a lot of information. The group concluded that children can talk usefully, even while they are playing.

Compared to the caregivers, the teachers had particular difficulties because they initially found it hard to participate in the uncertain process of learning by experience. This was because they were used to standardised learning programmes, and to determining pupil's starting levels before commencing lessons. At first they said:

*You should have checked what we already knew and could do, instead of putting everything up for discussion and making us feel that we knew nothing.*

But after the second interview, they were already concluding that it was refreshing to have no prior information about the children:

*Otherwise I could not have questioned him in such an unprejudiced way.*

*I now realise that I'm usually inclined to listen to what I think I hear. It's good letting go of my own terms of reference and, for example, openly asking the child's opinion on the matter rather than simply checking whether I'm right or explaining my conclusions.*

#### Interviewing in a school situation

The interview experiences made it clear that it is hard to interview children at school. There is hardly any suitable space – either the principal or teachers have to move – or there is too much noise and too many distractions. There is also the problem of time. In a school for special education for children at risk, the (only) teacher would have had to give the entire school time off in order to be able to conduct an interview during school time. This was solved by allowing her to conduct interviews after school hours.

There are other differences between interviewing children in a school setting and doing so in a formal care setting. Parents are willing to cooperate and children are unlikely to refuse in care settings so there is a higher refusal rate in schools.

Another is that teachers are less used to having one-to-one conversations with children than caregivers are, and also find it harder to ask questions about difficult subjects, specifically those relating to parents and the situation at home. Also, teachers tend to be satisfied with the first answer a child gives and then

move on to another subject instead of probing deeper. Yet a child's first answer will very often be just the beginning of a whole story.

Finally, teachers concluded that they tend to teach while interviewing: they check whether the children have learned anything from what they have just talked about, rather than checking whether they, the interviewers, have understood completely. We will be continuing with our analysis of interview attitudes and techniques.

#### The reactions

All the children reacted positively to the interviews. They found them interesting, liked the individual attention, and felt they had something to say. As a reward for their cooperation, they could choose a small present from a basket and these were appreciated. The interviewers were surprised and happy that the children were able to sit and talk for such a long time (varying from 20 minutes to over an hour). They concluded that:

*Perhaps we underestimate children; perhaps we are too focused on what is problematic and negative.*

The children gave a lot of information in response to open questions about how they experience their environment. They gave consistent information and realistic and differentiated judgements on their schoolmates or teachers. As they talked, fantasy and

magic may have featured too but these did not prevent us hearing about the realities of their lives.

#### What children said to us

The trainees we worked with often overestimated the importance of teachers in children's environments: the most important people in the lives of children in schools are actually their peers. In the training we asked them what question they would ask a child who had both a male and a female teacher, and who said 'The last time I had fun in the classroom was when I played a fun game with Martin.' (Martin was the child's friend). The trainees came up with:

*What game was that?*

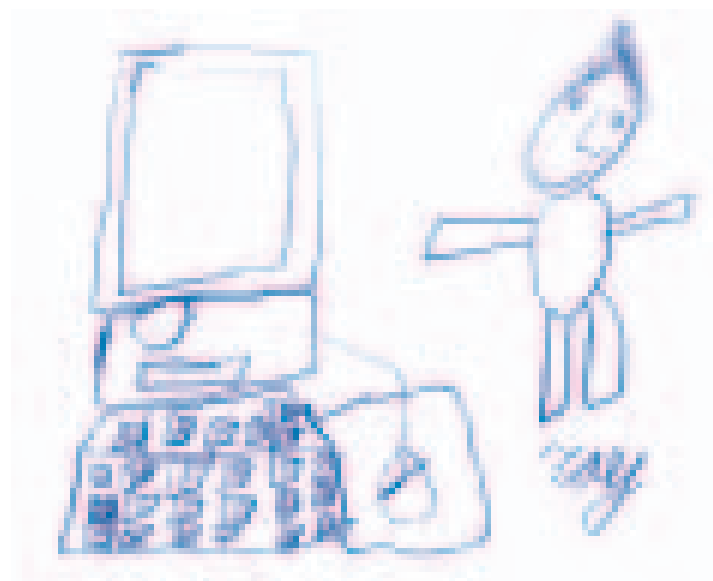
*What was fun about it?*

*Was this when your male or your female teacher was teaching?*

The key word that the trainer wanted to hear was 'Martin' but the trainees couldn't produce this. Peers are important both in a positive and a negative way. Children often get most of their support from other children; not from caregivers, teachers or parents. At the same time, however, they often need to be protected from their classmates by their teachers. It turned out that being bullied is the number one cause of

emotions that all children express in the interviews. It is the subject they talk about most, and most emotionally.

It is too early to draw any general conclusions at this stage of the project and it is hard to say whether interviews can be a suitable listening mechanism within the current structure and organisation of education. What can already definitely be concluded, however, is that the possibilities and need for working in a child-driven way are obvious, and that the interview is an interesting technique to consider as part of common and daily communication. ○



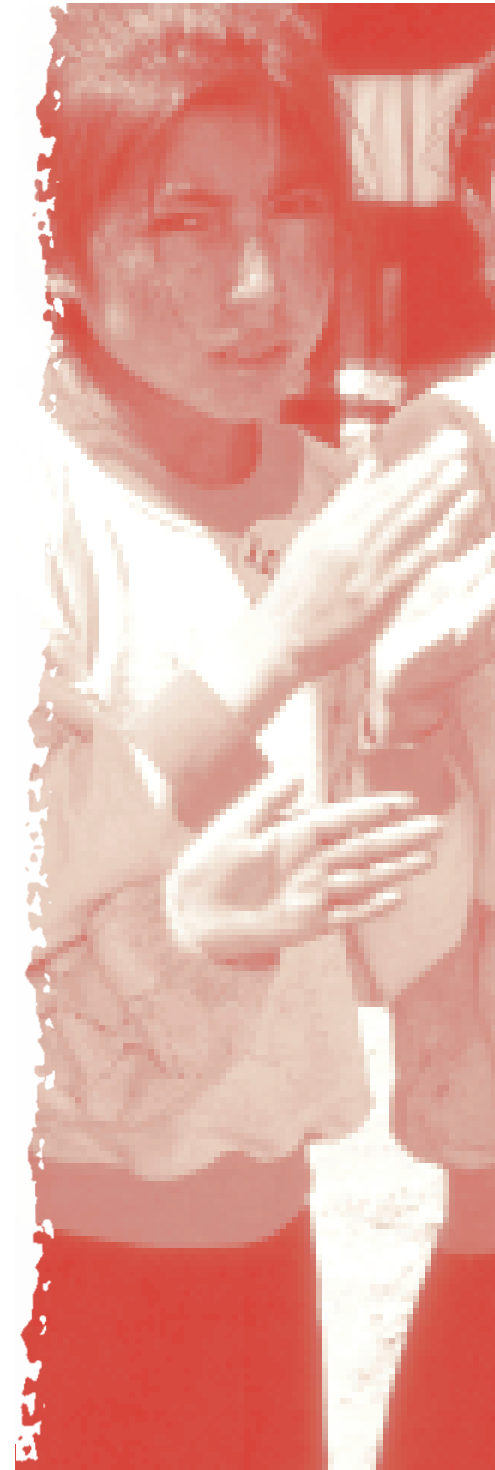
The Netherlands: computers are this simple  
Roy

# *Peru:*

Children's Parliaments - hearing children

Grimaldo Ríos Barrientos

Peru: activities with children that are high energy and packed full of activities  
photo: Gerry Salole







*The author is Coordinator of the Foundation-supported Proyecto Resiliencia de los Niños Afectados por Violencia – Pukllay Wasi (Resilience Project for Andean Children Affected by Violence – Play Houses) that is operated by PAR – CEPRODEP, Ayacucho, Peru. PAR stands for Programa de Apoyo al Repoblamiento (Programme of Support for Repopulation) of the Ministerio de Promoción de la Mujer y del Desarrollo Humano (Ministry for the Advancement of Women and of Human Development); and CEPRODEP stands for the Centro de Promoción y Desarrollo Poblacional (Centre for the Advancement and Development of the Population).*

*The project works to develop children's resilience – by which is meant their capacity to confront and resolve adversities in their lives. It operates with almost 500 children between four and twelve years, in remote peasant communities in which poverty and war have created massive stress.*

*This article discusses the Children's Parliaments that the project has developed so that children's voices can be heard and can have an impact on adults who have control over, or influence on, children's lives.*

Overall, the project is about enhancing resilience in children and Children's Parliaments are key instruments for us. This is because our resilience work focuses on a cluster of human abilities or characteristics. These are: the ability to express feelings; independence; self-awareness/self-criticism; optimism and a sense of humour; and a willingness to cooperate with others. Children's Parliaments can strengthen each of these; and they are especially useful in ensuring that children understand and subscribe to the notion of cooperation.

#### **Why listen to children?**

There are two adult views about child development and about the place of childhood in society. One view says that it is adults who must devise the social policies and family actions that will preserve children's best interests. The second view is that only adults can or should make resources available to support children. Both claim that children are the future but their views actually militate against this. A general vision emerges from these two views: an adult domination that is justified by claiming that children are too young to have valid opinions and ideas. To some extent, this accounts for breakdowns in communication and understanding between generations – 'Who can understand children?' And it can also account for the breakdown of programmes for children.

We take a different approach: we help children to think and speak for themselves; we listen to them; and we respond to what they express. Through this approach, children can make their needs, wishes and hopes known to the people who make the decisions. We call this 'child

protagonism'. It means that the adults who are responsible for a project no longer decide for children, and then make them adapt to it – something that may seem faster and more convenient but that isn't ethical and, in the end, isn't useful either.

This is why we have launched the idea of Children's Parliaments (see box on page 34) and are working to improve it. At first we were interested in ensuring that the programmes that we were devising for children were appropriate for them. We had already been running the resilience project for some time, so we started by trying to find out what they thought about all aspects of what they had experienced so far. We also asked them what they thought should be included in a new programme.

In the first Children's Parliaments, we couldn't generate proper participation by the children about the core interest of the project: how to promote resilience. We realised that this was because we were continuing to operate as specialists – as the adults who know best – and that this did not allow the children to develop and express informed opinions. We therefore took a very different line in subsequent Children's Parliaments, involving children in self-diagnostic processes that enabled them to explore, reflect on and offer their views on the situations they experience. They concentrated on three areas: things that made them sad – their hurts and problems; things that made them happy – their joys; and the things that they wanted in the future – their hopes.

#### What we learned

First, it is very obvious that, given the right processes, children are very capable of understanding and working with the self-diagnostic approach. They used it on their material situations, on chaos or uncertainty in their lives, on their prospects and, in one community, on abuse.

In terms of our original objectives, the Children's Parliaments taught us the aspirations that children had for the project. They wanted a happy project; they wanted to learn how to make music so they could dance; and they wanted a recreational space. They also wanted better facilities, more like those enjoyed by children in Lima, the capital city of Peru.

The biggest shock for us was that they wanted to change some of the animators. The children found them too hard and very serious: they didn't make the children happy. Also, they didn't always fulfil their promises, sometimes came late, and sometimes didn't come at all. Some would only play with their own children or with the children nearest to them. The children also told us that they weren't happy with our organising team so we had to change that too.

“

*The biggest shock for us was that they wanted to change some of the animators.*

”

## Enabling young children to participate

At first, we operated with a group of children aged from 4 to 12 years. We didn't think about this beforehand and had expected to work with children of all ages, all together. The outcome was obvious: the older children participated much more, while the smaller children observed or participated in a passive way: they weren't key players.

Our first response to this problem was based on asking the young children questions about what made them sad or happy, writing down what they said and then producing drawings to show them what they had told us.

Unfortunately this did not work well so we have developed a new technique: we produce drawings or photographs about, for example, things related to their daily life – the older children help us in this too. The small children look at these, respond to them, and describe what it is in these images that hurts them, makes them happy, gives them hope. We write down what they tell us and fix this to the drawings and photographs. These become the working notes that are then used as we help them to understand how they can express what they want to say.

Other devices that also help young children to express themselves include play-acting (either directly or using puppets and stories), drawings, jokes, songs and riddles.



Peru: children of different ages participate together – but there are special activities for the younger ones  
photo: Gerry Salole



Peru: reading out her point, before placing it in Happy, Sad or Hopes, and then ...  
photo: Gerry Salole

## *Children's Parliaments the Andean way*

The Children's Parliaments have been started in two remote rural locations. They are held twice a month in Play Houses – places where children gather to participate in the general work of the project.

An animator runs each of them with a group of about 15 to 20 children. Her job is to create an intimate atmosphere that is also purposeful. Music is sometimes used to help do this. Children sit in two rows facing each other with the animator at one end of the room with a board behind her.

One technique that she uses is to ask children to write on a piece of paper what makes them happy, what makes them sad and what their hopes are. When they have done this, she invites them to come to her end of the room and read out what they have written on their papers. The board behind her is divided into three columns: 'Happy', 'Sad' and 'Hopes'. Each column is also divided horizontally: 'Very', 'Quite' and 'Little'. When a child has read out what is on their paper, he or she tells the animator exactly where it should be placed on the board – for example, under the 'Sad' column, in the 'Very' section.

When the papers have all been added to the appropriate place on the board, a vote is held to see which topics should be discussed for possible action.

We also learned that the children wanted to participate in decision making about the project's activities, about the workshops on art and cultural identity, and about the equipping of the Play Houses.

All of this shows what changes might be necessary when the wishes of children guide programmes. I would go further and claim that, beyond this purely practical level, it is only when children help to shape a project that its viability can be guaranteed.

### **Children taking responsibility**

Even more interesting and important is children's dedication to participating in the realisation of their hopes. Through the processes I've talked about, the children assumed a level of responsibility for the evolution of the project. They said:

*This is what we believe, this is what we need and want, and this is what we can and will contribute to make it successful.*

In other words, they didn't just make demands. They didn't exhibit a culture of dependence such as you might expect in a country that is in the process of development, especially one that has just experienced terrorism, or policies that have used up so much of the energies of the population. I believe that this also shows that processes of

participation like this have a profound internal effect on children: they accept responsibility for ensuring success in the ideas that they put forward. Now and in the future, this is directly beneficial to their communities.

They also show responsibility elsewhere – for example, for the future of their families:

*I am sad because we are very poor, but I'm happy because my cow has just given birth. Now, to help make sure that we don't stay poor, I must take care of the calves. (Alfredo, aged seven)*

However, I also want to say that, as we gain more experience, we are refining all of our thinking. We started out with the idea that it was important to enable children to actually speak for themselves, and that we needed to prepare them – train them, even – to do so. The ways in which everything has developed have been almost accidental: whatever arose was considered and, if it seemed to be necessary, became a fundamental part of the project. Now the most important new area to work on is analysing what we are hearing, finding out how to gauge its significance; and determining what kind of strategic analysis is possible. From that we have to determine how to refine the ways in which children can take responsibility for bringing about change.



... making her case for taking action  
photo: Gerry Salole

### Putting the results to work

We have used the information gathered so far to determine that the project should be happier, and should use participative and child-like approaches. We have also used it to redefine our approaches to working with the issues that children identify: we take a positive line. That means not talking in terms of burdens and effort but in terms of strengthening, of opportunities and of the future. Instead of threats, we talk about fears and about hopes.

The results so far show us that it was realistic to aim at enabling children to decide what they needed, and to argue and work for it. We see that they carry out analyses in four settings: in their families; in their communities; in their schools; and internally as individuals. But we also see that they have yet to move beyond this to become automatic or natural protagonists. That's what we are now working hard on.

### The place of the Children's Parliaments in the project

We make the link that children who can speak to their own needs are resilient children. They also become a different sort of citizen. The next step – and it's a big one – could be for them to become child leaders. Children want to speak for themselves, and many of them also want to be leaders in wider society in later life – leaders of their communities, presidents of associations, mayors of towns, and so on.

But again, I have to say that we don't claim to know everything: we are trying out something here, looking for ways forward. The promotion of resilience in children is new to us and nothing existed for us to work with: we are inventing and testing it.

### Impact on stakeholders

Parents can see that these kinds of activities change children ... and if children are changed, their families are also changed. Children who can speak for themselves will have different roles in their families, and this changes the ways in which families develop – for example, instead of the parents having a position of authority over the child, they recognise that children are contributing to the development of the family. Such children also generate new resources or put new life into existing ones – like parents for example! We help parents understand the importance of play and what children express through it. Once they understand, parents become resources by joining children, supporting them, responding to them and helping them make things happen. And don't forget that, just by playing, children also make the family environment a happier place.

Teachers said:

*This project helps us and it helps the children make better progress.*

*The children in my class come top in all the regional tests, thanks to this.*

A pupil said:

*But what would happen if all the other children had this too? Then we wouldn't win everything!*

### Conclusions

Children's Parliaments can serve as a vehicle of intergenerational communication that can start the processes of healing family divisions. More than this, they help the development of civic consciousness in children and, at an early age, introduce them to abilities such as investigation, analysis, and participation in democratic processes. ○

# *India:* *Bal Sansad -* *Children's Parliaments*



India: a Children's Parliament in session – attended by members of the local community  
From the *Children in Charge for Change Resource Package*

Children in Charge for Change is a Foundation-supported project initiated by the non-governmental organisation Centre for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA – which also means 'awareness' in several Indian languages). Via this project, CHETNA aims to equip and enable children to participate fully and responsibly, not only in development activities, but also in decision making.

This article is drawn from a Resource Package put together by Children in Charge for Change.\* It focuses on the Bal Sansad (Children's Parliaments) that have been developed by the Social Work and Research Centre (swrc), Tilonia, Rajasthan. Rajasthan is a semi-arid state in northwestern India. It is one of the country's largest and poorest states, in which over 80 percent of women and 45 percent of men are illiterate. More than half of school age children do not attend school and the majority of these are girls.

swrc is a voluntary organisation, established during the 1970s to work with local village communities in an integrated development process. This covers community development, education for both adults and children, water and sanitation, the preservation of the environment, health, agriculture and effective utilisation of energy. The Bal Sansad are for children aged six to 14 years of age. The youngest children gain experience in democratic processes that are directly linked to their lives and needs; and they develop confidence and skills in participation. This is in preparation for the more formal roles they become eligible for later.

The Bal Sansad were devised with the aim of orienting village children about the political system and at the same time enabling them to participate in matters pertaining directly to their lives, mainly in the field of education. Creating opportunities for children to understand and communicate their needs, and learn about both their rights as equal society members as well as the responsibilities that ensue, prepares them to face the challenges of adulthood as conscious, active citizens. It also presents an opportunity to recognise development priorities thereby putting children in the centre of the development agenda, and linking them to concerns on a wider scale.

Conceptualised in 1991, the programme actually acquired its present shape in 1993 when the first Bal Sansad was elected. However, it is important to understand that this happened following a long process of changing the nature of village schools. Visualising participation as a primary aim, a different system was evolved for schools, based on the philosophy that everyone has something to contribute in teaching as well as the capacity to learn. The traditional environment in which the student is dependent on the teacher was abandoned for one based on mutual communication and interaction.

The objectives of the Bal Sansad were inspired by great value and respect for children's opinions and capabilities. This innovative concept provides students with the opportunity to actively participate in the running of their schools through a democratic process that is above gender, caste, creed or economic situation. This unique exercise helps root education in the local context and builds appropriate and relevant life

India: Children's Parliaments are part of an integrated development programme that includes preschools  
photo: Llane Gertsch







skills, teaches children about politics and the electoral process within their own world, retains the interest of the students and enhances their curiosity to learn and to question.

### The election processes

The electorate for the Parliament constitutes about 1,750 students between 6 to 14 years of age. Elections to the Bal Sansad and [Legislative Assemblies] take place simultaneously. One Member of Parliament (MP) is elected for every 100-125 children, while each Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) represents 30 to 35 children.

SWRC functionaries adopt the role of the bureaucracy within the Children's Parliament to impart training about how policies are formulated, how the electoral process actually works and the importance for citizens to exercise the critical right to vote.

There are ministers and the portfolios defined for each of them are similar to those of the various units of SWRC: Education; Finance; Home; Industries; Energy; Communications; Environment; Women's Development; Water Resources; etc. The person in charge of each section/unit at the organisational level serves as secretary to the corresponding minister. These linkages facilitate coordination between the Bal Sansad and SWRC and enable the children to understand how the organisation operates. The members of the elected government also act as a critical link between SWRC and the community.

The parliament consists of two parties: Ujala, which means Light with a tree as a logo and Gauval, which means Shepherd, with an elephant as a logo. Names and logos are decided by the children themselves. The candidates opt to be in either party and are then given nomination forms. Time is then given to each party to canvass for its candidates. The election notices are issued by the Election Commissioner.

Once the campaign period ends, the dates for casting of votes are fixed. Ballot papers are printed for the secret ballot system. The SWRC office at Tilonia becomes the central point for the final count of votes. Party representatives are present during the counting process. If any candidate feels dissatisfied with the procedure or has any complaints, s/he has the right to file a written complaint with the Election Commissioner. The party attaining the largest number of elected candidates is invited to form the government. It is not uncommon to observe a winner in the elections pacifying a loser. Contesting on behalf of different parties does not create a rift between children, a common occurrence among adults.

### Parliamentary procedures

The parliament holds monthly sessions at different field centres, open for anyone to attend, to review its work and make future plans. If the opposition party finds that the efforts of the majority party are not satisfactory in any area, the issue is raised for discussion. The Prime Minister is accountable to all MPs, who have the right to question her/his decisions.

The decisions taken or the issues raised are recorded by the secretaries of the different ministers, the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader. As a rule, the secretaries must attend all the monthly sessions. If they are irregular in attendance, they could be fined by the MPs. Strict action is also taken against ministers who do not attend the sessions.

A booklet – *Code of conduct and Duties and Responsibilities of Ministers* – guides the work of the ministers. They are expected to talk to the parents of rural working children who are not currently attending night school and convince them of the importance and significance of education and specifically, sending their children to school. They also take attendance every day in the schools, of both children and teachers, and visit four night schools every month. Post-visit discussions are held to answer questions about the teachers, facilities, number of students, etc. Children with more responsibility raise issues such as the installation of hand pumps, construction of school walls and replacement of teachers.

Elected representatives are now expected to attend the meetings of the village committees and their activities, are informed and report on the facilities, especially with regard to health and drinking water, within their village. They have also launched their own magazine – Gwa – which is circulated to all the night schools to keep the children informed of their rights and various local events.

In addition, regular correspondence is maintained between the ministers, members of the Bal Sansad and other children, as it would be strenuous and inconvenient to travel between villages on a daily basis. This communication creates awareness among the children about important issues.

#### Notable outcomes

One outcome is a widening in children's spheres of interest. It was realised that because the Bal Sansad emerged from the night schools of SWRC, the children's interests and questions tended to remain within the confines of their immediate environment – that is, their school. To enable children to be empowered, it is necessary that they move beyond this limit and relate not only to the overall work of the organisation, but to every aspect of village life. Thus members are now being encouraged to ask questions which relate to their lives.

A second set of outcomes is about the Bal Sansad having direct impact. For example, Leela Devi, Minister for Energy, was unhappy when a liquor shop opened en route to her all-girl school in Puorhitan ki Dhani village. The mothers became uncomfortable sending their daughters to school and the regular attendance of 60 girls dropped drastically. The students held a meeting in the village and convinced the village head to have the shop moved outside the village.

For political reasons, the school in another village was closed. Notwithstanding the inaccessibility of the building, the children continued to hold classes outside the locked doors, on the roadside. When the matter was brought to the attention of the Bal Sansad, it was decided to hold the monthly meeting in this particular village and invite the political representative of the local self government committee, a district board member and the man after whom the village was named, to attend. The district board member promised the children that the school would be reopened and that if it were closed again, he would arrange for the construction of a new building. Not completely satisfied, the children met with the Assistant District Collector, who sent a team to investigate, and the District Commissioner, who promised that she would take the necessary action to prevent the school from being closed. The school remains open.

There are also instances of the Bal Sansad changing attitudes. For example in cases where parents hinder their child's participation in Bal Sansad activities, a mediation team comprising children from both the parties and SWRC members attempt to convince the parents. If they still do not agree, then new elections are held. However, it needs special mention that many traditional and orthodox people of this area of Rajasthan have allowed their daughters to go to the schools and contest elections which are generally considered to be priority areas for boys or men.

#### Conclusions

An environment of actual parliamentary proceedings is created through which the child is able to experience firsthand the results of true awareness in a democratic process as well as the merits and consequences of responsibility. Through this environment the child is able to draw a link to the adult world and understand and relate to it, maybe for the first time in her/his life, from her/his own perspective. On this level of learning, the child's viewpoint is connected to the larger perspective; and this process irrevocably broadens thought, increases expectations, generates curiosity and creates a feeling of fearlessness among the children. In turn they develop confidence and independence of thought to fervently question; to articulate their views, thoughts, feelings, opinions and desires; and to take decisions.

Overall, there is still a great deal more to be accomplished, which will be possible due to the awareness of the project staff and the fact that they do not turn a blind eye to any innovations suggested by the children or the community and are constantly making efforts to make improvements. ○

*\* Children in Charge for Change: a resource package; (1998) CHETNA, India*

# The Bernard van Leer Foundation's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary

Oscar van Leer, shaper of the Foundation and ...



... Bernard van Leer, the Founder



The Bernard van Leer Foundation celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in November of this year. It was founded in 1949 by Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist who, in 1919, established an industrial and consumer packaging company that was to become Royal Packaging Industries Van Leer NV. This is currently a limited company operating in over 40 countries worldwide.

During his lifetime Bernard van Leer supported a broad range of humanitarian causes. In 1949, he created the Bernard van Leer Foundation, to channel the revenues from his fortune to charitable purposes after his death.

When he died in 1958, the Foundation became the beneficiary of the entire share capital of the then privately owned Van Leer enterprise and other assets. Under the leadership of his son Oscar van Leer (1914-1996), the Foundation then started to focus on enhancing opportunities for children and young people who were growing up in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage, to optimally develop their innate potential.

For the past 20 years, the Foundation has been concentrating only on children from 0-7 years of age. This is because

research findings have demonstrated that interventions in the early years of childhood are most effective in yielding lasting benefits to children and society.

The Foundation accomplishes its objective through two interconnected strategies. The first is an international grant making programme in selected countries aimed at developing contextually appropriate approaches to early childhood care and development. Over 130 major early childhood projects are supported at any one time and these cover a broad range:

- some are in developing countries, others in industrialised countries;
- they may be situated in urban slums, shanty towns or remote rural areas;
- they may focus on children living in violent settings, children of ethnic and cultural minorities, children of single or teenage parents, or children of refugees and migrants;
- some seek to improve quality in daycare centres, preschools, health and other services;
- some may develop community-based services;
- some may seek to improve the quality of home environments by working with parents and other family members and caregivers.



Spain: learning about real life  
Pre-escolar na Casa Project  
(Entry for the 1998 Poster Competition)

The second strategy is sharing the accumulating wealth of knowledge and know-how that is generated by the projects that the Foundation supports, with the aim of informing and influencing policy and practice. This knowledge and know-how is disseminated via publications and videos to policy and decision makers; practitioners; trainers; and academics. The Foundation also encourages the projects that it supports to produce their own publications and videos for their principal audiences.

Through its two strategies, the Foundation endeavours to create better development opportunities for the greatest number of disadvantaged children possible, by achieving a wider impact in the domain of early childhood development than would be possible through grant-making alone.

To celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Foundation will organise a programme of special events, the highlight of which will be a celebration in The Peace Palace, The Hague on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1999. This will be followed by a small international conference for practitioners and policy makers that will focus on what makes early

childhood development programmes effective.

A leaflet giving fuller details of the Foundation and its grant-making policy is available, as is a Publications and Videos List. Please contact the Department of Programme Documentation and Communication, at the address given inside the front cover. ○

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Fundação da Criança e do Adolescente

