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*Listening to children*



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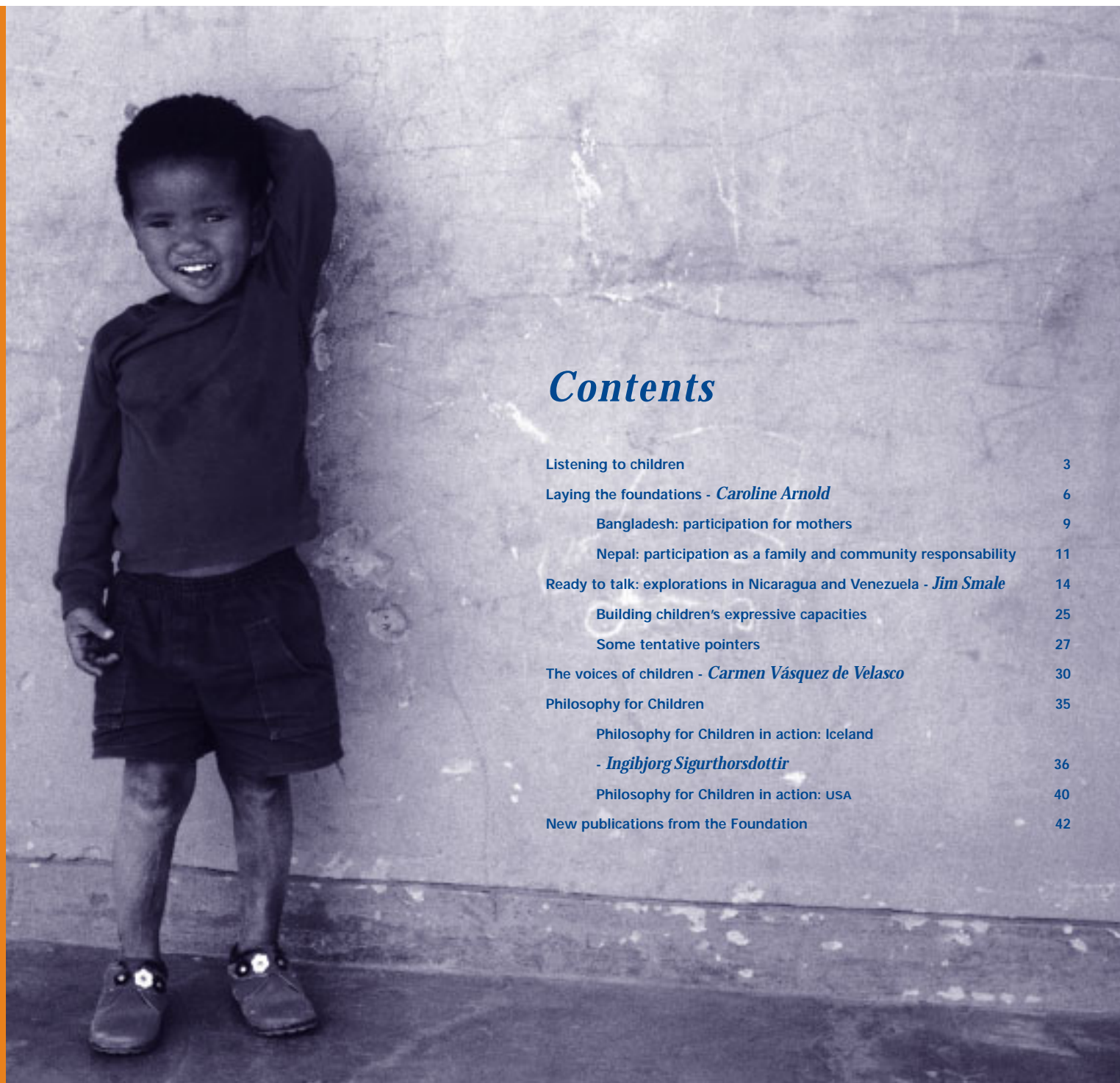
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*(Poster Competition entry)*

**Inside front cover:** *Zimbabwe: Ready to talk*

**photo:** *Mozambican Refugees project*

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# Listening to children

*In February 1999, Early Childhood Matters 91 focused on the effectiveness of programmes for children under eight, taking the line that judging the worth of programmes needs reflective and critical input from its principle beneficiaries – the children. The articles went further and suggested greater participation by children in each stage of programmes, from conceptualisation, through operation, to monitoring and evaluation. This is in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that children have the right to participate. However, the articles were not suggesting that children should determine what is done with and for them: simply that children should contribute to the processes that result in those decisions. And clearly their ability to contribute will vary according to their stage of development and the opportunities that they have had to develop their participative capacities. Equally, their views have to be listened to and considered along with the views of the other stakeholders in the programmes.*

*Early Childhood Matters 91* made clear that, while child development programmes for older children had readily embraced participation, programmes for younger children had not. One year on, it seems that the picture has not changed much. In the current edition, we had hoped to feature examples of good practice that explored and discussed the realities of participation, and set out the implications for effective programming. Instead we have only been able to

gather articles that show how adults are taking the crucial first steps in developing that participation: establishing environments and practices that enable young children to express themselves confidently and fully, and to develop some experience in participation.

Drawing on experiences in Nepal and Bangladesh, Caroline Arnold (page 6) takes the long term view, showing how parents and communities can support

greater participation by young children in many aspects of their everyday lives, even when cultural norms and local contexts pose special challenges. The point is to start from where children, families and communities are, look for naturally occurring opportunities, and build towards what parents and communities decide is better. Arnold shows how positive experiences in the early years both encourage and enable young children to participate during that time, and help to ensure that they

will naturally and confidently grow into participatory roles in their families, their communities and their societies in the future. She also considers how to work with some of the challenges – for example, that children sometimes face real contradictions. A young girl may be encouraged to ask questions, analyse issues and solve problems in a particular setting with her peers yet, when she gets home, she is supposed to keep quiet and not offer opinions.



United Kingdom: *This is what I mean*  
Hummingbird Housing Association

The second article is about the practicalities of ensuring that children encounter the right participative environments in which they can express themselves readily, knowing that they will be listened to. It is based on work with children, project workers and leaders, and programme directors and coordinators in Nicaragua and Venezuela, in October and November 1999 (page 14). This was an exploration of strategies and approaches for everyday use with young children in 10 centres, an exploration that was amplified by discussions involving workers and leaders from many more centres. The positive and negative experiences were discussed, with project workers and educators working together to learn the lessons and develop the techniques further. However, this was in no sense a carefully structured investigation and this article should be seen simply as a collection of experiences from which some tentative pointers for practice have been drawn. It also includes observations and reflections about the capacities of young children by programme leaders, coordinators and educators from the City of Managua's preschool programme,

from the Preschool Department of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education and from the Fundación La Verde Sonrisa. These reveal a considerable respect for young children's capacities, but also show that the impact of these capacities on programming is limited. For example, children's creativity is widely respected but it is exercised only within programme activities. It would be fascinating to watch its application to something like the evaluation by the children of an aspect of programming.

The article by Carmen Vásquez de Velasco (page 30) discusses an investigation in two Peruvian communities – one in a remote city, one in an area of the capital city – into helping 60 children aged three to five years to express themselves. She starts by reviewing the benefits of listening to children, linking this to the rights of children and to the needs of the adults who create and operate programmes. For this author, it is vital that adults believe in the importance of listening to children. She goes on to describe the use of cut out figures that children can arrange

and rearrange on a graphic background. As they do this, discussions and interviews involving puppets help them to talk freely and express their experiences in the early childhood programmes that they are attending.

Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir's article on page 36 is both an aid to developing discussions with children, and a reminder of what young children can do. It shows how discussions between children aged three and above can be developed so that, with the minimum of intervention from adults, they can explore a wide range of topics and themes. Based on the ideas of Dr Matthew Lipman (page 35), the article features children aged three to six years in a preschool in Iceland.

Complementing this we also include a review of a film about similar work with six year olds in a primary school in the USA (page 40). The nature and quality of the discussions reported here support Dr Lipman's conviction that young children are capable of investigating abstract concepts, analysing complex data, and presenting and justifying their ideas and findings. In doing this, they invite

us to be much more open to hearing and valuing what they have to tell us.

Overall, this edition offers a range of practical ways of listening to children. It shows that, if adults want to find out how effective early childhood development programmes are for young children, one way is to focus on what children have to say about those programmes. However, this edition raises other significant issues as well. By showing that many adults respect what young children can do, and by demonstrating that children under eight are capable of relatively complex exploration and reflection, it invites adults to reconsider the roles that young children have in programmes. Is it enough to simply ask children what they feel about the programmes that adults devise and operate? Or should adults be thinking hard about opening up the conceptualisation, operational and evaluation processes of programmes to input from young children? If so, how could and should that be realised? In a future edition, I hope we will be able to feature articles that show how practitioners are addressing these kinds of questions.

#### The next edition

*Early Childhood Matters 95* will focus on the roles of parents within programmes as children's first educators. What does their participation in programmes really mean in practice? Under which conditions are parents best able to participate in ECD programmes? To what extent are parents engaged in determining the content of programmes? How do they complement and support the work of early childhood practitioners? How do they contribute to monitoring and evaluation of programmes? What other roles do they play? What are the constraints on their participation – and are some of these artificial? I welcome contributions from you that present and discuss successful practice in this area. ○

*Jim Smale*  
Editor



# Laying the foundations

Caroline Arnold

*The author is Regional Child Development Adviser (Asia) for Save the Children (USA and Norway). In this article she takes the long term view of bringing about child participation, showing how parents and communities can support greater participation by young children in many aspects of their everyday lives, even when cultural norms and local contexts pose challenges. The point is to start from where children, families and communities are, look for naturally occurring opportunities, and build towards what parents and communities decide is better. She shows how positive experiences in the early years both encourage and enable young children to participate during that time, and help to ensure that they will naturally and confidently grow into participatory roles in the future. She also considers how to work with some of the challenges.*

In development, when we talk about children's participation most of us tend to have pictures of older children in a 'Child-to-Child' scene, some of which have developed into children's clubs where children define issues and create street theatre dramas. We may visualise 'bal melas' (children's fairs) where thousands of children get together and organise games, quizzes, cultural performances, dramas, health exhibitions etc. We may see a street children's council deciding on a programme of activities, or working

children presenting their recommendations in an International Conference. We may see their intense concentration as they participate in a Participatory Rural Appraisal session, or as they conduct their own research on a particular topic. We may see them behind a camera, capturing the image they want, telling the story they want to tell.

The connecting thread between much of the most inspiring child-focused work seems to be an emphasis on

children's active participation in defining the projects and making decisions at different stages. Adults play a facilitating role rather than being the traditional 'teacher'. The impact of this approach on children's confidence and self-esteem, their enthusiasm for learning and their problem solving abilities is clear.

But it is not always easy. A picture springs to mind of the first Participatory Rural Appraisal that Save the Children (USA) undertook with a

group of adolescent girls from a very conservative rural community in Bangladesh. Raised from birth to look after the needs of the men and boys of the family, it was hard for them to believe their opinions were valued. No one had ever sought their opinion on anything so it was hard for them to formulate their ideas and express them. While they were frustrated with many aspects of their lives, envisioning alternatives was very hard. Waiting until children are adolescents before seeking their participation denies children's right

Nepal: *Learning to participate must start early*  
photo: Tom Kelly/Save the Children (USA)



to participate at all ages. If we are really serious about children's participation we have to give them opportunities to grow up in environments which, from birth, positively encourage this.

#### Starting early

A Save the Children Alliance paper on children's participation stresses that

participation should be thought of both early and very broadly: 'It could be a baby who communicates with her mother about food'. This is important because it is during the early years that attitudes critically influencing people's ability to participate effectively are laid down; it is during the earliest years that the seeds of participation are sown; and it is during our earliest interactions that

our sense of who we are and the confidence and skills to express ourselves and negotiate our rights are established.

It is children's earliest exchanges (usually with their mothers) where they indicate what they want through sounds and signals and then get what they want, which tell children they can influence their environment and those around them. Later, the degree to which children are encouraged to communicate with words by those around them profoundly influences the way they use language and expect to be able to participate. Picture a four year old girl talking with her father who listens carefully while she tells him all about how one of the chickens got lost and how she found it. He responds with interest and praise, wanting to know more about what happened. The girl feels happy and an important part of her family. It is during such day to day interactions that children develop self control and self confidence (or a sense of failure), learn how to relate to others and what behaviour is culturally

acceptable, and develop (or suppress) their curiosity. What really counts are the ways in which families encourage and discourage children to participate in their families and communities.

Similarly, children in centre-based childcare arrangements are affected by the nature of their interactions with adults and peers. Children need to be listened to and appreciated, encouraged to choose between a number of different activities which foster exploration and 'discovery', enabled to join in group activities involving taking turns and so on, and given responsibilities. This gets them off to a good start on the participation track.

#### Taking the long term, inclusive view

It is relatively easy to support children's participation in specific 'projects'. The longer term challenge lies in ensuring real changes in the ways children can participate throughout their everyday lives – in their families, with their peers, in schools, in their communities and in



Bangladesh: *Doing it together*

From *Urban Child Care in Bangladesh* published by Save the Children (USA)



## *Bangladesh: participation for mothers*

In Bangladesh, parenting/caregiving programmes are springing up around the country with support from the Early Childhood Development Unit that is supported by Save the Children (USA) and Plan International. These programmes incorporate many traditional religious stories, rhymes and so on, and emphasise a very active participatory approach that respects, draws on and extends caregivers' own experiences and knowledge. The programmes also encourage sharing experiences and problem solving, and supporting mothers to effectively promote their children's development within the context of their everyday activities.

Sessions are lively and diverse – for example, there could be an intense discussion of the mothers' own childhood experiences from which the

facilitator helps them draw out a list of basic needs of children. This list bears strong similarities to that in any psychology textbook but is constructed from the mothers' own experiences. They could be roaring with laughter as they invent multiple games to play with a heap of leaves or a pile of seeds. In another group they might be lost in concentration, making toys from banana leaves, clay, old medicine boxes and match boxes. In another they may be discussing games children play at different ages and what they learn from these.

The telling time comes as one observes the mothers with their young children, listening to the way they now talk more with their children, see the value of their children's questions, and understand the usefulness of their play.

the workplace. But there are real contradictions being faced by the child who is encouraged to ask questions, analyse issues and solve problems in a particular group setting with peers, and who then has to keep quiet and not offer opinions once she goes home. Children's own recommendations from a 1997 Save the Children (Norway) workshop in Nepal emphasised this point. They stressed the importance of raising awareness regarding the benefits of children's participation with parents and teachers. We should listen and find ways to do this.

All children have the same basic needs but for programmes to work they must be rooted in the culture, recognise, understand and respect local childrearing practices, and build on existing strengths. This is perhaps the key: valuing diversity; a commitment to developing processes that allow different

voices to be heard; and an openness to creating new knowledge and new ideas with all involved in learning. No one group has a monopoly on understanding how to raise children: we all have much to share and learn.

However, societies vary greatly in their understanding of the importance of the early years. While there are a large number and huge variety of ways in which we can influence the contexts in which children are growing up, there are some basic principles that help to ensure that programmes benefit children. In reality, quite often these principles are in potential collision with the dominant ideas – either because of certain cultural beliefs or where communities are under pressure. Some cultural beliefs can be damaging and in direct contradiction to the rights of the child – for example, that girls

should not be educated or that children should be beaten.

Programmes have to find ways to challenge such things but from within the culture or community. It is important to remember that culture is neither static nor homogenous and that there are many different beliefs within a given culture.

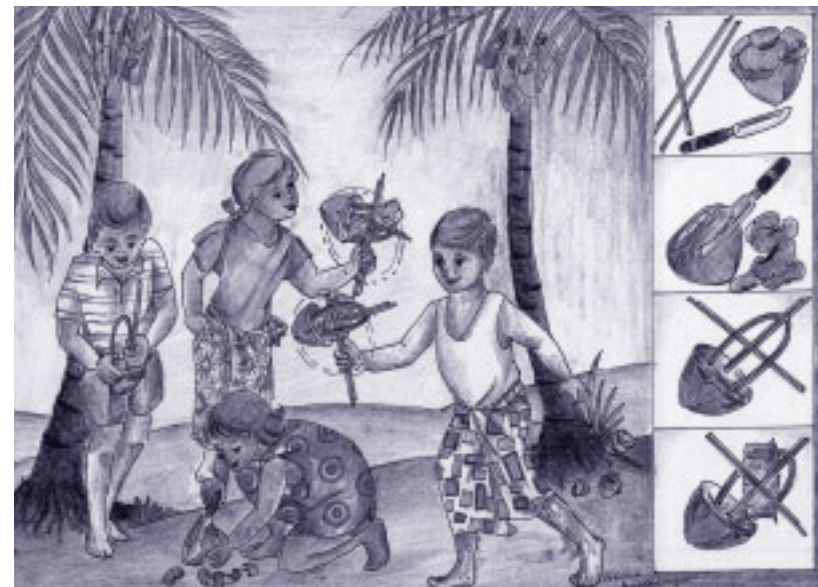
Another major challenge is to convince people that children learn more easily through active learning methods – that they should not be seen as passive recipients. While early childhood development (ECD) programmes may be pushed into preparing children for formal school, there is more openness within ECD programmes to accepting that children ‘learn by doing’ at this age than later on. However, the most vital ingredient is the caring responsive caregiver who takes an interest in what the child is doing, supports the child’s explorations, and guides and extends learning. It is how the caregiver interacts with children that really

matters most, in the home, in the community and in schools.

The two boxes that accompany this article focus on effective ways of working alongside parents, showing examples of how to support children’s participation by working with what is there. The whole approach is based on the premise that mothers/caregivers know and achieve a great deal, and on drawing this out from them, building their confidence, and providing important additional information. This type of approach is perhaps especially important in cultures where, from birth, a woman is made to feel of little value.

Yet, for all the diversity of ECD programmes, much of the best of what is happening includes common key elements. There is an explicit emphasis on promoting self-esteem, cooperation, enthusiasm for learning, problem solving and decision making. If such approaches can be used in concert with

some of the best of the traditional (for example, teaching dance, music, craft skills and spiritual development) that have been such an important part of transmitting culture, the results can be so very powerful in terms of supporting participation. ○



Drawing: Amara Amarasinghe  
UNICEF Colombo and The Children's Secretariat, Sri Lanka

## Nepal: participation as a family and community responsibility

*This section is taken from Childrearing in Nepal: supporting the strengths of different cultures' childrearing practices in the context of child rights and a changing world, a study by Save the Children USA/UK, Redd Barna, UNICEF, the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Education, Seto Gurans, CERID and the Children's Environments Research Group from City University of New York (to be published in April 2000).*

The study is an examination of different beliefs, values, patterns and practices in childrearing. It is an attempt to develop effective methodologies to facilitate collaborative dialogue with families, communities and partners around children's overall development and rights. A major aim of the study is to develop effective ways to initiate discussion and debate on key issues for children (including on participation). These will be the basis for practical joint planning for interventions that will help promote children's optimal

development and ensure their rights. In working with the results of the study, the communities decide what is important. Once they have set the agenda, discussions take account of the very real constraints people face because of economic difficulties, workloads, and so on, as communities search for what they can do to improve things.

### Contextual factors

The study clarified some factors that have to be taken into account in this kind of work in this region. The first of these is to maintain positive traditional practices which are under threat from modernisation and outside influences. Not all cultural practices are good and the challenge is to hold a balance between keeping customary practices strong while at the same time enabling children to develop skills that will help to ensure that they can participate successfully in a rapidly changing world.

The second factor is the blurred boundary between work and play. Even very young children help families with daily chores. However – with the exception of childcare – much of this is in essentially play imitation rather than serious work.

The third factor is children's identity within the family and community. This is very much a function of their developing capacity for work. One mother of four felt that the small tasks that children begin to take on at five or six give them a strong sense of self-worth by proving their competence and gaining the respect of their parents, friends and older siblings. Her own children willingly helped to care for the plants in her nursery.

The fourth factor is that children's work is partly a practical response to necessity and partly regarded as essential for learning fundamental life skills and habits. Children become adept in a range of physical skills, in

the capacity to plan ahead, in making judgements and decisions and in taking responsibility. They also learn about the environment – for instance, Sher Bahadur (a father) describes teaching his children when the twigs of a plant can safely be cut for cattle fodder.

The fifth factor is that children's involvement in community work activities is encouraged and their efforts are respected from an early age: they watch parents and older siblings at work, learn from them, and become rapidly skilled enough to contribute themselves. They also feel useful, involved and competent. However, later on the burden of work, especially for girls, can quickly restrict opportunities rather than expand them.

The sixth factor is that parents have goals, hopes and expectations for their children. Ideally, boys are expected to be well educated and get good jobs so they can care for their parents in their old age. Girls are usually expected to





Bangladesh: *Shahinoor dressed as a bride*  
From *Urban Child Care in Bangladesh* published by Save the Children (USA)

become capable and disciplined so that they can marry well and bring prestige to their families. Taken at face value, these goals suggest that children's own well-being and happiness were immaterial, except as they contributed to parents' long term security and contentment. However, parents clearly show that children's satisfaction with their lives is a significant, almost overriding concern, especially with young children; while men and boys, interestingly, were more likely than women to suggest that girls, too, might become educated

people capable of holding down important jobs.

The seventh factor is that children's participation has risks. Rather than adapting the environment for their protection, the emphasis is on adapting children to the realities of the environment. That means increasing their awareness, competence and capacity to deal effectively with risk. For example, by the age of three or four, children may be able to use sickles adeptly. But accidents are an issue and a major concern for families.

The eighth factor is that parents are very aware that encouragement and support can stimulate learning and growth; and that guidance and support are especially important in the development of self-discipline and morality.

#### **Being effective within this context**

Within this context, our experience is that the following are key areas for development workers to concentrate on if children are to

become confident and competent agents in their own development.

*Support families in building children's confidence and communication skills within the context of everyday activities (feeding, cooking, washing, household chores, work in the fields, and so on)*

Recognise that what happens within the home is by far the most significant influence on the child and develop programmes accordingly.

- Build parents/caregivers' awareness and confidence in the huge role they already play in supporting their children's learning and overall development, in their everyday interactions with the children.
- Build parents/caregivers' understanding of the role of everyday activities in learning basic concepts.
- Emphasise that much of what families already do is really positive and gives their children

- a very deep sense of self-worth.
- Emphasise the importance of children continuing to participate in family discussions and decisions, and having their opinions listened to and valued. Show how to initiate discussions based on what they are doing.
- Encourage children to solve problems and make decisions.

#### *Help to eliminate threats and fear*

Discuss the fact that, although they love their children, many parents sometimes use threats and fear. Explain that this can undermine children's confidence and harm their development. Explain the importance of helping children to understand why they have to cooperate. Explain to parents that they should only make threats that they are willing to carry out.

#### *Encourage more opportunities for girls and more responsibility in boys*

Discuss with parents and the community the reasons why, in comparison with boys, girls may take on more and more household tasks

and be left with little opportunity for interaction and gaining the kinds of experiences that build their confidence and therefore help their participation. Work with the aspirations parents have for their daughters and enable discussions about the contradictions there are between those aspirations and the roles and opportunities that girls have.

#### **Seizing opportunities**

##### *Showing an interest in what interests children*

A group of girls aged six and under acted out a marriage ceremony. Some were carrying bundles on their backs to represent babies, some acted out being the bride. The mother joined the role play by putting red tika, representing married girls, on all of them: she showed her interest in the children's play by getting involved and acting in it.

##### *Learning to dance with confidence*

Children and adults often gathered in front of a house to dance and sing. On

one particular evening, a large group had gathered. A small girl of five to six years was asked to dance in the centre. At first she hesitated, but her mother encouraged her to go and others pulled her into the middle to dance. As she was dancing she was moving her hands, fingers and legs freely in time to the music. She was trying to sing the song along with the rest of the group. From time to time, she looked at her mother and smiled at her. Her mother was smiling back at her and this encouraged the girl to be able to face the crowd and continue dancing on her own. Researchers observed that the girl and her mother both had a sense of pride at the girl being able to dance in front of the crowd.

##### *Bamboo umbrella weaving*

It was the rainy season and Prem Bahadur was weaving shyagu (a typical umbrella made of bamboo). His four year old son was watching eagerly. Prem noticed this and asked 'Where have you put the shyagu you wove yesterday?' The boy brought the shyagu, hung it under the roof of the porch area and sat near to his father.

The father had already woven half of the shyagu and suggested that his son finish it. At first, the son hesitated so the father taught him: 'First catch the strip like this ... no, no ... like this, look here'. The son caught it as the father directed. The father again directed him 'Push it into that part like this' and the boy did what the father directed. The child laughed and repeated this. The father helped him again to do the job and he did well, although it took a long time and slowed the father down a lot. Both laughed and the father said 'Well done, if you repeat this again tomorrow, you will be perfect'. The boy looked very satisfied and went to the water tap carrying the shyagu which he had woven the day before. ○

# *Ready to talk:*

explorations in Nicaragua and Venezuela

Jim Smale

In late 1999 I spent some time working alongside educators, project directors and leaders and directors and coordinators of projects and programmes in Nicaragua and Venezuela, many of these projects and programmes are supported by the Foundation. Our work was about the practicalities of ensuring that young children encounter the right participative environments in which they can express themselves readily, knowing that they will be listened to. Specifically, we tried out a wide and varied range of strategies and approaches for everyday use with young children, in 17 working sessions in 10 preschools and centres.

This article is a record of that work. However, we did not carry out a carefully structured investigation and the article should therefore be seen as a collection of experiences from which some tentative pointers for practice have been drawn by the people who did the work. These pointers are set out in a separate section (page 27).

We didn't see listening to children as an end in itself but as a first, crucial step in an exploration of how young children might participate more fully in all stages of programmes that are operated for their benefit. The article therefore also includes observations and

reflections about the capacities of young children to participate by programme leaders, coordinators and educators from the City of Managua's preschool programme, from the Preschool Department of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education and from La Fundación La Verde Sonrisa (The Green Smile Foundation).

Work with young children should be done by those they know and trust. The work in Nicaragua and Venezuela was therefore in the hands of the children's own educators – the people who spend more time with them than anyone else except their immediate family members.

Because of this, there's a particular character and quality to what was done: it was practical, set in the everyday, and dependent on the knowledge, experience and empathy of the educators. This also kept the objectives tight: to experiment with practical ways of helping children to express themselves; to explore what educators can usefully discover from young children; and to consider what they can and should do with the outcomes. It also defined the nature of the data that emerged, and the nature of the analyses of, and speculations about, those data: what is useful in practice and – taking the broader view – how this affects the



ways in which programmes are conceptualised, monitored and evaluated.

#### Just asking

The first two working sessions in Nicaragua were in centres in marginal communities in San Marcos, a suburb of the capital, Managua. One was actually the educator's home, the second was a simple shed. These centres are associated with the Movimiento Comunal Nicaraguense. Each session started with a warm up activity that the children (four to seven years) already knew. The educators then simply asked the children questions about the preschool and their reactions to it, what they liked and did not like doing, and what they wanted to be when they grew up. Each also developed further questions from the replies. Most children responded although many responses were minimal and very predictable – for example, 'I want to be a doctor' often followed by 'I do too'.

No public discussion developed between the children: everything passed through the educator. Neither educator, naturally enough in these first short sessions, took the discussions to a deeper level or generated discussions between the children.

Three points arose (and these recurred throughout the sessions with children): the first was that the educators and children functioned very well together, the children were responsive and gave every sign that they had plenty of things to share. The second point was that between themselves, the children whispered with some excitement, prompted each other, reminded each other about things, told each other what to do, asked each other questions, reported to each other. It was impossible to really catch or record these subtexts, annexes and asides. The third point was that, at the end of the session, the children immediately engaged in very intense discussions again between themselves, some of

which were about the session we had conducted but most of which appeared to be about other things that were clearly interesting – even exciting – to them.

#### Drawing and talking

The third session was in Ciudad Sandino, Managua in the 'Los Cumiches' centre that is associated with the Centro de Educación y Comunicación Popular (CANTERA – Centre for Popular Education and Communication). Here two educators tried a different approach involving two groups each of four children. One group consisted of four year olds, the other of six and seven year olds. Led by their educators, the children simply drew what they wanted to and talked about their drawing as they produced it. Then the educators brought the two groups together and asked the children to talk about their drawings. Questions from the educators brought out more and the children commented as each

presentation was made, picking up on what was being said, adding to it, discussing it. Each child was readily able to express what they wanted to and this seemed to be because their basic attitude is 'Let's try it and see where it takes us, and we take it'. Some of the points that emerged from the presentations and subsequent questioning were of clear importance. One theme that arose frequently was being hit:

*Why is the doll crying?  
Because her father hit her.  
Why did her father hit her?  
Because she did something wrong.  
And how did her father hit her?  
Like this. (demonstrates)*

In this case, the educator was well aware of the violence that some children suffer and the centre already has a programme to reduce parental violence. Another point that emerged here was the educator's skill in asking simple direct questions that allowed children

to give more information. The educators also stimulated the children to produce more thoughts by making suggestions but were careful not to lead them.

The drawings and the information that emerged from three children were especially interesting. One seven year old boy was exceptionally articulate about what he wanted to be when he grew up. A six year old girl had very clear ideas about her ideal house. Questioned by her educator, it was clear that this was rather different from her current house – but she didn't seem to mind. One four year old child drew a complicated picture full of everything that was important to her. As she talked us through it, a full picture emerged of her life as she perceived it.

In a discussion with a larger group of educators afterwards, the two who had taken part in the exercise were very enthusiastic about what they and the

children had done together. They recognised its potential for enhancing children's opportunities for expressing themselves; but they added that whatever was revealed had to be put with what else they knew about each child. They also indicated the importance of their empathy with young children and their long professional experience.

#### Children are capable

The fourth session was led by Dr Juan José Morales, National Director of Preschool Education, and included 11 coordinators of the Municipality of Managua and of the Ministry of Education. It took the form of a discussion about participation by young children and how to achieve it, and was at a more abstract level than discussions with the educators. It revealed a strong belief in children as individual people, who are capable of expressing themselves clearly, and who need educators to set the environment

and make opportunities for them to develop their creativity and contribute their ideas.

- *Children have lots of ideas: teachers have to be facilitators to help children express them.*
- *We have to see children as active and constant participants who are not just being directed by adults.*
- *We have to give them the freedom to express themselves, to investigate, to discover, to know, to contribute.*
- *Teachers need to be sensitive to each child, and the dynamics that help them to express themselves also have to be specific.*
- *We can ask them: 'What can we do about this?'; 'What do you think about this situation?'; 'What can we do to make it better?'*
- *We have to take into account everything children say and everything they know.*
- *We are weak in this, we are too locked into preparation for primary school.*

Clearly, the participants in this discussion appreciated the potential in young children and believe that it should be built up and built upon. However, for this to happen, all those who are concerned with young children's participation – parents, educators, community members, and policy and decision makers – must establish a political climate in which children are put at the centre, and seen as individuals whose contributions are expected, welcomed and taken seriously.

#### Getting it wrong

The fifth session took place in Villa Venezuela and Villa Canada, two marginalised areas of Managua that were severely affected by Hurricane Mitch and by flooding in October 1999. The sessions were in a centre associated with the Centro de Información y Servicios Asesoría en Salud (CISAS – Centre for Information and Advice Services in Health) and focused on

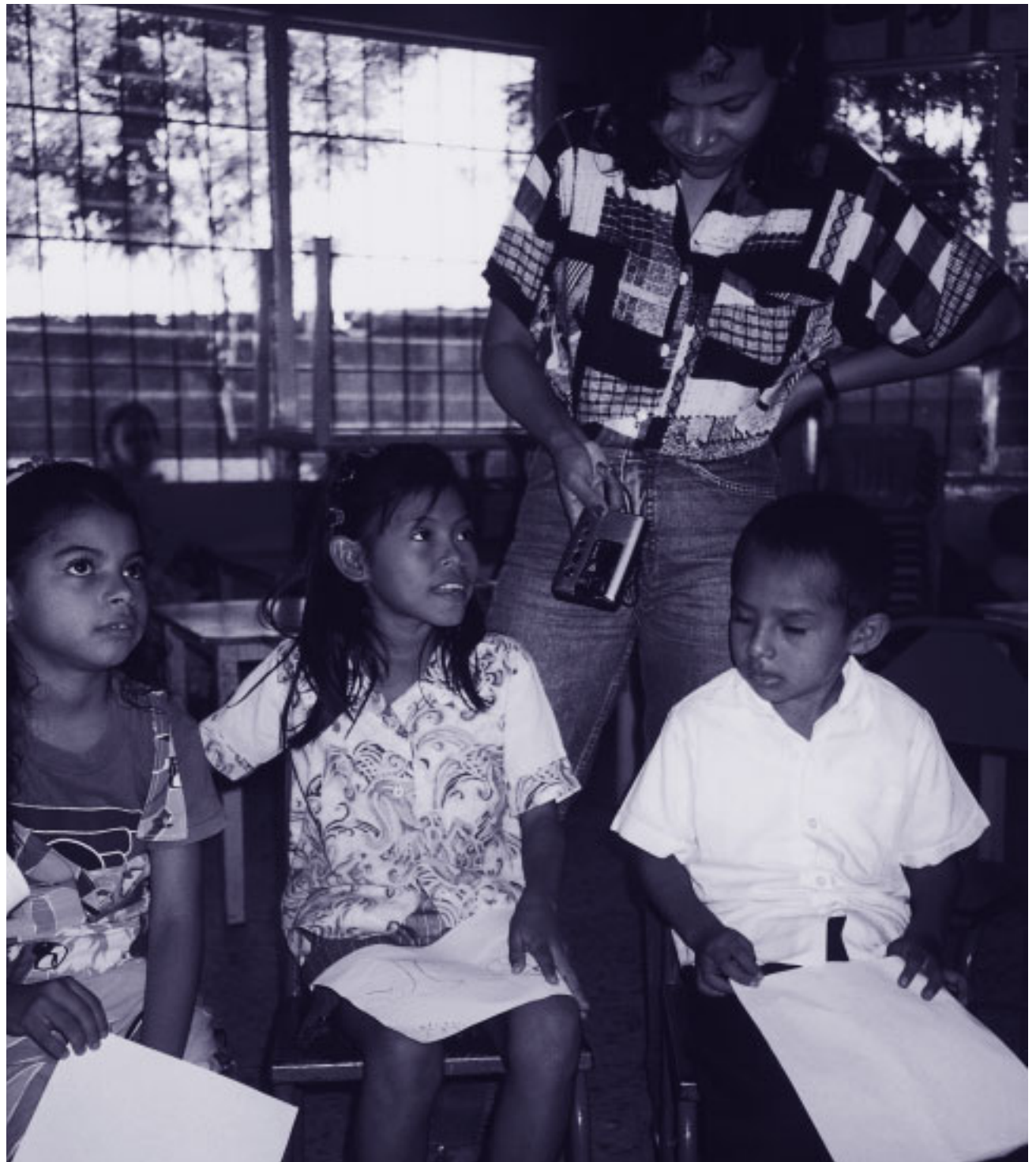
Nicaragua Los Cumiches Centre:  
*Drawing, talking about the drawing  
and recording*  
photo: Jim Smale

three approaches. The first was an adult stranger interviewing a five year old ... the child was overwhelmed and said absolutely nothing. Our conclusion was that the problem was not an outsider interviewing young children but the child not feeling comfortable and confident.

The second approach we tried was a 12 year old boy from the same centre interviewing the same five year old. Again this was unsuccessful for very much the same reasons. Later, in a different setting, with much more experienced young people in charge, it worked well.

We then ran a session in which 11, 12 and 13 year olds tried to recall the kinds of experiences, ideas and thoughts they had had as young children. They had some vague recollections about how they felt about a teacher, or some of the activities they were involved in but little more. Perhaps the only useful grain of information that emerged was from a thirteen year old boy who remembered just one thing about his school when he was about five or six:

*I liked drawing. I used to like drawing (characters from a violent cartoon series for children).*







Nicaragua Marc Mataheru Centre: *Ask me what this means*  
Drawing by one of the children from the working session

Again this approach worked better later on in another setting with a particular group of young people.

#### Working in groups

The next three sessions were in preschools associated with Comité Pro Ayuda Social (COMPAS – Committee for Social Support) in other marginalised areas of Managua. The first of these – and the sixth in total – was in the ‘La Colibri’ centre. Here one of the educators ran a session with a group of about 25 children aged four to six, asking them questions and generating a basic discussion about what they wanted to be when they grew up. This produced a lot of animated excitement and the same sorts of responses as elsewhere such as ‘I want to be a teacher’.

It was clear that launching and sustaining this group discussion was easy for the experienced educator. Children knew what to expect of their

educator, and were prepared to go with her, while the educator knew how to lead them through new, important activities. A group of 25 was practical, although the educator had to ensure that all children had the opportunity to express what they really wanted to.

The seventh session was in the ‘Marc Mataheru’ centre in a similar area. Here one of the educators ran a drawing lesson based on previous work on parts of the human body – she was building on what they already knew, and taking them further by getting them to express more. She did this by having each of the children discuss what they had drawn, then having other children amplify that. The whole of the session was done with the children using a microphone and this seemed to encourage several of them to speak very articulately, almost as if they were performing.

The educator then asked the children for topics that interested them from television, from radio or from their

own experiences. Topics that emerged included poverty, children begging on the streets, finding bombs left over from the civil war... and in the middle, one child recited the story of Little Red Riding Hood. The educator was quick to pick up each new topic and help each child express more and more. This meant that the session wandered around a lot but it clearly interested all children, and the educator always brought it back to the point.

She also ran a session asking children what they wanted to be when they grew up. This again produced some predictable (and perhaps unrealistic) responses. However, some of the children were able to justify what they had said – for example:

*I want to be a doctor to help people get better.*

*I want to be an engineer because they earn a lot of money.*

Afterwards, the educators of the centre

discussed their thoughts about the participation of children. They were overwhelmingly positive, and talked about their respect for the children they work with and about their intelligence, cleverness, creativity and humanity. Their work with the children already takes account of these qualities and the educators want to do more work on getting children to express themselves. They agreed that, in principle, children's views should have more impact on the life and work of the centre.

The eighth session was in the 'Centro Integral Infantil Fernando Gordillo' where children between five and seven presented a puppet show of welcome for their visitors. This was impressive and the presenters were obviously very excited and involved. We discussed the idea of using puppets with the educator concerned and he said that young children identified closely with the characters that they are presenting. They make up their own dialogue and can thereby reveal not only their

creativity, but their understandings, thoughts, and so on. He said that he was often surprised by the ideas they came up with through working on stories for the puppets to tell. The Director of the centre and the educators subsequently discussed their own work, drawing out the qualities that they saw children demonstrating. They too stressed the respect they have for the capacities and abilities of young children.

In discussions with Helia María Gutiérrez and Vilma Cuadra of COMPAS after these three sessions, they emphasised a number of points that have emerged over the years. These included the following.

- That there is a natural link between valuing creative activities and supporting the holistic development of young children effectively.
- That educators show their respect for children by the amount of intelligence, humanity and creativity

they bring into their work.

- That by using puppets, drawings, language development and commentaries, the educators reinforce the impact of their teaching.
- That children don't mind being interrupted if they are expressing themselves naturally.
- That most children show a natural ability to develop dialogues.
- That as they draw, they are simultaneously identifying and refining their thoughts about the subject of their drawing.
- That individual attention is vital for inhibited children if they are to have the confidence and sense of security to participate in group sessions.

#### Applying the lessons

The remaining sessions were in Venezuela and built on what had been learned from the sessions in Nicaragua. The first Venezuelan session was in the 'Centro Comunitario de Atención

Preescolar' (CECAP – Community Centre for Preschool Care) in Los Cipres, a marginalised area of the capital Caracas built on a vulnerable hillside. Before we went on to work with the children, the General Coordinator of CECAP discussed the ways in which young children partly determine the content of the working day. These include making selections from the activities offered and developing these as they wished to, and developing dramatic presentations together. The Coordinator stressed the need to allow things to arise naturally from children and for the educators to pick up on these and help children to develop them in their own ways. In considering listening to children, she made clear that adults are most successful when they empathise with the young children. Although the educators are not experts in psychology, they are highly proficient in recognising young children's needs and wishes, and they are very good at knowing how children are responding. Skills and abilities like these clearly fit with more

formal or structured attempts to understand what children are expressing.

Following this, one of the centre's educators explored three approaches with five children aged four to six: the educator asking questions; the children making drawings and then responding to questions from adults; and the children reflecting on their future in response to questions from the educator. As in other centres, the most successful approach was allowing children to draw pictures and then discuss what they had drawn. Again, as they talked about their drawings, the educator was able to help them to express more. She did this by bringing in additional aspects of the subject of each child's drawing and getting the artist to discuss these as well.

In the second session, a class of children aged eight to ten in the same centre tried to recall their experiences of being small. This generated a lot of enthusiasm and drew in other young

people who happened to be passing. It was noticeable that the older the children were, the less they could recall, and that what they did say seemed to come mostly from what they must have been told – for example, being able to walk at one year old.

The third session in Venezuela was in the Centros Comunitarios de Aprendizaje (CECODAP – Community Learning Centres) with 11 adolescents from the Así Somos project that helps children establish their own social agendas. One outstanding feature of this project is that the older children undertake quite formal programmes of work with younger children, effectively acting both as mentors and enablers. Each member of the group made individual presentations about their work with young children and expressed their opinions about who and what young children are.

- *Four and five year olds are interested in any topic and are quick learners.*

- *They love to mimic.*
- *They have opinions of their own, they are not just parrots.*
- *The themes that they bring up include assaults, the absence of their parents and being punished.*
- *They love playing, making things, drawing (and they can be good at expressing things through that), singing and making music.*
- *I think that making music makes them more intelligent.*
- *The people who give them affection, they draw bigger.*
- *They get so much information from television.*
- *They watch cartoons on television and talk like the characters. This restricts their ability to express themselves – and they pick up bad words as well.*
- *When I work with them, I start from what they know.*
- *You can talk with them about their needs and about good things and bad things in their lives.*
- *One girl told me she is against abortion because she is alive.*



They then tried to interview two five year olds. Failing in this – as had their peers in Nicaragua – they discussed together how to proceed. They quickly decided that just two adolescents should try to interview each five year old. This didn't work well either. They again discussed the problems between themselves and came up with the idea of having the five year olds make drawings about the topics they wanted to discuss. As in other centres, asking questions about the drawings enabled the children to express much more than was in their drawings. But what was interesting here was that the adolescents managed to move beyond a simple questions and answer routine by sustaining a fluidity that almost turned the young children into storytellers.

#### **A superstar in the making?**

The fourth session in Venezuela was with David Ordonez Diaz aged five and his mother who is also an educator. David is very energetic and

confident and will probably become a major figure in the broadcasting industry in the future. We recorded a question and answer session between him and his mother and he then interviewed his mother briefly before going on to interview another adult. He sought opinions on homosexuality and, after his mother had checked that he knew what the word meant, he listened very intently to the reply. This was an interesting illustration of something that had already arisen in discussions with programme coordinators: that young children are getting a lot of information from all kinds of sources and need to check it, amplify it and come to healthy understandings.

The fifth session was with a class of six year olds in the Do Re Mi preschool in the centre of Caracas. This was a more formal setting in which David did the interviewing. The children were rather subdued in responding to David's earnest desire to discover their

attitudes to homosexuals and to children's rights. Later they interviewed each other about whatever they liked, but again they seemed reserved. Finally, we set up a 'television studio' in the classroom and they tried being television interviewers. Again this was not very successful: the children didn't animate the idea as well as we had expected. One clear reason for this is that we hadn't recognised that the context was different – that children were used to more formal approaches than we introduced. However, this does raise the question of whether children in informal settings are more agile in responding to new experiences than those in more formal settings.

The sixth session was in the same preschool with a class of two, three and four year olds. David did the interviews but the responses were again very limited. Later he took the tape recorder and about six of the children into a small play house. The

outcome was predictable: a tape full of the happy sounds of small children exploring an exciting new experience: recording themselves and listening to the results.

The seventh session in Venezuela was with 12 young people between eight and twelve from the Asociación Ayuda a los Niños (AAN – Association for Helping Children). All were former street children who had been associated with AAN for between three and twelve months, building new lives or restoring their pre-street lives. These young people were able to recall their memories of being five or six years old without trouble, in contrast with the group of similarly aged young people in Nicaragua. They did this first individually, then in two groups where they reflected together on three good things that they could remember and three bad things. Each wrote their own memories down and later read them out, sometimes adding extra commentary.

Good memories included:

- When they bought me the doll I really wanted.
- When I got to know new friends in school.
- When I was in a bookshop and I found some steps so I could reach the books I liked.
- When I was finally old enough to go to the meeting place – but that didn't last long because they closed it.
- When, in the second grade at school, I saw my name on the roll of honour for the first time.
- When I arrived at preschool and they told me that my brother had been born.
- Looking after my brothers. When I was elected Queen of Carnival by the people in the building that I lived in.
- Learning to swim: when I first tried I swallowed so much water that I nearly drowned.
- When I went to my first piano concert.

- When my brother helped me to talk and taught me how to do the work that I had to do.

Bad memories included:

- When for the first time I learned what it meant to be called a nickname, a nickname that expressed hate for me.
- When I first saw a coffin – it gave me nightmares.
- When my two best friends and I hit each other.
- When I wasn't allowed to go to the meeting place because I was too young.
- When we were in a friend's house, all of my family, for a fiesta, then the next day I heard my uncle had died. That was terrifying.
- When my mother and I were attacked and robbed – it happened so fast.
- When I heard that my best friend had been shot. This affected me more than anything else because we were always together.

- When at college they maltreated us children, hitting us on the head.
- When I fell off a two metre high wall and I asked my mother who she was because I had lost my memory.

Discussing their recall ability afterwards, we wondered whether it is linked to the kinds of lives they have lived as street children. Their life experiences have been extreme in comparison to those of children who have enjoyed a safer, more stable and more loving environment. We speculated that these experiences have helped to make them self reliant, independent, capable, determined and resilient in their lives; and more reflective, alert and aware as they have drawn on their experiences, considered their situations and made their decisions.

The eighth session in Venezuela – and the 17<sup>th</sup> in all – was with Juan Angel Gouveia, a profoundly deaf young man

who works with young deaf children. He reflected on what he has discovered in this work, offering deaf children's views of the communication problems they have and showing how these can be overcome.

*Many parents don't understand deaf children: they think that because the children can't hear, have trouble learning to talk and can't express themselves, they are not intelligent. Many children tell me that their parents discriminate against them in comparison with non deaf children: they are told what to do, made to do things, manipulated and prevented from participating as non deaf children do. Some are also maltreated. The problem is that the parents lack knowledge and understanding, and treat their deaf children like objects.*

*CECODAP has a programme that I'm involved in to educate parents about deaf children, helping them to*

*understand how difficult it is for them to learn, showing them how to teach children to learn words. The best way is to teach the children sign language first. Using drawings, paintings, photographs and play all help as they learn what words are and how to use them.*

*Young deaf children can participate in many ways once they have learned to communicate and once people have learned to 'listen' to them. They love mime theatre because it's play acting and all kids love that – but, more important, it uses bodily and facial expression rather than words. They are also very good at using computers to show people the words that they need to.*

This was a good session with which to complete the work in Nicaragua and Venezuela. Juan Angel has drawn particular experiences out of young deaf children. But, in many ways, these also highlight some of the more general adult attitudes and understandings that many young children

encounter, and that often limit their potential to communicate well.

### Conclusions

After experiencing so much in so many centres, I have no doubts about the quality of what children in these preschools and centres are offered: the curricula are broad, constructed around rights/needs of children and based on the concept of holistic development. The environments are welcoming, safe, purposeful and rich; activities are stimulating and highly participative; the educators are knowledgeable, experienced, and deeply committed to their work and the children they work with. And the children clearly want to be there, are completely engaged and respect – even love – the educators. They are confident, articulate, industrious, spontaneous, creative, full of fun and curiosity... and they are enjoying it all.

At times, they are also able to determine some elements of the programmes.

Venezuela Do Re Mi Centre: David Ordanez Diaz (right) prepares for a glittering career in the media  
photo: Jim Smale



For example: centres may start with a session in which children choose what they will do from the range of possibilities that are on offer. Equally, educators are sensitive to how children are responding and make changes to the planned programme; and they expect children to initiate activities which they, the educators, support. There is even a sense in which children evaluate elements of the programme: their reactions are picked up by the educators who may then decide to change the immediate programming.

In other words, children already do participate to a limited extent in deciding what is included in their programmes and how these programmes are conducted. However, my view is that participation is largely understood as 'They come, we offer them a good programme, they participate in it'. Young children do not participate formally or directly in a programme's conceptualisation and planning stages. They only impact on the operation of the programme in the sense of affecting some elements of its day to

day running and have only an incidental involvement in formal monitoring or evaluation. In this, they are well behind older children and this invites the question 'How much more is possible?'

In this context, it was very interesting to hear about the respect for young children's capacities that adults involved in early childhood programmes have. I didn't encounter any examples of what it means to build on those capacities by trying to bring young children into a broader and deeper participation in project life. But what would happen if – perhaps using techniques designed to exploit their creativity – they were invited to contribute their ideas, needs, perceptions, reactions, feelings and dreams as programmes are conceptualised? How would projects approach and manage that kind of change in process? What might be the nature of structures and mechanisms they would need to devise to make that change? How would they ascribe value to what young children contributed in relation to the

inputs of other stakeholders? How might the nature and operation of the resultant programmes be changed? Following on from this, at what other stages of a programme could young children also participate, and in what ways?

Enabling children to express themselves freely and fully, knowing that they will be listened to, is a prerequisite for even beginning to consider the viability of such participation. The work that we carried out in Nicaragua and Venezuela explored a wide range of simple and practical approaches, methods and techniques to allow that expression. These complemented what – often empathetically or intuitively – educators already do. We couldn't take these approaches, methods and techniques very far in such a short time, and children revealed relatively little to us. But we were left with a strong feeling that, given time, they would enable us to hear what we have to know from young children, if we are to understand what they are able to contribute to programmes. ○

### *Warm thanks and acknowledgements*

*This article is the outcome of a collaborative effort involving over 100 people whose lives are dedicated to early childhood development: the educators, directors, committee members and parents of the preschools, centres and organisations who willingly changed their normal routines to make this work possible. In addition, hundreds of children participated in the work. The article belongs to all of these people.*

*A core group of directors, specialists and leaders was responsible for conceptualising and coordinating the work, and for helping to develop the article. They were: Aura Lila Ulloa (CANTERA, Nicaragua); Dr Juan José Morales (National Director of Preschool Education, Nicaragua); Helia María Gutiérrez and Vilma Cuadra (COMPAS, Nicaragua); Gustavo Hernandez (CISAS, Nicaragua); Luz Daniela Talavera (La Fundación La Verde Sonrisa, Nicaragua); Ada Ligia Portocarrero (Movimiento Comunal Nicaraguense); and Oscar Misle, Fernando Riviera, Soraya Medina, Elizabeth Hernandez, Catalina Martínez and Jenifer Quintana (CECODAP, Venezuela).*



## Building children's expressive capacities

The ninth working session in Nicaragua was a meeting with the Director and the Head of Social programmes of the Fundación La Verde Sonrisa, and eight voluntary educators from seven marginalised areas of Managua. The educators work in the Casas de Atención Infantil (Childcare Houses) project. Most of the session was centred on an exploration by each of the educators of the nature of their work and the activities that they develop with young children. We also discussed helping children express themselves, and how they can participate in more profound ways. A range of points emerged: some were linked to mutual development of the preschools and the children who help to make them what they are; some were about using natural abilities that are being developed in children; and some were straightforward techniques that educators employed. Here is a range of the points that were made.

- *The educator is a facilitator. Children have to discover, to find out, to control*

*their learning. This helps their creativity, helps them be curious, ask questions, think, understand cause and effect – by their own efforts.*

- *You have to give them options so they can choose what to do, opportunities for them to express how their lives are, how the world appears to them. They are better developed intellectually because of being in the preschool. They have opinions about what is happening. We have to expand opportunities for them to reflect.*
- *Creativity is important. Children are fascinated by playing with materials. They invent and tell their own stories, and we learn from them. Their imagination enables them to enter these stories and express how it feels to be in the situations in the stories.*
- *Painting and play are good for helping children to express what is in their heads.*

- *If they tell you what their father does by acting it, they show you all the details. They make jokes and puns as well. One of the tools the father uses is called a cat, so they make cat noises when they act the father using it.*
- *When we did the first evaluation, in very simple words parents said things like 'Juanito is more awake, he sings, he plays, he's more developed, he*

*speaks more, he expresses himself better, he is better at communicating'.*

- *The small ones choose what we are going to sing and we give them little dolls to help them. They invent new verses.*
- *We tell them stories and they add to them, develop them, participate by contributing their ideas.* ○

Nicaragua Marc Mataheru Centre: Getting into the world of small children  
photo: Marc Mataheru Centre





## Some tentative pointers

After each practical session, there was a discussion between the adults who had participated. The following views, observations, opinions, analyses and pointers for good practice offer the essence of those discussions. They are broken up under a number of headings for easy reference but shouldn't be considered in isolation: all emerged from complex operational contexts.

### The children

To really understand what young children want or need to express needs medium to long term work.

Children in informal settings seem much more confident and ready to take part, with or without their teachers.

In individual discussions, young children can be open, confident and responsive as long as they feel comfortable with whoever is asking them questions.

Most children show a natural ability to develop dialogues.

Casually sitting next to young children in the middle of an animation and starting a discussion with them doesn't seem to inhibit them – although it can distract other children.

When children tell stories they can add to them with a little prompting, thereby demonstrating their creativity while also giving useful information.

Some children will spontaneously begin to talk about something without any prompting from the educator – to the extent that they actually get in the way of other children. This leads to diversions but can offer unexpected opportunities to get at more ideas from children. The educators can pick up on these and help children to develop them in their own ways.

During most of the sessions, the children were often engaged in

dialogues, promptings and commentaries between themselves. Capturing that is hard but will undoubtedly amplify the quantity and, we felt, the quality of what the children are actually expressing. Similarly, after the exercises they moved spontaneously on through an interim stage that included some discussion/commentary about what they had been involved in, but then quickly settled around an agenda that they seemed to develop spontaneously among themselves and that seemed to evolve in an organic way. We will miss a lot if we can't find ways to have them share with us what they share with each other.

Using a microphone and amplifier resulted in many children performing, as if they were mimicking being on television. Alternatively, it may have been just the environment that the educator has – very skilfully – established. Either way, in performing, the children opened up opportunities for their educator to enable them to express more.

Topics in existing curricula can be used to help children express themselves – in one centre these included the human body and coping with discarded bombs.

Some topics seem to matter a lot to children even though these don't necessarily impact on them directly – for example: children begging.

Although David (see page 21) was one of a kind, he showed what a five year old can do. His awareness and depth of understanding, coupled with confidence and an ability to immediately take on a job and do it well, made him a kind of benchmark in terms of the potential that young children may have for participating in projects.

In a formal setting, the introduction of approaches that children don't expect needs good preparation.

Greater formality may anyway have made the children inhibited – they seemed almost frozen without the



Nicaragua La Colibri Centre: *This drawing is about ...*  
photo: Jim Smale

guidance and support of their teachers. When we removed the formal structure of their day, they tended to drift down into a kind of unfocused restlessness.

Most older children could recall little or nothing about being five or six years old. However, a group of former street children (8-12 years) was able to recall a great deal.

Older children can be very adept educators. They can monitor their own performances, make necessary changes and yet constantly pursue their objectives. They can be astute in adapting their tone and manner to support the five year olds and make things easier for them; and they are readily accepted by the five year olds as interlocutors.

#### The educators

Educators communicate with children naturally, in their normal

style, in their role as educators – someone who the children trust and are used to working with.

They are often most effective when they empathise with the young children.

They are highly proficient in recognising young children's needs and wishes, and they are very good at knowing how children are responding.

Their approach affects the nature of the interchange between them and the children but doesn't seem to affect the kinds of responses they get: the skill lies in ensuring that each child produces his or her 'real' response.

It is the educator's sensitivity to the nature of what each child is actually saying, coupled with the quality of the follow-up questions, that is likely to produce useful responses.



They are clearly comfortable in working with children's drawings and in moving quickly to take advantage of what comes out of them. It seems clear that they can readily go further in terms of getting at more important ideas from the children.

It doesn't much matter what the starting point is, a skilful educator can lead discussions in ways that enable topics to be explored. For example, in one centre, reciting the Little Red Riding Hood story led to the child putting herself in the heroine's place: 'She ran home so she wouldn't be frightened'.

#### Approaches, techniques, activities

Finding out from children can readily be incorporated into the normal programme: it doesn't need to be a special session – indeed, it may be better if it is simply introduced naturally and becomes part of the normal activities.

Approaches, techniques and activities of this sort should be planned in regularly and fit naturally within the centre's normal programme – and they should also be introduced as opportunities arise.

A fixed list of questions may provide some good starting points but should be used flexibly. Children should lead adults to what they want to explore.

Allowing children to draw something that is interesting to them and having them talk about what they have drawn allows them to express themselves. What they express may not appear in the drawings: they often reveal the content by explaining, or amplifying what they have drawn, sometimes in response to questions. In addition, as they draw they seem to be simultaneously identifying and refining their thoughts about the subject of their drawing.

Once the theme has been established, and the methodology and dynamic identified, launching and sustaining group work is relatively easy for an experienced educator: children know what to expect from their educators, and are prepared to go with them, while the educators know the children and know how to lead them through important activities.

A group of 25 seems practical, although it inevitably means that some children are left out. But it's not easy for all children to express what interests them when they are in a group: there's interference from other children's ideas which either leads to them copying the ideas of others, or to them being so swamped by what is going on around them that they express nothing.

We need to discover how these approaches, techniques and activities can be applied/developed to address more important and relevant subject

matter and elicit responses from the children that are significant in programmatic terms.

Real effort is needed to develop approaches, techniques and activities that will enable programmes to follow up on what young children tell us. ○



I like to go  
because they  
pick me up  
in a boat

## *The voices of children*

Carmen Vásquez de Velasco

*The author is Director of Servicios Urbanos y Mujeres de Bajos Ingresos (SUMBI – Urban Services and Women with Low Incomes) in Peru. SUMBI investigates and promotes education, health and culture and operates a number of programmes including one for children. This article discusses a SUMBI project that is linked to the Effectiveness Initiative\* and that is developing and applying an innovative way of finding out how to collect the opinions of children aged three to five. The children attend 'Wawa Utas' (Children's Houses in the Aymara language) and 'Wawa Wasis' (Children's Houses in the Quechua language) which are centres of the Programas no Escolarizados de Educación Inicial (Non-formal Initial Education Programmes).*

*The work described here is in two communities, one in the city of Puno in the remote and impoverished high Andes, the other in a poor suburb of the capital, Lima. As the article makes clear, the investigation is in its early stages and further development is necessary. This includes exploring deeper subjects; asking more open questions to enable fuller discussions; and – as with most of the work discussed in this edition of Early Childhood Matters – putting value on what children express and then deciding how to act on it.*

photo: SUMBI

Within early childhood programmes there have been interesting efforts to discover the voice of children. In addition, there have been many important initiatives at international level that have focused world attention on children. Among these are the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that puts forward a vision of childhood in which children – as a right – are seen as active subjects rather than passive objects, and therefore as actors in their own learning.

However, oppression and marginalisation of childhood remain. The opinions of children are still not sought sufficiently and ‘child participation’ often simply means older children being allowed to take part in certain events. Those who are responsible for policies about childhood and those who design programmes may take the needs of children into account but they do so with an adult vision and understanding. Similarly, in our everyday relationships with children, in the home or in educational programmes, we tell children what will

happen and we provide the ideas. We might ask them for their opinions about recreational or leisure activities but even then we mostly ignore those opinions. That means that we really don’t know the answers to important questions such as: ‘What do children really want?’, ‘Are the needs we identify the same needs that children themselves feel they have?’ and ‘What do they expect of us?’. But we need answers as we try to ensure that the nature and quality of young children’s development opportunities is right for them.

We should remember as well, that children are already telling us what they want – although we don’t seem to be listening. What father has not heard his son or daughter complain ‘You said we could go to the park?’ How many times have we heard a child telling us ‘You never have time’ or ‘Daddy doesn’t listen to me?’ How many times do we refuse a request like ‘Tell me a story please?’ To these obvious examples we should also add children’s hidden or less obvious messages – what they are telling us through their actions, for example.

In short, we are not listening enough to those who are in that important stage in which they develop the values with which they interpret and manage their lives. We have to ask ourselves ‘What kind of human beings are we trying to build – do we want passive, inhibited, disinterested adults? Or do we want people who are proactive, interested and engaged?’

#### Listening: its importance for adults

We adults have had many different visions of children over the years. For example we have seen them as ‘savages’, ‘the fruits of sin’, ‘empty vessels that need to be filled’ or ‘sponges that absorb everything’. To regard children as having rights requires a major shift of perspective. It means seeing them as growing human beings who have opinions and influence the world, as people who happen to be in a different stage in their lives. It means eliminating the view that children are apart from society and of importance only within their families – a view that, perhaps more than we assert or believe, is very convenient for many adults.

Working directly with children helps adults to achieve a shift of perspective because children show us that they have opinions and ideas, and that they are full of sincerity, spontaneity and creativity. They also constantly remind us – parents, educators, adults – that we have responsibility for their growth and well-being, and that we are human beings too. Finally, working with young children helps to keep alive that sense of ‘me the child’ that many of us carry in our hearts and our minds, and that helps to keep us in touch with the need to maintain a humanitarian society.

Those of us who work closely with children have to create environments and offer activities that help children learn, socialise and develop as people. As we do this, we need to find ways to listen to children so we can learn whether our approaches and methodologies are working well, whether our resources are adequate and whether we are responding to their ideas, reactions, goals and needs. But, much more important than this, we have to open ourselves up to what is important to children. We have to be sure that our sense of how well we are

doing is rooted in their sense of who they are, what they want and need, where they need to go next, how they are responding as people, and so on.

#### The benefits for children

As children's identities are formed, specific elements can be isolated – for example: gender, values, how they present themselves to the world, what is productive or associated with work, what is conventional or institutional, and so on. At this level, self-esteem – or valuing oneself – is the capacity that allows them (and us) to be unique and special yet still members of a social group. When we listen to children and, better still, consult them, it stimulates their sense of self-worth and the importance of their opinions.

The ways we have to help children express what they feel and what is happening in their lives – for example through symbolic games, stories, drawings, songs – are valuable tools that help us listen to children. But these tools also enable children to deal with their realities, realities that might include the absence of a father, poverty, conflicts, fears, aspirations, and

problems with friends, the programme and their routines.

#### The importance for projects

In the course of our programmes for young children we have had interviews with authorities, family members, paraprofessionals and educationalists, all of whom have given us important information about what they consider effective programming. There was some agreement and complementarity between the views that they expressed but also some wide variation. But we now realise that it is only by adding the perceptions of children to those of the other actors that we can identify the most effective elements in our programming. When we do add children's views, a different picture emerges, one that includes respect for the community, the validation of popular knowledge, respect for the interests of children and treating children properly. It's also a picture that takes account of their reactions to educational activities and the realities of what they receive from programmes.

Of these, the most important in direct terms is knowing how children perceive

the programmes and the people who work with them – knowing how effective a programme is from the point of view of the principal beneficiaries. This helps us to make any and all necessary improvements at whatever stage in a programme and at whatever level.

#### How we listen to children

Our work in listening to children is through educators who know them well and who believe in the value of children contributing their ideas, opinions, reactions, ideas, and so on. The educators must be well prepared. They need training in techniques and strategies – for example, to ensure that they can conduct interviews with young children that enable them to express themselves freely and fully.

The actual work centres on the use of finger puppets and a 'flannelgraph' – a piece of cloth with a texture that allows other pieces of cloth to stick to it temporarily. The flannelgraph itself is decorated to represent the children's environment and the other pieces of cloth are shaped and decorated to represent significant people and objects.

The educator speaks to the children through the puppets, and the children use the flannelgraph to help them express themselves by arranging and rearranging the 'people' and 'objects'.

The children are in groups of three or four, and the core activity is the educator interviewing each of them in turn using sets of questions in Spanish and their indigenous language. These questions are about a range of topics that are closely linked to children's realities and include their daily routine, the games they play and their family. The idea is that these topics are starting points that stimulate children to express a great deal about their lives, their thoughts, their responses and their dreams. As each child is interviewed, the rest of the group watch and learn.

In practice, a working session goes like this. The educator prepares by rereading the guide, checking that all the materials are there, making sure the recorder is functioning, going through the questions, making sure that the atmosphere will be quiet and appropriate, and making sure that the session won't be interrupted. At the beginning of the session itself, she



greet the children and tells them that they are going to play. She then asks the children to choose a finger puppet from a selection that she has (the educator talks to them through this puppet during the whole of the session). Then she explains the activity to them using the flannelgraph and gives the children the flannelgraph materials so they can play with them freely for a while. All the while she is using techniques to keep children interested and make them feel comfortable. These include making the puppet come alive by having it greet the children, play with them, kiss them, run and jump.

The main part of the session is helping the children to express themselves. The educator uses the flannelgraph materials to tell them a story or to create a story with them and then has the individual interviews with each child. These start with a general theme and then naturally introduce the prepared questions, linking them to three separate moments in the day of the child. Asking the questions through the puppets makes the interviews more comfortable and stimulating for the children. Using the flannelgraph helps the children to focus on what they want

to say: they talk in reply to the questions, choose appropriate figures and objects, talk about them and place them on the flannelgraph as they talk. Because the figures and objects can be moved, the children can develop their stories by moving, adding or removing the figures and objects.

During this time, the educator uses more techniques to help the children. These include using interactive games in which the educator becomes another person or character; encouraging children to use their creativity; not interrupting the children; giving them time to expand on their answers; and accepting and valuing their answers instead of questioning them.

The interviews take place in the Wawa Utas and Wawa Wasis. We are also thinking about interviewing children in their own homes. The important thing is to create a relaxed setting that invites play, creativity, and free and natural expression by the children. If possible an observer is also present; and we also record the sessions. Recording is better than taking notes because it is much less intrusive which helps the educator to sustain a good atmosphere. It also

Peru: Getting ready to talk by placing objects on the flannelgraph  
photo: SUMBI



provides a complete record that we can share with the educators and parents, and which allows us to analyse what the children have said.

As part of the process, we are collecting the children's contributions so that we can report back to them. This will show the children that their work is taken seriously, and also give them the opportunity to give their opinions about their contributions and those of

their peers, to develop the ideas expressed, and to give additional information.

#### What children have told us so far

This work has been running for only a few months and we have not yet begun a reflexive process with the children about what they have told us. But we have already had some interesting responses from the children about their experiences in their Wawa Utas and Wawa Wasis.

- *I like my Wawa Wasi because my educator shows affection.*
- *I don't like my Wawa Wasi when the educator shouts at other children.*
  - *I don't like it because the floor seems dirty to me (the floor is actually clean but it is made of a material that is new to the child).*
  - *I come here to play but I don't learn anything.*
  - *They teach me to write.*
  - *I come alone, no one comes with me because I live nearby.*

- *When I don't come to my Wawa Wasi, it upsets me.*
- *I like to go to my Wawa Uta because they collect me in a launch.*

#### Conclusions

We must not allow children to remain simple actors in a life that we adults have determined for them. The work that we are doing in trying to find out what young children think and feel, need and want, see and understand, is giving us information about young children that comes directly from them. This information may not always be new to us – for example, they tell us about the importance of affection in their lives, and about needing more care and attention – but this time it is not based on theory or outside observation, it comes directly from the source. That gives it a special power to effect change, not just here and now, but also in the long term. With the help of this kind of information, we will be better able to help young children grow with love, to feel valued, to benefit from an education that is better suited to them, to develop into people who believe that the world is good but that they can help to make it better.

The more we want to listen and are able to listen to the children, the richer our work will be. Children are very aware of what we are doing – whether good or bad. It is essential that they have opportunities to react to this, and to see that we are sensitive to their comments, suggestions and opinions. Now that we have begun to gather these data, the next step for us is to find ways to process the data so that the children's perspective can take its place in the conceptualisation and planning of programmes. ○

\* In January 1999 the Bernard van Leer Foundation and partner organisations in the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development initiated a three year investigation known as the Effectiveness Initiative (EI). The overall goals of this initiative are to discover what we can about what makes an effective programme work, and to start an international dialogue on effectiveness that deepens our understanding of how to create and/or support effective programming for young children and families.

*Early Childhood Matters* 93 (October 1999) gives a very full introduction to the EI. It can be accessed at [www.bernardvanleer.org](http://www.bernardvanleer.org) and printed copies are available free of charge from the Bernard van Leer Foundation on request.

Peru: Lively finger puppets through which the educator talks with the children  
photo: SUMBI



# Philosophy for children

*Critical thinking is important if we are to have a reflective citizenry in a democracy. I don't think you would like to have a soggy mass of citizens who just accept what they're told without reflection, you want them to judge what they are told in a critical way, not be uncritical. That's a terrible notion, a non critical citizenry. But conventional education is not delivering this reflective citizenry. (Dr Matthew Lipman)*

Are young children really capable of making any kind of profound contribution to areas such as the conceptualisation and evaluation of early childhood development (ECD) programmes? Do they have the powers of investigation, perception, reflection and analysis that seem necessary? Can their obvious creativity be employed usefully? Dr Matthew Lipman believes that the answer to questions like these is 'Yes!' and, for the last 25 years, he has been showing how these capacities and powers can be developed.

He takes the view that education should produce individuals who are intellectually flexible, resourceful and judicious, and who have the concepts and thinking skills that could be identified as being most likely to develop a democratic citizenry. If it is to do so, it must start with young children. Lipman therefore produced the 'Philosophy for Children' programme, designed to help children from preschool

age upwards to engage in critical enquiry, and creative and caring thinking. The programme emphasises the excitement of discovery, reflection and analysis through helping the children to create what he calls 'a community of enquiry' that allows children to explore and better understand their world, other people, and themselves.

The programme is based on age-specific sets of stories about everyday happenings in the lives of children. Storylines raise philosophical questions in the children's normal language, and in the ways that children might talk about issues and ideas. The first step is to share a story with a class of children by reading it aloud. The teacher then asks for comments and questions and the children choose an aspect of the story that is relevant to them and that they are really interested in talking about. The heart of the work is then a discussion between the children that the teacher helps them to generate and sustain by

asking questions and seeking answers among themselves.

The discussion may naturally meander, so the teacher has to keep it within the 'norms of philosophical enquiry'. In effect, these are rules and guidelines and, especially with young children, it is useful to explain the need for these rules and guidelines, to have them spelled out and to show children how they keep within them – or not. These rules/guidelines include keeping to the topic under discussion, questioning assumptions, giving reasons for opinions and ideas, relating their ideas to those of other children, and so on. At the end of the session, a statement is produced about where the children have reached in their enquiry, and the teacher may then follow up the discussion with complementary activities.

For the teacher, the work is supported by a manual that contains suggestions for

dealing with the kinds of questions that might be raised, and exercises that help children to explore the questions that interest them. The programme is flexible: for example, the stories can be rewritten – or new stories can be produced – to suit local cultural and physical realities; and the manual serves as a guide, not as an instruction book. It is also a long term programme: results are cumulative.

The examples that follow show how it has been implemented, and with what results, with three to six year olds in Iceland (page 36) and among six year olds in the USA (page 40). ○

Details about the Philosophy for Children programme can be found at <http://chss2.montclair.edu/ict> and obtained from

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# *Philosophy for Children in action: Iceland*

**Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir**

As an administrator in Foldaborg preschool in Reykjavik, Iceland, the author introduced a two year programme for all children aged from three to six years, based on the 'Philosophy for Children' ideas of Dr Matthew Lipman (see page 35). The programme was designed to help young children to exercise and develop their ability to engage in investigations, debates and discussions. The original point of the programme was to provide young children with the means to resolve conflicts amongst themselves. The specific goals were to increase children's respect for each other, thereby lowering the risk of persecution later on; to develop better relations between children; to increase creative and critical thought among them; to increase their understanding of themselves and their own thoughts; and to increase their respect for the opinions of others. Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir is now a preschool counsellor for 12 preschools in Reykjavik.

Foldaborg is one of 71 preschools operated by the city of Reykjavik. It is for about 90 children aged from one to six years old, and they spend between four and nine hours there, five days a week. As in all Icelandic preschools, only about 40 percent of the personnel are qualified teachers, the remainder are assistants.

When I got to know about Dr Matthew Lipman's ideas of using philosophy with young children, I saw it as a way to open up children's minds: too often they are told what to think and do but not why. The Philosophy for Children approach increases children's respect for others while giving them a chance to be listened to, in an environment in which their opinion counts – there is no right answer, so they don't have to worry about saying something wrong. In Foldaborg, we were specifically interested in helping children find better ways of solving their problems, and we

recognised that philosophy can help them to look into their own mind and search for their own opinions and feelings. We therefore developed the first Philosophy for Children programme for preschool children in Iceland.

When I first discussed this idea in a staff meeting, most members of staff were very excited although some were scared – mostly, I think because it was called philosophy. But as soon as we started the preparation everyone took part with joy and excitement. As we started the preparation, we introduced the idea to parents who were also very excited. We didn't introduce it to the children until we were ready to work with them.

## **Preparing the staff**

We decided to use a whole year to prepare the staff. We needed to know

more about philosophy and methods of introducing philosophy to children and about working with them in philosophical ways. At the personal level, we needed to open our own minds and become more capable of communicating in a philosophical way. Last but not least, we also needed to practise leading discussion groups with children.

To help us on these matters we got in touch with a philosopher called Sigurdur Bjornsson. He was just as excited as we and worked with us both during the preparation year, and throughout the whole two years of the operation of the project. Right from the start we decided that we did not want to depend only on the discussion groups, although these are very important. Instead we wanted to change the whole environment of our daily work in Foldaborg and base it on the philosophical approach. This meant that

everyone had to be aware of how to talk with children, how to handle conflicts, how to encourage the children to seek answers for themselves and how to ensure that everybody respects each other's opinions.

Sigurdur led a two hour training session every two weeks and also two full days of further training and preparation. There were two areas in which we needed training: 1) in philosophical thinking generally, and in the Philosophy for Children programme – this was for everyone; and 2) in leading discussion groups – this was for a group of eight preschool teachers.

After the training, staff found that they needed to keep on discussing philosophy among themselves, so personnel in each class met one evening a month in their homes to do this. This was their own initiative, in their own time and it was unpaid.



As an administrator and the co-leader of the project along with Sigurdur, I was very pleased with this interest and commitment from the staff.

When the preparation time was over, and before starting the work with the children, we introduced the project properly to the parents. They were still excited and remained very enthusiastic throughout. In the beginning I was concerned that they would find it hard to deal with their children asking them the kinds of questions that necessarily arise in the Philosophy for Children approach – for example, questions about reasons and justifications for what they should do and should not do. But I never heard a parent express any negative reactions to the programme or to Philosophy for Children. On the contrary, parents often came to me to say how pleased they were with the progress that their children were making.

#### **The discussion groups with children**

Every child from three to six years old participated four times a week for 30 minutes each time. They were split into seven groups of between eight and ten

children, with a teacher and an observer. We thought it was very important that they stayed in the same groups with the same adults because it would increase their comfort, trust and sense of security. We had certain rules such as raising a hand when they wanted to make a contribution, sitting still, listening to other children, waiting their turn and concentrating; and we also had rules to keep the discussion on course.

Every discussion time started the same way and ended the same way. The children sat in a circle along with the teacher, and they would hold hands and say something like ‘Welcome to discussion time’ (the actual welcome varied from group to group). Then the teacher would introduce the topic for the discussion. This was usually drawn from a story called ‘Bullukolla’. This was written by Sigurdur Bjornsson for the project, and it is built up along the lines developed by Matthew Lipman in his series of books for the Philosophy for Children programme in the USA. That is to say, it tells a story in a way that highlights situations, events, problems and so on, and allows them to be analysed and discussed by children so

that they can develop their powers of critical thinking, bringing in their own experiences and ideas as they do so.

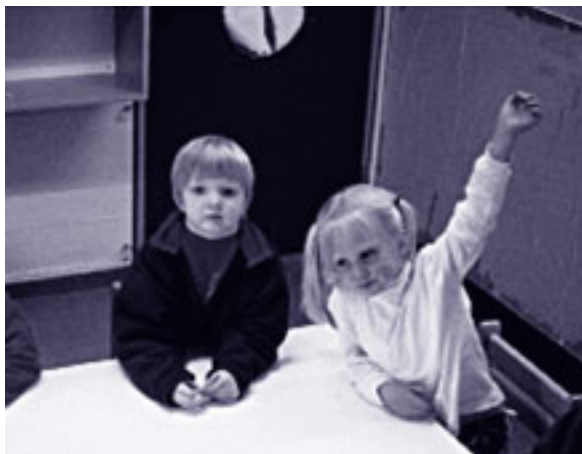
Bullukolla is an Icelandic story about an Icelandic girl, and we use it because it is culturally more appropriate than a translated American story. The story is about a girl of five years called Gudrun – a very common Icelandic name – but she is called Bullukolla (the nonsense girl) because she is always asking strange questions, making peculiar statements and wondering about various things in life. The story is divided into short chapters, each of which is followed by questions and exercises related to the story that the teacher can use to help to develop the discussion.

When using ‘Bullukolla’ we started the session by reading a chapter to the children. Then we asked them if they found anything strange or funny in the story and if they had a question to ask. Each question was written on a board on the wall along with the name of the child who ‘owned’ the question. When everyone had asked the questions they wanted to, we started to work on each question, trying to get every child to

express to the others what was in their mind: what interested them; how it related to their own experiences; what questions it provoked in them; and so on. As this happened, other children commented on what had been said, and, with the help of the teacher, a discussion developed. As well as Bullukolla we also used other material to encourage children towards creative critical thinking and discussions – for example, pictures, plays, things that had happened in the school or in their homes. Before ending the discussion, the teacher helped the children to sum up what they had said. At the end of the session, all the children held hands again and together said something like ‘Thank you for the discussion’.

The children asked many hundreds of questions during the project. These included:

*Is it possible not to know anything?  
Is there something that never changes?  
Is it possible to know if one really exists?  
What is it that controls us?  
What is living?*



Iceland: *Obeying the rules helps proper debate among young children*  
photo: Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir

We worked with the children on these questions, getting them to think about them, to form an opinion and argue their case. The children could disagree – we were not searching for one particular answer – and they also learned both to accept a valid argument and protest at a weak one, and to accept the right of others to have their own opinions.

#### Monitoring progress

We held staff meetings every month to discuss general progress, and the job of the observer was to help monitor the progress of each child in each group. We found that the children showed great progress in most areas. For example, only 38 percent participated in the discussions at the beginning of the project but that grew to 95 percent; and, while only 2 percent of the children

could argue their case at the beginning, 71 percent were able to do so later on. The observer also monitored how well the children kept to the rules – something they actually did very well. In the beginning some children were insecure about asking their own questions – for example, they said they wanted to ask the same question that another group member had done. At first we just added their name to that question, but after a few weeks we insisted that they came up with their own questions if they wanted their names on the board.

The only area where children made little or no progress was in generalising: they couldn't do that by themselves but the teachers did this at the end of some discussions.

We assembled our overall conclusions about the effects of the project on children under the different headings set out below.

#### *The children improved their skills in asking questions*

The ability to ask relevant questions is a very important skill in the comprehension of every subject. In a philosophical discussion, children are encouraged to ask questions and are

helped to formulate their questions by the teachers and their peers if they have problems. This questioning process appeared to be fruitful because at the end of the year, the children expressed their doubts in direct questions that were much more easily comprehended by their peers. In the beginning it always took some time to figure out what the children were really asking.

#### *The children stated their opinions much more easily*

Most of the children put their shyness behind them and became very competent at saying what they thought. Some were very shy in the beginning and did not want to participate but got to enjoy the discussions by the end.

#### *The children improved their ability to find reasons*

Reasons are the cornerstones of philosophical discussion. In the beginning the children had difficulties in finding reasons but after the philosophical training they improved their ability to support their judgements with reasons.

#### *They disagreed with each other*

In the philosophical discussion we put emphasis on the interrelations between the children themselves. The idea was

to move from child-teacher to child-child discussions. Therefore the children were encouraged to speak directly to the one they agreed or disagreed with. After a while, this kind of communication happened frequently and the children started to settle their disagreements by themselves.

#### *They started being able to correct themselves*

One of the main characteristics of critical thinking is that it corrects itself. In the beginning of the training the teacher had to point out the disagreements and contradictions but as the children became more used to the process they started to correct themselves. Frequently, children raised their hands and said that they had changed their mind and, after a time, they could even say why. Often, this was because they had listened carefully to their peers.

#### *They became more tolerant and involved in the discussion, and their concentration as they listened to their peers became much better*

To start with, many of the children lacked tolerance and were easily carried away from the subject. They didn't know what the discussion was about and expressed views that were

not related to the subject. Very often they raised their hand to say something but had forgotten what it was by the time it was their turn to speak. Later they could concentrate better and follow the discussion more easily. They listened more carefully to each other and they could wait longer to express their own views.

### *They became more ready to help each other in the discussion*

One of the ethical aspects of discussion is the readiness to help others to express their views and find reasons for them. This was a focus in the discussions and children developed the desire to help each other. Their help might be in the form of interpreting an idea that was unclear, finding reasons for an opinion or finding examples that threw light on the opinions of others. In this process the children learned the joy of helping others and also learned to accept the help of others.

### *Discussion became a tool for conflict resolution*

Both staff and parents reported that the children became much more ready to give reasons for their opinions or wants; and seemed more able to use discussions to settle differences with other children.

### *Differences in participation between boys and girls decreased*

A very interesting factor is that the difference in the participation between boys and girls almost disappeared. In the beginning the boys were much more active than the girls but in the end the girls had caught up.

### **The views of the parents**

From the beginning we were anxious that the parents were with us, so we also discussed with them what changes they had observed in their children. Generally parents felt that their children talked with them in a different way. Many explained further:

- *She is more open-minded and realises that her opinion is not always the right one.*
- *He speaks about everything that frightens him or that he finds beautiful; he talks about everything between heaven and earth.*
- *He is better able to talk about things and argue his case, and he demands the same from others.*
- *She doesn't like answers like 'maybe' or 'possibly', she wants*

*clear answers and reasons for everything.*

### **Conclusions**

Introducing the Philosophy for Children programme was difficult in the beginning because staff members were handling situations that were new to both them and the children. But progress was obvious after a very short time and that was a constant reward and stimulus. The responses from the parents were very rewarding also: most of them were very excited about the project. We also had very positive responses from outside Foldaborg preschool, including a lot of phonecalls and visits from teachers and other people who wanted to know more about – and see – what we were doing.

Personally, I found that working on this project was very demanding but at the same time very exciting and rewarding. I wanted to be as much involved in the work with the children as I could so I had my own discussion group to lead. It's a great experience to see a girl who in the beginning hardly said a word, or a boy who always took the word of others and had difficulties in sitting still, become active and confident members of a discussion group that is

dealing with important and complex matters.

The teachers in Foldaborg are still working on philosophy with the children, and are doing very well. Nowadays it has become a very natural, important part of the curriculum and the school is well known for this work, both by parents as they select schools for their children and by professionals. Also, since the project in Foldaborg I have given many lectures introducing Philosophy for Children and it has now been taken up by other schools with similarly impressive results. ○

*Some parts of this article originally appeared in the article 'Philosophy for Children in Foldaborg; Development Project in Foldaborg, a preschool in Reykjavik, Iceland, for children from 1-6 years' by Ingibjorg Sigurthorsdottir, first published in OMEP International Journal of Early Childhood, Volume 30, No. 1, 1998; OMEP World Organisation for Early Childhood and Education, DCDPE Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1A 0HH, England.*

## *Philosophy for Children in action: USA*

In 1996 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) made a film that included work with young children in Tuscon School, New Jersey, USA, called 'Socrates for six year olds'. It was produced and directed by Anne Paul. The film catches fascinating scenes of open dialogue between six year old children. For example, just five months after the introduction of the programme, it shows children's ability to address an individual's sense of self, and relate that to the location of thinking in the body. It also shows that young children can sustain dialogues between themselves with minimal intervention by their teacher. In this example, the teacher's interventions are in italics.

- Elfie always thinks a lot, that's why she doesn't talk a lot.
- I agree with Joanne, because your brain is for learning and it's powerful.
- *So you don't agree with Clarissa who says it's you who thinks, and not your brain? That's an interesting*

*thing to say Clarissa.*

- I disagree with Clarissa, because if you didn't have a brain, you wouldn't be even thinking of the words that I am talking right now. So, it would be impossible without your brain.
- I think it could be possible because you have a heart, and a heart can beat, and it could think it's beating.
- I disagree with Teresa, because if your heart beats, that's just your heart beating. You don't know if your heart thinks.
- *You don't know if your heart thinks?*
- If you have your brain like we do, you know all the thoughts.
- I agree with Teresa, because you think and your brain stores your thoughts.
- *So, it's really you who's doing the thinking?*
- Well, if you didn't have a brain, you would say, What's that? What's that? What's that?
- How would you know what's happening? And how would you know how to spell the word if you

didn't think about the word?

- You wouldn't know anything, so you wouldn't know what you are saying, so you don't know it.
- It's like, well, I don't even know what that is. And you don't even know where you are.
- You couldn't even talk, because you don't know what the words are.
- If you didn't have a brain, you would die. Because if you wouldn't have a brain you would keep falling down, and you would really go into the street and you would get run over. So, you would be immediately dead if you didn't have a brain.
- I disagree with Christian because you could walk ...
- ... your brain wouldn't tell you that you can walk. I am thinking that I've got to talk and if I didn't have a brain, then I wouldn't be talking. If I didn't have a brain, I couldn't hear you and I wouldn't be here and I wouldn't be at school and I wouldn't be doing anything. I wouldn't be alive.
- When people grow up, get really old

they wouldn't know anything, because they've used up all of their thoughts.

- *Lauren do you agree with Patrick that you can use up all your thoughts when you're young and wouldn't have enough anymore?*
- You can use up all your thoughts because sometimes I have thoughts and I forget them and I don't have anymore for the rest of the day.
- I disagree with Lauren because you always have thoughts and everybody has thoughts. There's never no thought or only one thought in the world.

In the BBC film, Catherine McCall, the teacher of the Philosophy for Children programme in Tuscon School, explained the approach:

*You create a situation in which the child generates philosophy. It's the children who create the ideas they find interesting, not the ones that the adults find interesting – and that is*



*tremendously exciting for children.  
They are not nearly as frightened of  
the risk of intellectual adventure as  
an adult is.*

This demonstration of the capabilities of six year old children invites the question 'What next?'. In practical terms: how do preschools and schools acknowledge these, develop them further, build on them? What impact should such abilities have on the ways in which children are regarded, on how childhood is conceptualised? What impact should such abilities have on how programmes are devised, operated and evaluated. ○

For details of *Socrates for six year olds* and other  
BBC programmes and publications please contact:  
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80 Wood Lane  
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USA Alabama Day Care Services project: *Fully engaged*  
photo: FOCAL

# New publications from the Foundation

## Espacio para la Infancia

Durante este pasado mes de enero, la Bernard van Leer Foundation ha sacado a la luz *Espacio para la Infancia*, una nueva publicación que, si bien presentada con un nuevo diseño, supone la continuación del anterior *Boletín Informativo*. Dirigida a las comunidades de habla hispana y portuguesa, se presenta como un punto de encuentro donde poder tratar, exponer y profundizar sobre todos aquellos temas de interés y experiencias sobre el desarrollo de la primera infancia.

Español/Portugués. Edición semestral. 44 páginas (ISSN 1566-6476).

Teresa Moreno  
Editor

*Last year, saw the redesign of both the Foundation's series, the 'Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections' series and the 'Working Papers in Early Childhood Development' series.*

## The Cynon Valley Project: investing in the future

The Cynon Valley in Wales (UK) is struggling with the consequences of economic decline. With funding from Save the Children Fund and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the Cynon Valley Project started work in two communities. The Project's focus was on early childhood work and community development. Although starting at about the same time and under similar conditions, the two communities developed in completely different directions. One community continued its early childhood work, among other activities, while the second concentrated on community action.

Through the voices of parents, community workers, and childcare workers, this booklet charts the development of the work in both communities and analyses why their directions diverged so radically. The thread that underpins this study is that the people making up communities must have the strings of development in their own hands to pull themselves and others in the direction that they decide is important. Equally, funding agencies must be prepared to be flexible and react to changes in direction if real development is to take place.

*The Cynon Valley Project: investing in the future* is number 12 in the 'Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections series'. It was published in October 1999 (ISBN 90-6195-051-1).

## Childrearing in Hubai Village, China

*Childrearing in Hubai Village, China* summarises the findings of research

carried out by staff of the China National Institute for Educational Research which runs the Foundation supported Hebei Preschool Education Project. The research looked into the childrearing practices of a small village in the province of Hebei in Northern China. The project will use the research findings to tailor its future work to local conditions.

*Childrearing in Hubai Village, China* is number 25 in the 'Working Papers in Early Childhood Development series'. It was published in December 1999 (ISBN 90-6195-054-6).

**Valuing evaluation: a practical approach to designing an evaluation that works for you**  
*Alain Thomas*

*Valuing evaluation* is based on an evaluation workshop that took place in Tel Aviv, Israel, in May 1997. As the workshop participants included staff

from 11 projects, the discussions centred around very practical issues. The participants looked at what is evaluation, different types of evaluation, why people evaluate, the aims of evaluation and so on. As this paper recounts the findings of the workshop, it is very practical.

This paper is particularly useful to project staff and resource centres, and is of great interest to project directors, policy makers, and academics.

*Valuing evaluation: a practical approach to designing an evaluation that works for you* is number 26 in the 'Working Papers in Early Childhood Development' series. It was published in February 2000 (ISBN 90-6195-055-4).

Joanna Bouma  
Series Editor

*Single copies of these publications are available free of charge from the Foundation at the addresses inside the front cover and on the back cover. A list of all the publications in both the Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections series and the Working Papers in Early Childhood Development series is available from the Series Editor.*



# *The Bernard van Leer Foundation*

## Investing in the development of young children

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a private foundation based in The Netherlands. It operates internationally.

The Foundation aims to enhance opportunities for children 0-7 years growing up in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage, with the objective of developing their potential to the greatest extent possible. The Foundation concentrates on children 0-7 years 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:

- a grant-making programme in selected countries aimed at developing culturally and contextually appropriate approaches to early childhood care and development;
- the sharing of knowledge and know-how in the domain of early childhood development that primarily draws on the experiences generated by the projects that the Foundation supports, with the aim of informing and influencing policy and practice.

The Foundation currently supports a total of approximately 150 projects in 40 selected countries worldwide, both developing and industrialised. Projects are implemented by project partner organisations that may be governmental or non-governmental. The lessons learned as well as the knowledge and know-how in the domain of early childhood development, which are generated through these projects, are shared through a publications programme.

The Foundation was established in 1949. Its income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883-1958.