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Young children's participation:
Rhetoric or growing reality?

Bernard van Leer



Foundation

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Editorial

The February 1999 edition of *Early Childhood Matters* reviewed ideas and programmes of work that sought the views of young children, and that valued them as contributors to, and participants in, all aspects of early childhood development (ECD).

A follow-up edition in February 2000 highlighted a practical component of this approach: how to listen to children. Interestingly, it revealed that it isn’t hard for children to express themselves. Rather the problem is that many adults, assuming they are committed to the idea, are not actually all that good at listening to children: they lack the right attitudes, experiences and skills.

Four years on, we hope to have progressed the debate on children’s participation by calling on contributors to make the case for opening up spaces in which children can contribute to the processes of conceptualisation, operation and evaluation of programmes. This call is based on the conviction that participation by young children is beneficial for both the children themselves and for all of those around them; and it recognises that there is real sense in which participation implies a process of reciprocal learning – on the part of adults obviously, but also on the part of young children.

In the following pages, we present a general overview of ideas and reflections, and a number of cogent examples of practice. We start with an article by Gerison Lansdown that takes the Convention of the Rights of the Child as a reference point for the participation of young children. The article goes on to review the concept itself, different levels of participation, as well as participation in practice.

But what is the relationship between child participation and child development? Indeed, what does child development tell us about early childhood programming and the participation of children? Helen Penn (page 15) offers her reflections on current theories and specific studies and programmes.

Moving to implementation, the articles that follow offer examples of participation by young children that had the objective of influencing the development of a programme, often intercut with reflections about aspects of practice. These start

with an article drawn from an interview with Tião Rocha, president of the Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento (CPCD), in which he sets out the philosophy that inspired the work and the methodology used in the Foundation-supported ‘Sementinha’ project in Minas Gerais, Brazil.

In September 2004, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child organised its annual Day of General Discussion on the theme of ‘Implementing child rights in early childhood’. The Foundation formed part of the organising committee for this event and participated in the discussions on the theme, principally within a working group that focused on child participation. Other participants in the working groups included a number of representatives of Foundation-supported projects. The article on page 28 offers a review of the thoughts and experiences of the participants gathered via a questionnaire.

Participation by young children is a cross-cutting theme for the Bernard van Leer Foundation, running through the policies that underpin ECD programmes, as well as its communications work and learning agenda. In the latter respect, the Foundation launched in 2003 a process for deepening its understanding of this concept in order to nurture strategies for ensuring child participation in the programmes that it supports. It is already working with partner organisations in Latin America to share and discuss achievements, challenges and concerns about participation in practice. This work served as the basis or starting point for a meeting in Beberibe, Fortaleza, Brazil, in which a series of criteria for measuring the effectiveness of young children’s participation in programming were worked out (see page 35).

In the final section, we sketch a number of field experiences of child participation that come from different settings or that illustrate different levels of participation.

The subject of participation of young children is very much in its infancy. Although information is scarce on the ground, we hope to have made a contribution to knowledge-sharing in this area through the resource section that concludes this edition.

Participation and young children

Gerison Lansdown

The author is an independent children's rights consultant. In this article she challenges widely held views about the need for young children to participate in matters that involve them, arguing that, beyond the fact that it is their right to do so, it is an important element in their development, helping to enhance their self-esteem, confidence and overall capacities, and to strengthen their independence, resilience and social competence. She also shows that they have contributions to make at all levels – from the family to the wider political arena – and these contributions deserve to be included, valued and respected.

I'm big - you're little. I'm right - you're wrong. I'm old - you're young, and there's nothing you can do about it. Thus spoke the father to his 5-year-old daughter in the film version of Roald Dahl's 'Matilda'. His views encapsulate, albeit somewhat brutally, assumptions held throughout the world about the status and capacities of young children.

Although the treatment of children differs across societies, as do the ages at which levels of competence are deemed to occur, most cultures construct childhood as a period of 'becoming' rather than 'being' and attach little value to the way children construct meaning in their lives¹. Adulthood is deemed to be the 'norm' with children in a state of immaturity characterised by irrationality, incompetence, amorality, passivity and dependence². Children's actions and words are seen through a framework which attributes less value to their perspectives simply by virtue of their childhood status. These assumptions about childhood incapacity effectively silence children's voices, and result in persistent under-estimation of their potential for participation in competent and rational decision-making.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child poses a profound challenge to these traditional attitudes towards children, incorporating as it does, for the first time in international law, recognition that children are subjects of rights, entitled to be involved in decisions and actions that affect them.

And indeed, the 15 years since its adoption have borne witness to a proliferation of activity and thinking on the subject of children's participation. Children have been increasingly involved in research, consultations, campaigning and advocacy, peer education and support, programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, media work, policy analysis, conferences as well as the development and running of their own organisations. To date, the primary emphasis in this work has involved older children in activities designed to provide new forums through which they can be heard, rather than on working within those institutions which have greatest impact on younger children's lives – family, school, health care, early years' provision. This focus, perhaps, reflects the fact that the key players spearheading these developments have been NGOs, who tend to have less contact with children under eight years. However, the Convention extends participation rights to all children capable of expressing a view. It embodies no age restrictions. There is a pressing need, therefore, to explore approaches which address the rights of younger children to participate, and in so doing, to review the culture, attitudes and practices prevailing in those environments where young children spend much of their time.

The concept of participation

Respect for children as participants is reflected throughout the Convention, but is most clearly elaborated in Article 12 which states that 'States

Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. Article 12 is a **substantive** right which entitles children to be actors in their own lives, not merely passive recipients of adult care and protection. However, as for adults, democratic participation is not just an end in itself. It is also a **procedural** right through which to realize other rights, achieve justice, influence outcomes and expose abuses of power.

Many adults misunderstand the meaning of participation and fear that it may give rise to inappropriate burdening of children, disrespect for parents and excessive freedom without corresponding responsibilities. However, Article 12 does not give children the right to take responsibility for all decisions irrespective of the implications or their own capacity. What it does do is require adults to hold a more inclusive and respectful dialogue with children. Participation means more than taking part. Taking part in a sporting activity organised by an adult is not participation. Creating a game, deciding on respective roles, rules and focus is. And there are different levels of participation. Consulting children on a range of play options predetermined by an adult worker provides a limited opportunity for participation. Creating the space for children to contribute their ideas on organising the day and working with them to implement their suggestions offers a deeper level of involvement and responsibility.

Children's participation is an ongoing process of children's expression of opinions and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters that concern them. It requires information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect and power sharing. Genuine participation gives children the power to shape both the process and outcome, and acknowledges that their evolving capacity, experience and interest play a key role in determining the nature of their participation³.

Applying the concept of participation to young children

All children are capable of participation

Article 12 imposes no lower age limit on the exercise

of the right to participate. It extends to all children able to express views, and even very young children are capable of understanding and contributing thoughtful opinions on a range of issues affecting them. Indeed, there are many areas where young children can demonstrate equal or superior competence. Look, for example, at their capacity to acquire IT skills, remember where things are, use their imaginations, mediate between arguing parents, show willingness to forgive, learn new languages, or express creativity, love and compassion. In order to respect these competencies, adults need to learn to hear and see what children are saying and doing without subjecting it to the filtering process that diminishes their contribution simply because they are young. Unfortunately, too often, adults fail to recognize these capacities because they assess children from an adult perspective. The consequent limitations are exemplified in a study with young children to explore capacity for consistent thinking. Psychologists have traditionally taken the view that young children's thinking is inconsistent and confused because in tests devised by Piaget, and replicated around the world, children tended to vary their answers when asked the same question several times. In fact, the children assumed the researchers wanted a different answer each time and were trying to be helpful. The researchers interpreted these responses as evidence of the children's inability to think consistently. When, instead, the questions were asked by a 'teddy' the children laughed at his repetitions and repeated their original answers. They felt no need to be polite to the teddy or to pretend not to notice that he kept asking the same questions⁴.

Young children's views should not automatically be given less weight. Of course, consideration has to be given to their level of understanding of the issues involved whilst also protecting their best interests. Furthermore, the extent to which the child's views can be respected needs to reflect the risks associated with the decision involved. Obviously, a 2-year old cannot be left to decide to run into a busy road. However, she can, with information about the weather and the anticipated activities of the day, take part in deciding what clothes to wear. A decision over whether to wear a coat to school will, for example, have to be based on a calculation of the harm caused by compelling her to wear a garment

she sees as restrictive, compared with the chance of her catching a cold⁵. And through participating in such choices, children learn to accept responsibility for their actions.

One of the difficulties faced by small children is that adult language is prioritised as the ideal form of rational communication. Because small children are unable to communicate on comparable terms, their perspectives tend to be ascribed less weight⁶. Indeed, they are often assumed to have no views worth listening to. Respecting the rights of young children to be heard necessitates a preparedness to listen to their views in ways appropriate to them – through music, movement, dance, story-telling, role play, drawing, painting and photography, as well as through more conventional dialogue.

The capacity of children to share important perspectives through visual rather than verbal communication is highlighted in a project undertaken with 4–5-year olds in the UK designed to seek their perspectives on local public health issues⁷. The children produced a mural depicting the local environment both as it currently was and as they wanted it to be. In their desired environment, play areas were concrete rather than the grass assumed by adults to be the most appropriate surfacing. When questioned, they were able to explain that concrete was preferable because grass hid the broken glass, dog excrement and discarded needles used by drug addicts. In this example, the power of the pictorial representation was more effective than words in confronting adults with the legitimacy and relevance of the children's perspectives. Through visual images, these very young children demonstrated that they were better able than adults to identify what was needed for their own protection. When a children's discovery centre was being set up in London, a forum of children aged 2–13 years was established to contribute to its design and development. Through child-friendly, creative workshops with sculptors, poets, artists and story-tellers, their input has provided ideas for the logo, exhibits, garden design, accessibility, opening times, age limits, crèche facilities and costs, and in so doing has ensured the attraction of the centre for other children⁸. Another study involved 3–4-year olds in data collection to explore what they felt about the early childhood centre they attended⁹.

Degrees of participation

Children can participate in matters that affect them at different levels. The deeper the level of participation, the more they are able to influence what happens to them, and the greater the opportunities for personal development. The following categories provide a broad overview of three different degrees of participation. All are valid and necessitate a commitment to listening to children and taking them seriously but allow for differing degrees of actual engagement. However, it is important to recognise that the boundaries between them are rarely clear cut, and many initiatives can span more than one level.

Consultative processes

Consultation takes place when adults recognise that children have views and experiences that can make a valuable contribution to matters that affect them. A preparedness to consult reflects an acknowledgement that adults do not have all the necessary expertise through which to provide adequately for children. They therefore set up mechanisms to elicit children's perspectives and use them to influence and inform legislation, policy and practice relevant to children's lives. Processes of consultation are generally characterised by being:

- adult initiated
- adult led and managed
- lacking any possibility for children to control outcomes.

Although limited in scope for real engagement, they do, nevertheless, play a valuable role in incorporating children's views into otherwise adult-dominated agendas.

Participatory processes

Participatory processes provide opportunities for children to be actively involved in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects, programmes, research or activities. Such processes can be characterised as:

- adult initiated
- involving partnership with children

- empowering children to influence or challenge both process and outcomes
- allowing for increasing levels of self-directed action by children over a period of time.

This degree of participation by children, whilst initiated by adults, does create opportunities for children to share power with adults and to play a significant role in shaping activities in which they are engaged. Participatory processes can be developed in early years and school settings, projects and families. They can also be applied to decisions or activities affecting individual children such as medical treatment. And consultative processes can be made participatory by, for example:

- enabling children to identify what are the relevant questions
- giving children the opportunity to help develop the methodology for the research
- allowing children to take on the role of researchers
- involving children in discussions about the findings, their interpretation, and their implications for future developments.

Self-initiated processes

Self-initiated processes are those where children themselves are empowered to take action, and are not merely responding to an adult-defined agenda. They can be characterised by:

- the issues of concern being identified by children themselves
 - adults serving as facilitators rather than leaders
 - children controlling the process.
- In these processes, adults respect children's capacities to define their own concerns and priorities as well as the strategies for responding to them. It involves a commitment to creating real partnerships with children, with adults fulfilling key roles, for example, as advisers, supporters, administrators, fund-raisers and counsellors.

The researcher explored methodologies, such as observation and interview, that played to young children's strengths rather than their weaknesses and cast herself on the role of 'inexpert' so that she could listen to and learn from the children. She gave the children disposable cameras to take photos of things that were important to them and invited them to take her on a tour of the site so that they could describe it to her from their perspective. In all these examples, young children demonstrate their capacity to make significant contributions to decisions and actions that affect them.

Children are entitled to express views on all matters that concerns them

The right to be heard extends to all actions and decisions which affect children's lives – in the family, school, health care, local communities, and at national political level. It applies both to issues which affect individual children, such as parental contact following divorce, and children as a constituency, such as the quality of child care or play facilities.

At a micro level, such participation is exemplified by nursery staff who decided that the children, aged four, could decide for themselves when they wanted fruit and water rather than having to wait for the adults to offer it. Initially, the children asked permission but gradually adjusted to the idea that they could help themselves. Some spilt water but helped to mop up and, with experience, learned to pour it more carefully. Through exercising choices for themselves, the children became more responsible and the staff were freed to do other things¹⁰. At a wider social level, in one community in Uganda, it was young children who identified the need for improved water and sanitation for the village. The 600 children at the primary school became concerned about animals using the village pond that was the main water supply. They spoke with the village leader who called a meeting where the children presented poems and dramas about the value of clean water. As a result, children and adults worked together to clean the pond and build a fence to keep the animals out¹¹. In an Indian village, the World Bank and local authorities funded a new primary school, but a year after its completion, the children were still not attending. When asked why, they explained that there was an 'invisible'

boundary around the village which marked the limit of safe travel on foot from their homes and that the school was outside this boundary. Had the planners involved the children in the development of the new school, they would have been able to advise them and the school could have been more appropriately sited¹².

It is important to recognise that many areas of public policy and legislation impact on young children's lives – transport, housing, macro-economics, environment, as well as family law, education, childcare and public health. They therefore have a right to have their views considered in all these matters. This places obligations not only on those individuals working directly with children but also on politicians and policy makers with the power and resources to act on children's concerns in the wider public sphere.

Experience and context influences competence to participate

Competence does not develop uniformly according to rigid developmental stages. There are, of course, important differences in capacities which are linked with age. Studies of anthropological literature indicate clear similarities between societies with regard to understanding the human life cycle and the place of children within it¹³. However, the widely differing patterns of social and economic participation by children in different cultural environments confirm that children's capacities owe less to biological or psychological determinants than to expectations of their community, social and cultural contexts, the decisions involved, the life experience of the child, levels of adult support and goals associated with childhood¹⁴.

This complexity was explored by a group of children in India who collaborated in a project to assess the ages at which children are capable of participating in different forms of work and what factors informed that capacity¹⁵. They argued that grazing cattle, for example, can be done safely by young children in areas where it can be undertaken within a child's own neighbourhood for a few hours at a time, but cannot be undertaken if it involves travelling long distances from home. They also observed that watering plants around the house and garden can be done by children as young as 3 years if water

is already available. However, only children over 9 years can water plants if it involves fetching the water from further distances. Alderson's work with 120 8–15-year olds on capacity to consent to surgery also highlights the importance of context on children's competence to participate in complex and profound levels of decision-making. It demonstrates that children who have experienced intensive levels of medical treatment can acquire the ability to understand their condition and any proposed treatments, and also to make wise decisions, often involving life or death implications, based on the information available to them¹⁶. Children's levels of understanding developed according to their individual experience coupled with the levels of expectation and support available to them.

Children's participation requires information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect and power sharing.

Children who experience discrimination and social exclusion will often have lower self-esteem, poor self-confidence, and less opportunity for participation and the consequent development of their skills and strengths. They are trapped in a downward spiral in which they internalise the negative attitudes held within their community to define their own limits and capabilities. For example, in Romania there has for many years been a widespread practice of placing Roma children in special schools for children with learning disabilities. Cultural discrimination combined with the children's inability to speak fluent Romanian led to negative assumptions about their capacities and potential. Different gender and class assumptions in many cultures influence the behaviour and levels of responsibility exercised by children. In Bangladesh, girls from the ages of 4–5 years wait without complaining when they are hungry, whereas boys cry until food appears. Parents explain this as the inability of the boys to understand¹⁷. And poor girls employed as maidservants from the ages of 9–10 years will be expected to demonstrate a higher level of capacity than that displayed by their employers'



Some projects highlight the capacity of children to share important perspectives through visual rather than verbal communication

daughters. In other words, the criteria applying to the development and capacities of children are defined by gender, class and occupation rather than age.

Children from marginalized groups need support and encouragement to recognise that their views and perspectives are valued. The importance of creating such opportunities is vividly illustrated in the experience of a young girl in India. "Before I joined Bhima Sangha, a working children's union, I hardly spoke to others. I used to feel that it was wrong to talk to others, especially boys. Now I have learned to socialise easily and can speak up without hesitating. I have the ability and the confidence to determine what is right and wrong. For example, when my family decided to take me out of school at the age of 11, I didn't react at all to their decision. I used to think that whatever adults do is always right. But recently when my family and my community tried to make me marry against my will, I tried to convince

them that this marriage was wrong. When discussions with my family failed, I protested against my proposed marriage with the help of the Bhima Sangha. Our protest was successful". The girl went on to become president of the children's village council and led a protest movement against child marriage in her village in Karnataka in India¹⁸.

The goals for development in different societies also influence the way in which parents will structure their children's environment, and the outcomes that children then achieve. For example, research with mothers in the USA and Japan reveals significant differences in the skills and behaviour they expect their children to have acquired by the age of 5. In Japan, the expectations focused on emotional control, respect for the status and authority of parents and certain areas of self-sufficiency. The US mothers expected earlier achievement of the social skills of empathy, negotiation, initiative,

assertiveness and persuasiveness¹⁹. In another study comparing perspectives from parents and teachers in Nigeria and the USA on the most important skills for a 4-year old to learn, the Americans emphasised language and social skills whereas much greater priority was attached to pre-academic skills by the Nigerians²⁰. Hoffman found that whereas parents in the US emphasised goals of becoming a good person, being self-reliant and independent, parents in Turkey, Indonesia and the Philippines placed greater stress on deference to elders and obedience²¹.

This growing body of research highlights the limitations of using age as a proxy for assumptions of competence and the importance of avoiding pre-conceptions about what children can and cannot do at any given age²².

The process of participation enhances children's capacities

There is a growing body of evidence indicating that where children are given opportunities to participate, they acquire greater levels of competence, which in turn enhances the quality of participation²³. Children are not merely passive recipients of environmental stimulation, but actively engage with their surroundings in purposeful ways, even from babyhood²⁴. Rather than development taking place in orderly, predictable stages, children come to know and understand the world through their own activities in communication with others²⁵. And the experience of involvement in shared activities with both adults and peers, where there is a presumption of ability to complete a task successfully, encourages children's development. Within any given culture, children's capacities to participate effectively are directly influenced by the level of adult support provided, the respect with which they are treated, the trust and confidence invested in them and the opportunity to take increasing levels of responsibility. Children will acquire competence in direct relation to the scope available to them to exercise agency over their own lives. The most effective preparation for a sense of self-efficacy is to achieve a goal for oneself and not merely to observe someone else achieving that goal. Vygotsky, one of the most influential thinkers in this field, argued that there is a gap between what children can achieve with and without assistance²⁶. This is defined as the 'zone of proximal

development' and it is in this zone that cognitive development takes place. Through a process known as scaffolding, where a person, adult or child, adjusts his or her help in response to the level of the child's performance, children can perform tasks they are incapable of completing on their own.

Evidence of the effectiveness of participation in building children's capacities can be found in the Escuela Nueva programme in Colombia, which has developed structures enabling children to function as a democratic community²⁷. One such school has made children's participation in managing the environment of the school and local community integral to the basic concept of the school as a community-based centre for democratic learning. They have developed a forest conservation project in which the children are seeking to save the mountain slope by planting native species of trees. Part of the challenge is for the children to educate local villagers about the problem of using wood for firewood and for sale. The children collect seeds from existing trees to establish a nursery which will ultimately result in replanting all the slopes with native trees. The strength of the programme lies in the wide range of competencies children acquire, backed up by the opportunity to learn through practice. A key element of the educational process is that children learn by being respected enough to be allowed to take responsibility for the project, with the support of committed adults. And when children's own rights are respected, they learn to respect the rights of others.

However, despite widespread acceptance within the child development field that children learn most effectively through participation, it is far from universally accepted or applied in practice. The educational experience in the Escuela Nueva is in sharp contrast with the enforced dependency associated with much schooling where children are denied opportunities to acquire competencies associated with taking responsibility, engaging with the adult world and experiencing a sense of social worth. Many early-years and education systems remain rooted in traditions of seeing learning as a transfer of knowledge and expertise from teachers with children as passive recipients. Respect for children's right to participation requires a different approach. Facilitating and supporting children to express the meanings that they are searching for,

encouraging them to ask questions, giving them undivided attention and valuing their perspectives helps children make sense of their experiences while helping the listener to gain an understanding of children's views²⁸. This kind of interaction empowers children, giving rise to socially inclusive relationships which, in turn, are the foundation from which to promote listening as basis of work with and care for young children²⁹.

Children need respectful, safe spaces in which to participate

Children need the space in which to express their views. This requires the provision of time, adults willing to listen, and environments in which they feel safe and comfortable. They also need age-appropriate information with which to form those views. For example, many young children are frightened of injections. Giving children information about why the injection is necessary can help the children overcome anxiety and participate in giving consent, along with giving them the space to articulate their fears, perhaps to hold and examine the syringe, draw a picture of what would make them feel braver, and have the opportunity to have an important adult present when the injection takes place. Conversely, imposing the injection without consideration of children's perspectives is likely to exacerbate the terror³⁰.

The failure to provide children with respectful environments in which to express their views, and the damaging consequences of that failure, are starkly illustrated in the experience of many young children who are deemed to be incompetent witnesses in child abuse cases. Many prosecutors fail to create a framework through which children are able to express themselves fully, with the result that cases get dropped because children are assumed to be incapable of understanding the importance of telling the truth. The normal procedure is to ask children if they know what would happen to them if they lied in court. As many children are unwilling to identify themselves as liars, even hypothetically, they insist instead that they are not going to lie. Lyon and Sawitz undertook research into the competence to act as witnesses of 192 4–7-year olds who had allegedly been mistreated. They found that of those children who clearly exhibited an understanding of the difference between the truth and a lie,

69 percent failed to explain it adequately using conventional approaches adopted by the courts. The researchers developed an alternative test which helped children demonstrate their competence to understand the concept of truth. Based on simple picture identification tasks, it asks children to identify when story characters are telling the truth and the consequences of the characters' actions³¹. In other words, when an appropriate environment was created, the children were able to demonstrate their actual capacities to participate in court hearings.

Adults can learn from listening to children

Young children have insights, perspectives, ideas, and experiences which are unique to them. Indeed, they have a great deal to teach adults about their lives. For example, it is only in recent years, as children have begun to exercise their right to be heard, that the extent, nature and impact of violence on children's lives has begun to be understood. The violence children experience at home and in school has not, historically, been taken seriously by the adult community charged with responsibility for the protection of children. Yet study after study, including with young children, has revealed that it is one of children's greatest concerns. One such study with 6–7-year olds on their experiences of physical punishment reveals a very different reality to that offered by adults³². In defending the continued right of parents to hit their children, it is widely argued that parents are able to exercise appropriate restraint and judgement in the use of such punishments. However, children observe that parents hit their children when they have lost their temper and their behaviour is out of control. Their graphic accounts of the humiliation, pain and rejection they experience when their parents hit them contrast starkly with the widely promulgated view from parents that such punishment is delivered with love, does not cause real hurt and is only applied *in extremis*. Children in primary schools in Bangladesh cite the absence of physical punishment as one of the most important factors enabling them to learn and encouraging them to stay in school³³. And children in Nepal, when provided with opportunities to take action on issues of most importance to them, prioritised parental violence and drunkenness³⁴. It is clear from these and other studies that children themselves have a significant contribution to make towards an understanding of their lives.

Listening is not enough – children have the right to have their views taken seriously

There is little point in listening to children if no account is subsequently taken of their views. And the fact that young children express themselves differently from adults does not justify dismissing them. Article 12 insists that children's views are given weight and inform decisions that are made about them. Obviously, this does not mean that whatever children say must be complied with. However, it does mean that proper consideration must be given to children's views when decisions are being made. Too often, token efforts are made to listen to children, but little effort is subsequently made to take on board the views they express. Even where it is not possible to act on children's concerns, they are entitled to an explanation of what consideration was given to them and why they cannot be implemented.

This problem is exemplified in a consultation exercise, commissioned by a local authority and undertaken by an NGO in the UK, involving over 400 children under 8 years to explore their experiences of early years' provision³⁵. The children proposed numerous ideas for improving services including being listened to, more play equipment and facilities, more safe places to meet friends, less vandalism and pollution, less racism and bullying, better toilet facilities in public settings such as nurseries and primary schools, less smoking and less dog mess. However, none of these concerns were given serious consideration by the local authority. Of course, the children were unable to question this neglect of their findings: their powerlessness and invisibility makes them very easy to dismiss or ignore.

Participation serves to protect children

Children who are encouraged to express their views are less vulnerable to abuse and better able to contribute towards their own protection. Access to information necessary for their protection, opportunities to participate in key decision-making processes, and encouragement in speaking out can empower children to challenge abusive behaviour. Conversely, an insistence on passive obedience renders children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Creating a safe environment for children can best be achieved by working with rather than merely for them. For example, an initiative in

Uganda involving 200 children was introduced to address child abuse in the community. The children were involved in identifying needs and designing interventions and strategies for implementation. The children, all aged 10–14 years, created their own structure for implementing the project, which involved a project steering committee of 18 children for overall planning, a management committee for handling the implementation of project activities, a child protection committee for investigating, hearing and handling cases of abuse and neglect and an advocacy committee responsible for community sensitisation of child rights and child abuse. Members of these committees were all elected by other children in the community³⁶.

Allowing children to contribute to their own protection provides them with opportunities to explore and understand the nature of the risks they face, and take increasing levels of responsibility for avoiding harm. The experience of Highfield junior school in the UK demonstrates how effectively young children can collaborate in protecting each other³⁷. The children, aged 7–11 years, run a school council that carries real responsibility, including the development of all school policy and recruitment of staff. Many are trained as mediators to help children resolve disputes in the playground and others can volunteer to become 'guardian angels' and befriend children being bullied, without friends or in need of support. What emerges from this experience is that, with adult support, young children can develop capacities to accept responsibility for protecting other children, provide care and engage in conflict resolution. This experience implies a need to question traditional assumptions of adults as providers and children as recipients of protection, and acknowledge and nurture the contribution children can play as a resource for other children.

Conclusion

So, does participation matter? Is engagement in decision-making really as important as direction and guidance? The answer has to be yes. Not only is it a fundamental human right for children to be listened to and taken seriously, but unless adults listen, children's lives are diminished. Participation enhances children's self-esteem and confidence, promotes their overall capacities, produces better outcomes, strengthens understanding of

and commitment to democratic processes and protects children more effectively³⁸. It provides the opportunity for developing a sense of autonomy, independence, heightened social competence and resilience³⁹. Young children have a contribution to make at all levels – from the family to the wider political arena. As one 6-year-old boy from Bangladesh eloquently expressed it *"I don't know about my rights, but you don't know about my life"*⁴⁰. A partnership is needed. Adults must help children learn about their rights, and children can contribute towards their realisation through a process in which their perspectives are included, respected and valued.

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Photo: Courtesy CECODAP

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What does 'child development' tell us about early childhood programming and the participation of children?

Dr Helen Penn

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The background to child development
Child development is a highly academic subject. Most of the work in the field is empirical and theoretical. It is conducted mainly by psychologists through experiments which investigate very specific aspects of children's social and cognitive functioning. For example, the most recent edition of the prestigious journal *Child Development* contains articles with titles like "Infant vocal-motor co-ordination: precursor to the gesture speech system" and "The development of symbol-infused joint engagement." There are no longer any over-arching theories of child development – as Piaget, 70 years ago, seemed to promise. Piaget assumed that child development was in one sense a journey towards the acquisition of logic. Rational thought could only be achieved in adolescence or adulthood. Children had to pass through many stages – aided by adults – before being able to think logically. This assumption has been fairly conclusively rejected in the psychological literature. Children, even young children, are capable of reasoning and thinking

This Commentary section is intended to contribute to the international debate on early childhood issues by presenting the views and observations of a noted practitioner or academic in the field. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the Foundation. Join with us in stimulating dialogue on the topic under review by sending your thoughts on the article that follows or, indeed, any other section of this issue of *Early Childhood Matters*. All correspondence should be sent to: ecm.epi@bvleerf.nl

logically within the limits of their knowledge and experience, and there are many experiments that demonstrate children's ability to reason.

Instead of grand theories, there are many technical discussions about tiny and often peripheral aspects of children's behaviour. These do not add up to a coherent whole, and are certainly not intended as guidance to practitioners working with children.

The author of one best-selling contemporary textbook on child development, leading psychologist Michael Cole, says that it is best to think of child development as a series of useful – but probably, in the end, unanswerable – questions about childhood. Is nature more important than nurture? Does genetic inheritance matter more than good environments? Are the early years the most important, or can children – and adults – develop and change at any age if the circumstances are right? Does the development take place in identifiable stages, each stage building on the previous one, or is development a much more irregular and uneven process? Over the years, psychologists have come up with different slants to these questions and have given different answers to all of them.

Cole sums up by saying "the practice of developmental psychology cannot rely heavily on precise scientific formulas to explain and produce dependable solutions to problems the way the formulas of physics guide engineers". In his view there are no definitive answers. Child development offers some signposts to practice, which may be useful in some circumstances, but useless in others;

much depends on how practitioners interpret these imponderable questions and technical findings. The famous US psychologist William Kessen suggested there were fads and fancies in the way early childhood is investigated; child development offers “a history of rediscovery... with some modest advances towards truth”.

Does early intervention work?

However, driven by economic and policy concerns in the USA, there is a sub-branch of child development concerning ‘early interventions’, which is much more positivistic and less prone to self-doubt. ‘Early Interventions’ is the name given to attempts to shape or change children’s behaviour through teaching parenting skills, offering education programmes in centre-based care, home visiting and so on. Some psychologists believe that these early interventions can be systematically measured and tell us what works best. The most famous intervention study of all, cited over and over again in the World Bank and other literature, is the Perry High Scope project. A group of 123 children were randomly assigned to an intervention group who took part in the High Scope part-time early education programme, and a control group who did not. The intervention group appeared to perform better in the long run, and seemed less likely as young adults to get into trouble. (The High Scope project estimated that for every dollar spent on early childhood, 8 dollars would be saved: a figure that has been repeated again and again in the ECEC literature). Other long-term interventions, for example the Abecedarian project in North Carolina, offered a more intensive intervention, which offered childcare and education over a longer period, but although it has some positive effects, it did not produce the same results for crime-reduction and did not make the same kinds of long-term savings.

These early intervention studies are used by US economists and policy makers as the main source of evidence for investing in early childhood education and care. Perhaps such studies can prove that early intervention makes a difference in later life? There have been a number of recent, weighty, cost-benefit reviews in the USA with titles like “Diverting children from a life of crime”. Is it cheaper in the long term to invest in early childhood interventions to stop poor (usually black) children from becoming criminals? As the economist Janet Currie notes

in a review paper on early intervention for the US National Science Foundation, “many would argue that the ultimate goal of early intervention is to produce ‘better’ adults, where ‘better’ is measured in terms of things like schooling attainment, earnings, welfare use, and crime rates.”

Early interventions are intended to turn children into ‘better’ people who will contribute to society rather than being a drain on it. Not everyone agrees with this perspective of course. In a recent article, the North American psychologist Jeanne Brooks-Gunn has written a scathing report about early intervention programmes entitled “Do you believe in magic?: What we can expect from early childhood intervention programs”. She argues that although children might benefit from ECEC, being brought up in an impoverished environment is damaging to children at any age. The biggest problem for children and their families is not so much an individual one (i.e. learning useful skills) but a structural one: living in a poor community in an unequal society.

The limitations of research in child development

Apart from the thorny, but important, question of early intervention, there are broader criticisms of child development. Some critics suggest that much research in child development is seriously flawed in its scope and sampling. For example another recent article in *Child Development* entitled “Studying the effects of early child care experiences on the development of children of color in the United States: Towards a more inclusive research agenda” suggested that research in child development has downplayed the importance of context and largely ignored or misunderstood the position of poor blacks and Hispanics in the USA.

Research in child development focuses almost exclusively on North American and European children. It has been accused of misrepresenting the position of people of colour in the USA. But it could also be accused of failing to investigate the position of children in the South (the developing countries). Certainly, topics like HIV/AIDS, war and migration, very common experiences for many of the world’s children, barely figure in psychological discussions on child development – for example in discussions about attachment. This is partly because many psychologists assume that, like the development

of the body, the development of cognitive, social and emotional attributes in children is universal. Although children’s life circumstances may differ considerably, the processes of development are said to apply to all children. Piaget for example thought he was uncovering universal age-related stages, which every normal child would pass through. If it follows that child development patterns are universal, it does not matter too much where research is carried out.

Some early interventions are intended to turn children into ‘better’ people who will contribute to society rather than being a drain on it.

But not all psychologists would agree with this assumption that normative behaviour patterns can be established. Robert Serpell, a psychologist who has worked for a long time in Africa, has pointed out that the major life experiences of so many children have been excluded from psychological investigation. US children constitute less than 5% of the world’s children; children in the developed world make up roughly a further 18%. If we consider that the environment in which children grow up is a critical one, then we have to be very careful about the generalizing from the behaviour of such a small percentage of children who live in the USA. We need to know much more about other kinds of environments, both highly adverse environments and much more egalitarian ones.

Culture counts

Anthropologists are still more critical of the universalist assumptions of child development. Robert LeVine, the highly respected Harvard anthropologist, and the group of colleagues working with him, systematically compared caregiving in East Africa and in the USA. He describes the intensely collective upbringing of the East African children where there is little or no explicit caregiver focus on the development of word games or language (although there may well be bilingualism or multi-lingualism), and that of a typical North American child.

Compared with Africans, American infants experience a particularly sharp distinction between situations in which they are alone and those in which they are with others. African infants are never alone and are often present as non-participants in situations dominated by adult interaction, while the American infant is often kept in solitary confinement when he is not the centre of adult attention. This creates (for the American) a bifurcation between the extremes of isolation and interpersonal excitement that is unknown in Africa and may underlie some of the striking differences in interactive style between peoples of the two continents.

‘From infancy onwards, the (American) child is encouraged to characterize himself in terms of his favourite toys and foods and those he dislikes; his tastes, aversions and consumer preferences are viewed not only as legitimate but essential aspects of his growing individuality – and a prized quality of an independent person’.

(LeVine, 2003: 95).

Other anthropologists, for example Alma Gottlieb at the University of Illinois, have also investigated in detail the upbringing of non-American children. Gottlieb’s study of the caregiver styles and infant responses of a small community in Côte d’Ivoire is a brilliant demonstration of how deeply culture matters – and how culture in turn is shaped by social and economic factors.

Child development unfortunately does not offer neat interpretations of childhood. It is a fragmented collection of ideas and inspired guesses; a patchwork of experiments and investigations. As a discipline it is unique in focusing on young children, and, as Michael Cole suggests, may help us try to frame some key questions about early childhood; but it also encompasses many contradictory viewpoints. For example the idea of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, the manual issued by NAEYC (The National Association for the Education of Young Children), has heavily influenced early childhood education programming worldwide. It draws strongly on the assumption of universalism. Its basic underlying assumption is that we know enough about young children to be able to issue a prescriptive guide to practice which can be used, with minor adaptations,

anywhere in the world. Others would argue that such a guide is heavily influenced by a particular societal viewpoint, that of the USA, and cannot be universally applied.

Children's participation

Where does participation of children figure in all this? The debate about the rights of the child is one which has only marginally influenced child development, most noticeably in the field of ethics. Psychologists are much more careful about experimenting with children, and much stronger guidelines are in place from the various associations of psychologists about respecting child rights.

To a greater or lesser extent, in child development there is an emphasis on what can be done with or to children to help them acquire certain kinds of cognitive and social skills, since these skills will help them cope better with the adverse circumstances of their life. In some of the early intervention studies, in particular, there is an instrumental view of children, as creatures to be shaped so that they do not cause trouble later on. A dose (the actual word used in one report) of early childhood programming can act as a vaccination against poverty and crime. Such an approach (as well ignoring the relationship between poverty, inequality and crime) is oblivious to any exploration or discussion of what young children themselves might enjoy doing; what might give their lives pleasure and purpose in the here and now. In these accounts children are disregarded as people and seen as less than fully formed.

Another, related, underlying assumption of most psychological research in child development is that the norm for children is to grow up in a benign environment under adult supervision, and protected against harm. Children are seen as essentially vulnerable and in need of adult protection. Yet a benign environment does not exist for many millions of young children. More research about children's coping strategies, or young children's ability to undertake informed decisions on major life crises, is surely necessary in the light of HIV/AIDS.

More challenging illustrations of young children's autonomy and competence have hardly been studied

at all in the field of child development. Gottlieb in her Côte d'Ivoire study notes how independent some very young children are – 4, 3 and 2-year olds confidently playing out of sight of adults, or going shopping, or helping with household chores – using adult cooking utensils. Other anthropologists have also noted how children as young as 2 can run errands, and fetch and carry. Care for siblings is normal. (My own 6-year-old African grandson cares willingly and capably for his 3-month-old baby sister – carries her, comforts her and entertains her). Encouraging this degree of autonomy and self-reliance in children would be regarded as wilfully risky or exploitative in many developed societies.

More research about children's coping strategies, or young children's ability to undertake informed decisions on major life crises, is surely necessary in the light of HIV/AIDS.

Self-esteem is regarded as an important issue in some of the work on children's learning. Clearly, motivation and belief in one's efficacy as a learner plays an important part in learning. We learn because we want to learn and we know we can. The West-African novelist Camara Laye described how he felt beginning school.

"We were remarkably attentive, and we found it no strain to be so. Young though we were, we all regarded our school work as something deadly serious. Everything we learned was strange and unexpected; it was as if we were learning about life on another planet; and we never grew tired of listening... An interruption was out of the question; it simply did not occur to us."

But how do children gain self-esteem and a belief in themselves and their own efficacy? As Camara Laye implies this is also partly a cultural question. LeVine argues that in contributing to household and communal tasks in the African societies he observed, young children are needed and wanted. They belong, without requiring praise or reward.



Clearly, motivation and belief in one's efficacy as a learner plays an important part in learning

"The constant presence of young children in family life whilst rarely being the focus of attention, and their participation in the productive and other activities of the household from an early age appear to offer emotional security without the verbal expressiveness by the mother and others... Making sense of this will require changes in our notions of emotional and communicative development".

In societies in the developed world where children are age segregated and generally lead separate lives from adults, promoting a sense of belonging and participation needs careful planning. Conversely 'participation' and 'consultation' may seem strange concepts in communities where children are seen less as separate individuals and more as necessary participants in communal tasks. Respect for elders is a cornerstone of some communities. Children may be treated as minors who do not achieve adulthood and the right to speak and challenge their elders until they are married, with children of their own,

or perhaps not even then. ("You are my son and you will always obey me" I heard one of my African relatives say!) Physical chastisement of children is common in some communities; and how to address it as an outsider is highly problematic. Similarly, gender inequalities may be very oppressive. But paradoxically, children's level of participation in such patriarchal communities may still be greater in some ways than in a conventional middle-class white Euro-American community. As Boyden has pointed out, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, whilst a useful benchmark, presumes a level of individualism which does not fully take account of the wide cultural variation in the way in which children join in and are seen as part of their immediate community.

New directions

The early childhood lobby draws heavily on universalistic assumptions such as the belief that all children develop in similar ways, and there

are universally recognized good practices which support such development. It has also relied heavily on instrumental justifications for early childhood programmes and repeats the argument that children who participate in early childhood programmes will do better in school, be more economically active adults and be less inclined to take to a life of crime. Both the universalistic approach and the instrumental approach rely in turn on highly specific research evidence from North America (and to a lesser extent Europe). Some commentators argue that it is relevant to take such evidence into account, because all societies will follow the same path as the USA in the end:

...[F]actors commonplace in industrialized countries are inherited by developing countries as they advance. Thus the developmental outcomes of poor children in the United States may be predictive of outcomes of children in developing nations.
(Scott et al 1999: *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*)

Other commentators are much more critical and argue that child development, if it is worth its salt, must engage more with the everyday contexts of the majority of the world's children. At the very least the early childhood lobby needs to engage with the conceptual boundaries of child development and the limitations of the evidence on which it draws. The new emphasis on child participation makes it more urgent that they do so. Child development is intrinsically concerned with young children. Psychologists attempt to define and explain what children can do in what kind of circumstances, and how those working with or caring for them can support or foster various kinds of skills and attributes. These are important aims. But as Gerison Lansdown has also pointed out, children do not live in a world apart, they are also thinking, feeling people, living their lives with us adults. They live and experience life with all its victories and vicissitudes in the present, as we all do – perhaps more intensely. As well as being the object of psychologist's scrutiny, they are movers and shakers in their own right. Gerison has argued that the Convention on the Rights of the Child is a legally binding obligation that requires us to take children's views very seriously indeed. This is a timely lesson for child development, which has so far erred in the other direction.

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The school under the mango tree

Mighty children grow from little seeds

An interview by Rosangela Guerra with Tião Rocha, President at Centro Popular de Cultura e Desenvolvimento

The Popular Centre for Culture and Development (CPCD) is a non-profit-making NGO based in Minas Gerais, south east Brazil. Founded in 1984, it has won national and international acclaim for its creative work in combining popular education with community development. This interview explores the Sementinha ('little seed') Project, which creates schools distinguished by their lack of a physical base and their determination to treat young children as equal partners in their own education.

Sementinha was the first project created by the CPCD. Aimed at 4–6-year olds, it focuses on such objectives as developing mutual respect and cooperation, self-esteem and identity, citizenship and awareness of hygiene and health. It was held up as an 'exemplar of an educational model for third world countries' by the Organização Mundial de Educação Pré-Escolar (World Organisation for Pre-School Education) in 1987 and has since spread to 13 locations in Brazil and been replicated in Mozambique.

Can you tell us why the Sementinha Project is also known as the 'school under the mango tree'?

We started this project because many young children were not attending school in the city of Curvelo in Minas Gerais. It was clear that something had to be done, but it would be a problem to put up new school buildings. So we posed the question: 'Is it possible to provide an education without making buildings?' Because there were a lot of mango trees in the city, we asked: Is it possible to make a school under a mango tree?

And that was how the Sementinha, or school under the mango tree, was created. The name is a metaphor for a school that does not necessarily need a building to be able to offer quality education for early childhood. The Sementinha is an itinerant school. Teachers and children meet somewhere in the community that is known to them all – it could be a church hall, a room belonging to some district association, or somebody's house.

The children move around various community spaces, doing activities that entertain them,

challenge them and form them as citizens. The school is the neighbourhood, the streets, the squares, the houses. The education is inspired by the community's culture, the knowledge and practices and aspirations of the local people. The teachers are all those who sit in the circle: the schoolteacher, the children, their parents and grandparents. We believe that education must be an equal relationship that involves learning on all sides.

You first developed the Sementinha Project 20 years ago. Who was involved and how did you come up with the idea?

We were a group of around 26 community members, teachers and volunteers who were interested in discussing these issues. We got talking and thinking about what such a school would be like, what its concept and design would be. In the end we observed that we spent more time talking about the kind of school that we didn't want than the kind we did. So we turned all of this into 13 'non-objectives'. In other words the project started off back-to-front, with the things that we didn't want to reproduce.

So what were the 'non-objectives' established for the Sementinha?

School should not be a place of authoritarianism and punishment, governed by oppression and swamped in inequality. It should not be a place where children go but don't want to linger, where they study but don't learn with pleasure. Teachers and children should not simply be well-behaved individuals who perform tasks and parrot ideas. There mustn't be an unequal relationship between children and adults. We should not present our knowledge as the only true knowledge.

We must not see children as lacking a will and life of their own, as blank pages on which to write our story, or as adults who have not yet grown up. Education must not cut short children's dreams, creativity or cultural identity. It must not stunt their critical, curious and observant spirit.

We, as teachers, should not teach that the world belongs to those who are stronger, smarter or richer. We should not foster individualism, competition, neglect and alienation.

These are doubtless all great ideas, but how is it possible to put them into practice?

We established 13 classes with children of 4, 5 and 6 years old, and in each class there were two teachers so they could think about and construct their work together. Every day all the teachers would meet in a big circle to discuss our plans, and after our work with the children we would meet again in the circle to assess the activities we developed. These are the principles of the educationalist Paulo Freire: action, reflection and action. We were constantly discussing our experiences and also creating a space where everyone could look each other in the eyes and express themselves freely.

The circle helped us to constantly improve our teaching practice. In the little things, the trifles of everyday school routine, we kept on questioning, tweaking and telling ourselves that if we couldn't justify something, we shouldn't do it.

For example, the 'crocodile' – when we need to go out with our pupils, teachers almost automatically put the little ones at the front and the bigger ones at the back. We asked ourselves: 'Does walking in line

teach anything?' Our discussions convinced us that a line organises but doesn't educate. Because our role is to educate, we decided we needed to teach the children to walk independently, respecting the traffic. In this way we managed to take possession of the street, turning it into school space.

What kind of methodology do you need to achieve these non-objectives?

It's based on two ideas: the circle and play. All group questions are resolved in the circle, which is a horizontal space where we can talk, listen, argue, reflect and reach consensus. The circle is not always led by adults; when it's time for playing a game with dolls, for example, a little girl is in charge of coordination. If there's a falling out within the group, everyone can discuss it. The circle has to develop alternatives for listening and trying new things. It has to be tolerant, generous, a constant exercise in inclusion.

Our search for a happy, pleasant and good-humoured school led us to start developing toys. From the start of the project, we decided that we would only buy toys when we couldn't make them ourselves; and over the 20 years that the CPD has been in existence, we have never bought toys. The children bring in anything of interest they find in the streets – scraps of cloth, bottles, seeds, stones, little branches, leaves and clay – and turn it all into toys. They're not only having fun but developing manual dexterity and an aesthetic sense, and also being challenged to sort out any problems and find alternative ways of doing things with the resources at their disposal, such as making paints from earth pigments and leaves.

All of the toys are tested by the children themselves. They refine the rules of play and re-build toys with other materials until they achieve the quality level required by the game. The results can be surprising. The children from the Sementinha in the city of Curvelo make kites of different sizes and shapes and from unexpected materials such as banana leaves. They have become so adept at this that they now form part of the judging panel for the kite competition which takes place in the city every year.

From the very start of the project, the children have made an effective contribution. To what extent has their age (4 to 6 years) affected their participation?



Children and teachers meet somewhere in the community that is known to them all

Yes, we thought that children's participation was important right from the start. We believe that everyone should contribute, regardless of age or size. We used to start the day's activity with the children sitting in a circle and asking them "What shall we study today?" In the first few days the children hardly expressed themselves at all, but the teachers encouraged them and they opened up more and more, putting forward their opinions and suggestions for activities.

In the beginning, we held a vote to choose what we would do that day. But over time we noted that that was an excluding process – those whose ideas were not chosen ended up participating less and less and withdrawing from the group. We discovered that we had to seek consensus rather than hold a vote. The more they felt that they were being heard and heeded, the better the children got with their suggestions.

For example, one day the children suggested visiting a colleague who hadn't come to the group meeting because he was sick. From that point, all of the children suggested visiting their own houses, so they could introduce their parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters. This also helped involve the families in the educational process.

Another day, the children expressed curiosity about how rice is planted, harvested and processed up to the point where it arrives on their plates. They had the idea themselves of inviting someone who lived in the neighbourhood and who had a rice processing factory to come and join the circle. So he came along and answered the children's questions, and afterwards they all made drawings and little figures out of rice husks that were sent to the man as a thank you. He was charmed by the presents and reciprocated by sending the children a sack of rice, which the group all enjoyed eating.

The children's suggestions led to other people being invited to take part in the circles – for example, teaching how to make teas from regional plants, or telling stories about the old local customs. Little by little, the Sementinha won over the community. One of the responsibilities of the teachers is to make those links, getting community members increasingly involved in educating the community's children.

Small children like to ask questions, and the teacher can use this curiosity to stimulate group involvement – the children feel they own the project when the teacher listens to what they ask and propose. But some children find it difficult to express themselves verbally, so the teacher also has to motivate participation in other ways, like drawing, dancing, running, playing with clay, or even such small but significant things as asking a child to give a message, find a material or hold a classmate's hand at walk time. It is very important that the circle provides the greatest variety of opportunities for trying different things so that each of the children can find a way of expressing themselves and joining in.

We have to remember that the age of 4 to 6 is when children emerge from their closed little world centred on the 'ego' and start the socialisation process, so we have to focus on identity formation, strengthening self-esteem and helping them to form relationships outside the family with their little friends from the street and the neighbourhood.

How do the children influence the day-to-day running of the programme? And how do the teachers adapt to the children's proposals?

The children not only suggest the activities, they also assess them. The teacher asks if they liked the day's activity, and they speak up and give their opinion; for example, they might say that they liked the outing, but they didn't like it when one classmate fought with another. They are encouraged to consider all aspects of their activities, not only at the good sides, and the exercise is not purely verbal – the children can record what made an impact on them through drawings, creating stories, singing and in many other ways.

The children's assessment represents immediate feedback, so the teacher can discover which parts

of an activity made sense for the group and which didn't, what caused conflicts and what was an inspiration. The teacher records all this every day in a work record, which helps her to reflect and propose further activities or changes in direction. She must be ready to make connections, to realise if the group needs greater stimulation or provocation or organisation. The work cannot be left to free-wheel because it will lose itself.

Are there any concrete examples where the children's assessment has led to a change of direction in the programme, in any of its areas?

Yes. In fact, each Sementinha evolves its own dynamic through the many changes that result from consensus in the circle. Some are very musical now while others are always involved in telling stories. In one Sementinha the children don't go for long walks because they want a little colleague who has a physical handicap to be included. In many groups, the times when the school is open are chosen by the children, and some even have activities at weekends in response to the children's wishes.

Another example is from Santo André, in the state of São Paulo, where the children revealed that they didn't like the packed lunch provided by the local council. So the packed lunch came to be prepared by volunteers from the community, as it is in many other Sementinhas, and at assessment time the children now recount proudly that the cake or tea that was served was made by the mother of someone in the group.

You need teachers who are convinced that that kind of education is effective. What is the teacher training like and what relevance does it have for the project?

It is perfectly possible to educate without a school, but it you can't educate without good teachers. When we set up a Sementinha Project somewhere, one of our first jobs is training teachers to be instigators of change, creators of opportunities, formers of citizenship and promoters of generosity.

It all starts with a deconstruction of the traditional, teacher-centred, authoritarian curricular school model. In most infant schools, for example, the teachers want to teach the children to read and write, but we know that this is the time for them to be imaginative, have fun with others and learn

to share. During training, the teacher comes to understand that her role is not to teach, but to create the opportunity for the children to learn.

Teachers are encouraged to question everything rather than follow tradition. "Does this game set challenges and open up new perspectives? Is it really educational? What do we have to change for there to be more joy, less arguing, more solidarity?" For example, we observed that musical chairs – a very common game in Brazil – is excluding, because the rule is that if you make a mistake, you're out. We turned things around so that it was the chairs that were out, not the children. This of course brought a new challenge of what the children were going to sit on when the chairs were taken away, which they solved by using their arms and legs to become chairs for each other.

Applying the same logic, we re-thought the game of football, where usually only the best players get a turn. We started playing football with the children in pairs, holding hands and with their feet tied together. It's great fun and everyone can play on equal terms, because the important thing becomes the solidarity of the pair rather than the outcome of the game.

And community participation, how does that come about?

You don't need to make invitations or have large-scale mobilisations to get the community involved in the Sementinha. Usually the only time parents go to their children's schools is for meetings, on days when there are no classes. But when the children and teachers are constantly moving around the community, parents can really see their children learning. Many mothers come to play an active role in the project, volunteering to make the snacks, to tell stories or help in activities.

That doesn't mean we've never met with resistance. Some parents say it could be harmful for their children to have the sun on their heads when they walk in the streets, and so we learned to make hats, out of newspaper or cloth or leather. Some mothers complain that their children get their clothes dirty because they sit on the ground, so we came up with the idea of making carpets. We listen to the community and move forward with the project. The



Photo: Rosângela Guerra
When the children and teachers are constantly moving around the community, parents can really see their children learning

point is that every difficulty can and must become grounds for education.

Like teachers, parents tend to have in their heads a traditional model of education – they want their children to use an exercise book and pencil to learn to read and write at nursery school. The project's methodology can scare people, but we resolve this by having the parents talk to the teachers in the circle. And as time goes on, they start to notice changes in their children at home. The quieter ones become more conversational, less inhibited. They start to take part in domestic life, cooperate in household matters and show themselves to be curious and observant.

They become more stimulated and developed than children who didn't go to the Sementinha. Some

parents even recount that when their children see family arguments, they propose that everyone sit in a circle to resolve the issues.

Do the children take part in the overall assessment of the project?

When the project had been running for 10 years, we wanted to develop quality indices to assess our performance under 12 headings: acquisition, creativity, protagonism, cooperation, happiness, dynamism, aesthetics, harmony, coherence, efficiency, opportunity and transformation. The problem was that we had no point of reference. How were these items to be measured? We decided to ask questions of teachers, parents and children.

The most difficult thing was to come up with questions that would illustrate each concept. For example, to assess the project's coherence, we asked: "Do the children and teachers respect what is discussed in the circles?" To assess opportunity: "What new things did you learn here?" Sometimes the questions were made up during a game, so that everything arose in a natural way, informally and spontaneously. We quantify all the replies and put them into a graph, and the replies from children and adults have the same weighting.

In the assessment process we also make a photographic report to capture the essence of the project, the expressions of joy and harmony on the children's faces. And we also make note of individual responses from children; one little girl once said that to study through playing at the Sementinha was as good as eating ice-cream.

What contributions has the children's participation brought to the CPCD?

We've learned that we need to see children in their entirety. In our training we put great stress on preparing the teacher to keep all her senses alert and fine-tuned. The teacher has to pick up on the slightest indications to read a situation and realise what the children are feeling. She has to be sensitive to subtle hints from children who come to us with problems, and decide if we need to orient our work with particular individuals in a different way. This is the crux of educational work, turning 'problem children' into 'solution children'.

We have learned that, given time, children take over the world around them and start to participate in the community. And it's interesting to see how the more the children own the project, the more the community comes to own it too. The children are the bridge to the community, they stir up the inhabitants and become little mobilisation agents for education. When they leave the Sementinha to go into basic education, they demand that class decisions are collective. They're a big surprise to any know-it-all teacher who has never been aware of her pupils' opinions

How has the original Sementinha project been replicated elsewhere?

In Brazil there is a great demand for nursery education but a lot of children are not in school because the town councils don't have the resources or policies for this level of teaching, so the CPCD has been called in to set up the Sementinha in a number of places. It already exists in 13 town councils in the states of Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Maranhão, Bahia and Espírito Santo, and the needs of around 3,300 children are being met this year by 165 Sementinha teachers. The project has already reached Africa, too – it has been set up in Nampula and Maputo, in Mozambique.

In each of these places, the project was adapted to local circumstances. When we started out, many people thought it would only work in small cities or a country setting, but the development of the project has shown that this is not the case. Santo André, in São Paulo, has around 660,000 inhabitants and the project there is considered to be highly successful and now forms part of the town council's public policy. In the Santo André Sementinha there are reading cases which open up into small bookcases holding around 25 books, a kind of mini travelling library which goes wherever the children and teachers meet. These cases also carry texts by the children and community members – recently, one mother put into the case a book she had written herself telling the story of her daughter.

The CPCD's involvement is to help set up the Sementinha and keep pace with it for a while, and then the project has to stand alone, using the partners and strategies at its disposal. In Porto Seguro, Bahia, the teachers and mothers formed an

NGO – Associação das Mães Educadoras de Porto Seguro (Association of Teaching Mothers of Porto Seguro) – to guarantee the continuity of the project even if there are changes in municipal policy.

To conclude, what do you think are the main challenges confronting the Sementinha project today?

We are perfectly aware that the Sementinha is not a panacea for all problems, but we are sure that the project offers a good start in early childhood and that it stimulates families to become involved in their children's education. A lot of ex-pupils have now become enthusiastic young workers in the project, and some of those who were involved at the outset are now teachers and coordinators in the CPCD.

The CPCD's current goal is to systematize our practices and communicate what we have learned to others. But how can we bottle seawater without losing the blueness? We need to make sure we don't lose our dynamism, because the value of our actions comes from their uniqueness. We want to make available to all interested parties what we have learned over these 20 years, but we don't want to create a prescription book.

So we are trying to present the essence of our experiences in an objective manner – for example, by suggesting games that have been very effective in practice. We have games that stimulate positive attitudes, such as respect, solidarity, overcoming conflicts and cutting through lethargy, that deadened look of those who see no future.

We also want to relate the common factors of work by our teachers that has proved successful. The idea is not to standardise, but to demonstrate the degree to which certain actions succeeded. We are working to discover an effective language that can communicate to interested parties the educational technology constructed by the CPCD.

Other CPCD projects

The CPCD has also gone on to develop other projects with the same philosophy that informed Sementinha: innovative methodology, an emphasis on training teachers to think creatively and question traditional assumptions, and a commitment to treating the community as partners rather than merely beneficiaries. An example is the Bernal de Jogos ('bag of games') project, in which games and toys made by children are used to enliven the teaching of conventional subjects and to spark discussions on issues such as human rights, sexuality, ethics, the environment and violence.

The CPCD's projects, which are found all over Brazil, are made possible by partnerships with local authorities and national and international institutions such as the Fundação Orsa, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. Its growing success has led the local council of the Minas Gerais town Araçuaí, which has 36,000 inhabitants, to invite it to take over responsibility for municipal education – the first time an NGO has performed such a role in Brazil. The CPCD's plan to tackle high rates of illiteracy and turn Araçuaí into an 'educational city' includes training community education agents and 'caretaker mothers', using games and toys for learning and setting up a book bank.

Young children as actors in their own development

The Committee of the Convention on the Rights of the Child held a general discussion in Geneva on 17 September devoted to the topic 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood' (for more information about the event see page 58). The Bernard van Leer Foundation was involved in the organisation of the event, and it invited four of its counterparts to join in the meeting. Beforehand, the Foundation asked the counterparts to reply to a questionnaire to reflect on a meeting workshop on the subject 'Young children as actors in their own development'. Edited summaries of the replies are presented below.

Children's participation: myth or reality? Caribbean perspectives

Christine Barrow, University of the West Indies, Barbados

The Caribbean countries have all signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Enshrined in this document is the notion of the right of children to participate in decisions affecting their lives. In introducing this concept of participation, the Convention advances the agenda for children from welfare to rights. It does so by advocating the right to express opinions and to be heard, the right to freedom of expression and to gain access to information and the right to freedom of association.

The realisation of these rights of the child requires a fundamental and radical change in the way in which the 'child' is defined and treated in Caribbean cultures. It requires us to replace the classical image of children as incapable, passive and dependent and to elevate children to the status of social actors and subjects of rights. In the Caribbean, this means that the concept of the child must be reframed. Children must no longer be considered the property of their parents and silent objects of adult benevolence, guidance or control. They must be allowed a critical voice in their own development.

This has not proved to be easy in any country, and, within the climate of opinion that prevails in many families, communities and societies, it appears to strike at the very root of social order and stability. Such a mandate therefore tends to be viewed with concern, suspicion or fear.

A small window of change is evident in the strategies and modalities for children's participation in some countries. These have often taken the form of youth parliaments, children's elections, youth summits, youth councils, youth affairs departments, life-skills training programmes for young people and committees at conferences. In general, however, participation in these forums and activities is limited to adolescents, mainly late teenagers, and is often only symbolic. Moreover, the impact of these one-off events, though critical in putting across the message of children's participation, tend to be temporary.

There is also only minimal emphasis at the level of governments and families on early childhood development, and, where it exists, the emphasis is on custodial care or preparation for formal schooling. There seems to be little appreciation of the importance of play, stimulation and creativity, or, indeed, social interaction and communication. While there is evidence of change in some Caribbean countries, those centres that provide more than custodial and academic programmes are usually privately run and are therefore fee-paying and beyond the means of the majority of the population.

There is therefore a need for Caribbean countries to institutionalise children's participation systematically and sustainably and to move the message and the mandate more directly into schools, families and communities.

Poverty and socio-cultural variables

Within the Caribbean, there is widespread ignorance of the stages of the psychological and intellectual development of the child. Traditional local beliefs and myths often fill the gap. Central to this belief system is the image of the young child as an innocent, incapable minor, dependent on adults. Inappropriate perceptions and poor treatment of children are reinforced by the increasing stress experienced by parents and other adults. Recent research has identified parental stress and frustration as correlates of child silencing and non-participation. The reliance on corporal punishment as the favoured disciplinary method is a related variable. A persistent pattern indicates that even very young children are being beaten into conformity.

Parental stress is linked to conditions such as poverty. Mothers who, as single parents, assume the double burden of employment and childcare have been identified as the individuals most susceptible to stress. In those countries experiencing unemployment and economic crises, there is the added problem of adult emigration and the consequent fragmentation of extended family support networks and the growing prevalence of lone parenting. The notion that 'it takes a village to raise a child', adopted from Africa and traditional in Caribbean communities, is unlikely to be realised in current circumstances.

Also connected to poverty, unemployment and migration are the rising crime and delinquency rates, especially within urban neighbourhoods. Declining community spirit makes the local environment unsafe for children and constrains their participation in play and other activities beyond the narrow confines of home and yard.

There is, in the life-cycle of childhood in the Caribbean, a sharp transition from the permissiveness and leniency of early infancy to the discipline that is enforced by age 4 or 5. From then on, a good child is essentially one that is well behaved, mannerly and obedient, 'seen and not heard'. This conception results in added pressure to strengthen discipline and control rather than provide space and freedom for child participation.

Conclusion

In the Caribbean, young children remain invisible and voiceless even in their own families. The culture of children's participation must filter through from official ceremony into schools, homes and communities and be reshaped from decorative symbolism to meaningful involvement. Interventions must move beyond the social-institutional environment of childhood to challenge the underlying ideological and cultural myths and beliefs that have created outdated images of the innate make-up, capacity and character of the child.

The right to the participation of young children in India: reality or rhetoric?

K. Shanmugavelayutham, Loyola College, India

Integrated Child Development Services was launched in 1975 to provide services for the development of the child and improve health, nutrition and education in each target community. The direct beneficiaries are children under 6. The focal point for service delivery is the *anganwadi* (childcare centre) in the village or slum. An anganwadi worker and helper run each centre. The focus is on physical, motor, psychosocial and cognitive development in an organised environment. There are 30,639 such anganwadis in Tamil Nadu.

Example of the participation of young children

The Government of Tamil Nadu introduced potatoes and chickpeas instead of an egg per child per week

as the supplementary nutrition in the anganwadi. The young children in the anganwadis were consulted about the change and mostly said they preferred the egg. There was an extensive campaign, and the government reintroduced the egg.

The anganwadi worker often designs her daily teaching based on the preferences mentioned by the children. Otherwise, the children start engaging in their own activities. Irrespective of the anganwadi worker's plan, when the children request a particular activity like singing, or a frog race, or an elephant's story, then the anganwadi worker follows their choice and carries out that activity. Hence, the children learn by choice and not by force.



Courtesy FORCES

In the anganwadis, sharing occurs especially in two areas: 'what the child likes the most' and 'what the child does not like at all'. To ensure participation, the anganwadi workers may ask questions such as "What do you want to see?", "Whom do you want to meet?" and "What will you ask them?". Children are usually direct in giving their opinions.

Level of participation

In general, a certain level of children's participation takes place, but there is still a lack of understanding and acceptance about the right of children to influence their own development. There are several reasons for this.

In Indian culture, an ideal child is one who sits quietly, and an ideal teacher is one who has children who sit quietly. 'Inactive' is assumed to be the way a child should be. Most anganwadi workers did not themselves experience true participation as pupils. When they were in school, they sat, they listened, and then they recited whatever the teacher had said.

Many anganwadi workers value authoritative discipline, including physical punishment and the rod. Some anganwadi workers fear that children's participation may lead to change and disruption. The anganwadi workers mentioned their chief problems as low salaries, heavy workloads, the duty to pick up children from their homes, and the lack of basic amenities. The ratio of children to anganwadi worker in some anganwadis is 40 to 1. It is very difficult to give individual attention. The scope of the activities of the anganwadi workers is limited by the rules and regulations imposed by the system. The workers have little room to express their creativity.

According to the Indian tradition of discipline, children in the anganwadis are not encouraged to interact with their peers. Talking with peers may even be punished. The socio-economic situation is not the same among the children. Some families face extreme poverty, and this creates many problems.

New perspectives on early childhood education

Participation in early childhood education can enable children to give voice to descriptions of the pre-school activities they have experienced, their own efforts to challenge the experience and the impact of adult efforts to help them. It can ensure that the views and concerns of those most directly affected are heard. It can help challenge the key barriers that children face in anganwadis. It can ensure that more appropriate, relevant and sustainable programmes and therefore programmes more likely to succeed are implemented. When children are asked about 'what matters to them', they will often highlight issues that adults do not necessarily prioritise or see as a major concern.

Participation enhances self-confidence and self-esteem. Children benefit from participation by acquiring and expanding their skills, by meeting other children and understanding that others share the same or similar experiences, and that they are not alone. They develop a group perspective. Participation gives children a sense of purpose and competence and a belief that they can have a positive impact on their own lives and influence and change the lives of others, especially their peers and their families. Children's involvement will bring numerous benefits, including new insights, improved understanding and more appropriate recommendations. It does this by bringing us closer to their daily lives.

Ensuring meaningful participation

The establishment of a safe and meaningful environment for the participation of children in anganwadis and one which minimises the risk to children from their involvement will not happen by accident. Certain preconditions must be met to help create the right environment.

What constitutes quality children's participation? Is it easy to recognise genuine participation (authentic,

voluntary, autonomous, spontaneous) and distinguish from counterfeit or pseudo-participation induced or coerced participation? Participation is a qualitative process leading to qualitative change. Is it possible to measure qualitative change? In child development, change has many dimensions, and various factors are at work. How can we say the change is due only to participation?

In India, to realise the right of young children to participate, the following steps should be taken.

1. The anganwadi worker should be sensitised to work with children and be assisted to become more responsive to the context in which children live.
2. Integrated Child Development Services should be made more flexible.

3. The individual needs of a child should be borne in mind.
4. Children should be trusted and encouraged to do whatever they can do themselves.
5. The space should be appropriate to encourage participation.
6. The anganwadi workers are given three months pre-school training upon recruitment; methods to elicit child participation and create a child-friendly environment should be part of the training module.
7. The terms and conditions of the service of the anganwadi workers should be sufficiently generous; a frustrated anganwadi worker can communicate negative emotions, and this may adversely affect the child.

Children's rights and community-based care for young children in South Africa

Victoria Sikhakhana, Tree, South Africa

Sadly, among most adults the issue of children's rights appears to leave an unpleasant feeling. In rural communities, one can speak openly only about meeting the needs of children. Although we know children rely on adult guidance, some adults lack an understanding of basic, simple solutions to needs. We have learned from discussions with caregivers that it is taboo to interact with children. Decisions are often made without owning up to the after-effects of the laws and rules making vulnerable children more destitute and distressed. Because of budget constraints, children's problems are often spoken about, but not addressed.

Sometimes, the negative view of rights seems to stem from our failure to demystify rights, responsibilities and roles. When one listens creatively to children, one can gather a sense of their opinions without compromising respect, caring and responsibility. It remains our duty to ensure that basic needs are linked with basic human rights. Children depend on adults to ensure that their rights are respected. Children need these rights protected because of who they are. Children are not workers who can help feed families. Children are not means of obtaining poverty benefits or pensions. Children are not pawns for determining who deserves more assets in a divorce settlement. Children must not and should never be shields in war.

A vision for child and family support centres

There is a workable, cost-effective solution to meeting the challenges facing young children growing up in impoverished circumstances and confronting the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This involves the use of the existing network of community-based early childhood development sites (crèches, day-care centres, pre-schools) to ensure that every young child has free and easy access to a safe, caring and stimulating learning environment during the day. After-school care would also have to be provided to those young children who finish formal schooling early and who are often then unsupervised and therefore vulnerable to neglect and abuse. These early childhood development sites would be administered by community committees, with the cooperation of traditional, elected and community leaders.

Government departments would have to provide integrated and intersectoral services. The Department of Social Development should take overall responsibility. The sites would have to be registered and subsidised to ensure that minimum standards are met and that the sites are sustainable. The Department of Health should provide nutrition programmes. They would then be in a position to monitor the status of the children's nutrition, health, growth and immunisations, as well as the integration of children with special needs. The Department



Photo: BvLF / Tanja van de Linde

of Education should monitor the quality of the sites, as well as the after-school care and recreation programmes. The Department of Agriculture must guarantee that each site has a food garden to sustain food security.

Local governments would take responsibility for the provision of buildings and basic services as an integral part of their integrated development plans. The Kwa-Zulu Natal Provincial Programme of Action for Children, through the establishment of local programmes of action, would play a monitoring and coordinating role.

Community, youth and women's groups and faith-based organisations could play a vital role in the provision of support. Non-governmental and community-based organisations could supply training, capacity-building, support and monitoring. The focus would be on the development of the capacity

of parents, caregivers, stakeholders and community leaders and ensuring the resources necessary to secure the basic welfare of young children.

In this way, two main groups of caregivers – the elderly and children who are unable to attend school because of their responsibility for younger siblings – would be released, confident in the knowledge that young children are being properly cared for in a stimulating environment during the day.

If the government were to provide free access to community-based child and family support centres within easy reach of children's homes, this would go a long way towards addressing most of the serious problems facing young children, especially orphans and vulnerable children in impoverished circumstances.

Venezuela: A methodology for community pre-school care

Fernando Pereira, Oscar Misle, Centros Comunitarios de Aprendizaje, Venezuela

In 1984–88, the Centros Comunitarios de Aprendizaje – CECODAP (Community Centres for Learning) a non-governmental organisation in Venezuela, developed an innovative approach to pre-school care involving the participation of families and the community. The approach evolved into the Methodology for Community Pre-School Care. The children participated in the programme within a community centre where they interacted with members of their own families, who were responsible for the centre's activities. Though it was certainly not the explicit intention at the outset to offer the children a space to express themselves, share their views and take decisions, the centres naturally allowed the children to come into meaningful contact with their communities, deepen their understanding of the context in which they were living, exchange experiences with other children and put into practice strategies to settle on the routine aspects of the activities in which they were involved.

Following the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by Venezuela in 1990 and the application of the Ley Orgánica para la Protección del Niño and del Adolescente (Law for the Protection of the Child and the Adolescent) in 2000, the role of children changed drastically to the extent that they were no longer *objects* of protection, but *subjects* of rights. This reality led the Community Centres for Learning to design, implement and replicate the programme Derechos a Mi Medida ('rights that are my size') to promote and defend the rights of 0–8-year olds.

A methodology directed towards teachers, families and communities was designed and implemented expressly for the participation of children and adolescents considered as citizens not only within the centres, but also in community mobilisation efforts.

During the troubled process of political and constitutional change that the country experienced beginning in 1999, and in celebration of the Semana Nacional de los Derechos del Niño (National Child's Rights Week), the Marcha de los Arcoiris (March of

the Rainbows) was organised with the participation of around 1,000 children. The theme of the march was: 'We want a law that reflects and does not obscure the Convention on the Rights of the Child'. Through games and dramatic presentations, the children publicised the rights they thought needed to be protected so that they could live equitably within their families and communities.

The troubled environment of political polarisation and high level of social conflict in the country were the motivation behind the implementation of the programme El Buen Trato Entra por Casa ('good treatment begins at home'). This initiative relied on children as actors in the resolution of everyday conflicts. Children were asked their opinions; they were encouraged to express their emotions and participate in negotiations among their families and teachers in order to establish guidelines for participation that would be more democratic.

Young children's participation: reality or fiction?

Clearly, there is resistance to the idea that small children might participate effectively in giving substance to their own rights or in making decisions. This is because one underestimates or overestimates the capacities and abilities of very young children. Many are ignorant of the process of children's development, while the power that adults can exercise over children is very great.

This is contradictory. On the one hand, children are stimulated from their earliest years through the application of special techniques to develop their motor, cognitive and social abilities. On the other hand, they are not allowed to use all these abilities to play a more active role in their homes or early education centres. When we say 'active', we mean that children can participate by sharing their opinions, expressing their emotions and taking part in decision-making.

To make this approach more consistent will require a change in concept. One must accept that children are citizens and that their abilities and capacities should be exercised progressively, in line with each child's level of development. Adults must recognise

and accept their doubts, their resistance to change and the emotions that hinder their acceptance of children as citizens with rights, and seek to alter educational practice in order to render the relationship between adults and children more democratic. It is a process that will not bear fruit overnight.

It is certainly important that children should exercise their duties of citizenship progressively through participation in all those situations that affect them. When children understand that they are part of the problem unless they are part of the solution, that democracy is built upon the participation of everyone, that, through the expression of their opinions, they can generate change in their surroundings, and that they are viewed by adults as individuals and not merely as objects of protection or of assistance, then there will be a culture of rights that will allow children to become protagonists in their efforts to be taken into account and exercise progressively their duties of citizenship.

The challenges of a meaningful children's participation

In the programmes that we are currently implementing, we consider it essential that the family be involved. We have learned that, when small children, through participation in community programmes, become more dynamic, more demanding individuals, who ask questions because adults listen; and who express their opinions because adults allow them to, then problems may arise when the children return to their homes, and their families do not know how to respond to their demands or deal with their opinions. It is thus important to sensitise adults so that they are prepared for a new relationship with their children and so the potential conflicts can be minimised. It is necessary to understand that there is a tension between the legitimate right of children to participate and the obligation, equally legitimate, of adults to protect children. Not all that children demand or desire is appropriate. Adults must protect children, while guiding them and helping them to deal with frustrations and other strong emotions.

Children should not be idealised as angelic beings, uncontaminated by all the shortcomings and errors that affect adults. Indeed, we know very well that

even very small children carry out activities more fitting for adults. They work on the streets, in the fields and ports, handling tools such as knives and axes. Like adults, they may adopt manipulative and violent behaviour in order to survive.

Early years and participation

We cannot expect the same level of participation from a child of 2, 4, or 8 years of age. Moreover, we must seek to understand the cultural environment of the child, its physical surroundings, its particular capacities and abilities so that we do not require the child to act beyond its stage of development. This means that there must be an effort at sensitisation among teachers, family members and community and programme agents and other individuals active among children.

Quality in young children's participation

For CECODAP, the surest indicators of the 'quality' of children's participation are revealed through the attitudes that the children adopt when they are participating in the resolution of conflicts, in living side by side and interacting with other children and with adults, in decision-making, in the freedom they feel to express their opinions, and in the spontaneity they show when they declare their points of view. If children seem oppressed, fearful, tense and anxious when they are participating, then we can consider this a reflection of a certain negative background against which they are exercising their duties and rights of citizenship.

Criteria for the evaluation of children's participation in programming

The criteria described below are intended to help create and establish tools to measure the effectiveness, benefits and outcomes of various aspects of young children's participation in development programmes, especially programmes oriented towards children. They were developed as part of a contribution to the Bernard van Leer Foundation's 'learning agenda' in response to a need – identified by the Foundation's Latin America desk in 2003 – for a framework to improve understanding of children's participation and use that knowledge to inform programme development. Ideas for the criteria emerged from a meeting between the Foundation and its Latin American counterparts in Chiapas, Mexico, in February 2004, and were subsequently fleshed out in a small workshop in Beberibe (Ceará), Brazil with the input of Foundation staff, counterparts from Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela, and Gerison Lansdown, an external expert in the field. Although elaborated with Latin American counterparts, they were conceptualised to have an international perspective.

The premise behind 'children's participation' is that children are more than receptacles of learning, passive recipients of adult protection, or human beings not yet fully formed. Children are agents of change in their own lives, the lives of their families and the life of society, entitled to be listened to and taken seriously in decisions and actions that affect them. However, for this right to become a reality, adults need to learn to listen to children and create spaces in which children are enabled to contribute meaningfully as individuals.

While the anecdotal evidence of the benefits of children's participation in programmes is now considerable, there has been, to date, relatively little sustained or independent research into its characteristics and impacts. Children's participation only really began to be widely explored in the early 1990s, and understanding is still in a stage of relative infancy. However, there is now increasing examination of the nature of the minimum standards that might be established to ensure that participation is a significant, affirmative experience for children, and the methods that can be employed in assessing the potential of participation to improve programme outcomes.

There are significant challenges to creating and applying coherent and sensitive indicators and precise measurement tools for young children's participation. For example, it is difficult to construct universally applicable indicators for diverse programmes in different cultures and social and economic contexts. The components of the success or failures of programmes vary widely and can almost always be evaluated only through a mix of quantitative and qualitative tools. Many outcomes of participation can be captured only over the long term, after the effects of the programmes have become more evident as children grow and change. Finally, many staff working with young children lack training and knowledge of the range of innovative tools that have been developed to conduct meaningful dialogue with very young children in order to access their views on their participation in programmes. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. It is important to explore new frameworks for evaluating participation, pilot these frameworks, share them, and adapt and amend them. It is necessarily a learning process.

Certainly, there is a powerful case for developing context-sensitive 'criteria' for the creation of indicators with which to measure the effectiveness

of the various aspects of children's participation in programmes.¹ Such criteria and indicators are needed to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of programmes, clarify those processes and practices that are constructive, redundant or obstructive, and identify areas where additional resources are needed. Furthermore, if children's participation is to be sustained, replicated, resourced and institutionalised into the wider communities in which children live, it is necessary to begin to construct methods of measuring what is being done and how it is impacting on children's lives.

Proposed criteria for measuring the effectiveness of children's participation

The following three areas have been proposed for an initial search for appropriate tools and indicators to measure the effectiveness of children's participation. The criteria outlined within these divisions offer potential for accurate monitoring and evaluation of children's participation in programmes, projects, or other initiatives in schools, nurseries, play groups, or other settings:

- **Scope** – what degree of participation has been achieved and at what stages of programme development; in other words, **what is being done?**
- **Quality** – to what extent have participatory processes complied with the agreed standards for effective practice; in other words, **how is it being done?**
- **Impact** – what has been the impact on young people themselves, on families, on the supporting agency, and on the wider realisation of young people's rights within families, local communities and at local and national governmental level; in other words, **why is it being done?**

The scope of participation throughout programme development

Children can be involved at different stages in the process of developing a programme – from the initial concept through to implementation and monitoring and evaluation. The earlier they are involved, the greater their degree of influence. At each stage, children can participate at three potential degrees of engagement: consultation, shared decision-making, or self-initiated or self-managed processes.² The extent to which children are empowered to influence an initiative will

be influenced by the degree to which they are participating.

The presence or absence of children's involvement in the following tasks can be used as a benchmark to gauge both the mode of engagement and the scope of children's participation in one or more of the following programme stages.

Stage one: Identification of key issues. At the design and development stage, it is important to ensure that a programme is going to address the concerns and problems of children. Adults should not assume that they have a monopoly on insights into these concerns and problems. Children can also contribute many insights. The involvement of children in the situation analyses that accompany programme development can therefore be invaluable in securing appropriate and properly targeted programme initiatives and goals. Their participation would require that: (a) opportunities are created so that children can articulate their concerns, priorities and interests [all three modes of engagement]³; (b) child-friendly and age-tailored strategies are used in the consultations with children [all three]; and (c) a range of settings are employed to seek out children for the consultations – for example, schools, community groups, recreational facilities, other programme target populations, the media – in order to foster the collection of a diversity of children's viewpoints [all three].

Stage two: Overall programme planning. Children can play a significant role in helping to plan what programmes might be developed on their behalf. They can be involved at varying levels: (a) the opinions gathered among children during the identification of key issues are expressly taken into account during programme planning [consultation]; (b) children contribute their views on what programmes are to be developed [shared decision-making]; (c) children are enabled to identify and choose among alternative programme parameters [self-initiated or self-managed processes]; and (d) child-friendly and age-tailored strategies are implemented to build the capacity of children to contribute in programme planning [all three modes of engagement].

Stage three: Programme design. Once the general outlines of a programme have been clarified, children can help hone the specifics. Their input in this task can be measured according to the level of

their involvement: (a) they are consulted on ideas conceived by adults [consultation]; (b) defining the basic principles behind the programme, determining the appropriateness of potential components and selecting programme agents and other personnel [shared decision-making]; and (c) space is created to enable them to evolve their own ideas about the details of programme design [self-initiated or self-managed processes].

Stage four: Programme implementation. Children can play a key role in the implementation of a programme. For example, they might play a part as researchers to discover more about the opinions of children and about precise aspects of children's lives, run a school council or contribute ongoing ideas and feedback for developing a children's facility. Their involvement can be measured by assessing whether: (a) they are consulted on how they would like to participate in the programme [consultation]; (b) they participate in deciding how programme activities are carried out [shared decision-making]; and (c) they take responsibility for the management of some aspect of the programme, for example, a school class council or a community initiative aimed at a segment of the child population [self-initiated or self-managed processes].

Stage five: Programme monitoring and evaluation. Children can play a valuable role in assessing the positives and negatives of a programme. Having programmes evaluated by adults alone will be less effective in understanding their impact on children. Moreover, involvement in monitoring and evaluation provides children with a greater sense of ownership in the programme and interest in its outcomes. Children's involvement in this task can be measured by assessing whether: (a) children's views are elicited during programme evaluations [consultation]; (b) children assist in choosing the programme elements to be evaluated [shared decision-making]; (c) children identify the programme elements to be evaluated and also determine the evaluation methods to be employed by, for instance, designing and carrying out feedback interviews among staff or other stakeholders [self-initiated or self-managed processes]; (d) monitoring criteria are defined in agreement with children at the outset of the programme [all three modes of engagement]; (e) children join in ongoing monitoring and evaluation throughout the programme [all]; and (f) the results of monitoring and evaluation are

discussed with children in appropriate and useful ways [all].

The quality of children's participation

There is a growing consensus on standards that need to be applied to ensure the quality of children's participation in programmes.⁴ The use of these standards as a tool of evaluation can facilitate assessments of the effectiveness of children's participation in initiatives, especially in terms of the benefits for the children.

First standard: The programme has an ethical approach. There are differences in power and status between adults and children. It is necessary therefore to have a clear ethical approach in order to prevent adult manipulation or control, and to create meaningful participation. This can be achieved by ensuring that: (a) staff are committed to, and have a shared understanding of, children's participation; (b) the process is transparent and honest, with children clear about what they are being asked to participate in and the boundaries of what they are able to influence; (c) there are shared principles about how people behave towards each other; (d) any barriers the children might face in their participation – for example, potential parental opposition to the involvement of their children in certain initiatives – are carefully analysed and confronted beforehand; (e) children are provided with adequate information so that they can understand the purposes and characteristics of a programme, as well as the areas in which they may have an input, and (e) staff create space for children to develop their own ideas and activities.

Second standard: Participation is inclusive. Children are not a homogeneous group. The opportunity to participate should be available to children irrespective of age, ability, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or social or economic status. Opportunities to participate should challenge rather than reinforce existing patterns of social exclusion and discrimination. To reach these goals, a programme should guarantee that: (a) children in all groups in society are permitted to participate, including, for example, girls, disabled children, minority children and poor children; (b) efforts are made to ensure the equal participation of all children, consistent with their evolving capacities; (c) all children are equally treated and respected within the programme; (d) the programme responds

to the range of the needs of all children, and (e) the programme is sensitive to the cultural background of all children within a framework of universal rights.

Third standard: The programme provides a child-sensitive, child-enabling environment. The programme environment in which children participate should be safe, appropriate, welcoming and supportive. This means that: (a) programme spaces encourage children to feel comfortable and relaxed; (b) staff are aware of and receptive to strategies to promote children's participation; (c) children are provided with information appropriate to their age and level of understanding; (d) the programme implements methods of participation that take account of the evolving capacities of children to express themselves and to act; (e) adequate time is allowed for children to 'grow into' effective participation; (f) children are encouraged to discover new forms of participation; and (g) recognition is given to the need for participation to be fun and enjoyable.

Fourth standard: Children are provided with a safe environment. Adults working with children have a responsibility to ensure that the children are safe and not exposed to harm, abuse or exploitation. They should therefore ensure that: (a) all programme staff recognise the right of the children to be protected from any form of violence and abuse; (b) staff are sufficiently trained in child protection procedures; (c) participation is planned and organised with a view to safeguarding the children; (d) any added risk to children more likely to encounter difficulties in finding for themselves, such as younger children or disabled or handicapped children, is accounted for; (e) children are aware of their right to be protected from violence and abuse; (f) children know how to seek and ask for help; (g) children are adequately protected from publicity and other exposure if they report wrongdoing; and (h) no photographs, videos, or digital images of children are taken or used without the children's consent.

Fifth standard: Participation in the programme is voluntary. The right of children to choose freely whether to participate should be recognised. This can be accomplished by ensuring that: (a) children understand that they may withdraw from participation if they wish; (b) children are supplied with the information necessary to make an informed decision about participation; (c) children are allowed and enabled to become involved

in issues that affect them directly and that can benefit from their special knowledge; and (d) the programme is sufficiently flexible to provide space and time so that children may meet other demands on their time, for example, the wishes of their parents, their school work and duties in the home.

Sixth standard: Programme staff are well trained, committed and sensitive. Adults should be trained in the skills necessary to work effectively and confidently with children. A programme should thus make certain that: (a) staff have acquired an appropriate understanding of children's rights, including the child's right to participate; (b) staff are sufficiently aware of participatory monitoring and evaluation techniques; (c) staff are properly supported and supervised; and (d) adequate training is provided to all professionals working with children directly or indirectly through a programme, for example, paediatricians, nurses, or teachers.

Seventh standard: The programme seeks to create durable linkages with families, professionals and the community. Children do not live in isolation from their families and communities. Initiatives to promote children's participation should also involve families and other community members in order to encourage harmony between the learning that children acquire through participation and the attitudes children face in the everyday environment beyond the programme. Programme agents should take steps so that: (a) parents are aware of the aims and objectives of the programme; (b) parents are sensitised to the rights and needs of children and know how to support and protect these rights; (c) the programme incorporates and builds on local structures, traditions, skills, knowledge and practice; and (d) members of the community, including local government authorities, religious leaders and other key community actors, are informed about and involved in the programme.

The impact of children's participation

The participation of children in a programme should also be judged in terms of the impacts it produces. These impacts may be felt in many areas. In order to assess the impacts, it is important to learn the views of the various stakeholders: parents, other community members, staff, other professionals and the children themselves. The nature of the impact under scrutiny and the stakeholder audience involved will influence the indicators that are

constructed to measure the effectiveness of the programme.

First area of impact: the children. The impact on children of their participation in a programme may usefully be gauged according to the objectives that were to be accomplished through their involvement. These objectives need to be clear at the outset of the programme. In undertaking an assessment of any impact, it is necessary to find evidence rather than merely an assertion that the impact has been achieved – for example, how has a child's self-esteem been raised and with what effect. Possible objectives for a programme might be to assist the children in demonstrating, experiencing or building: (a) enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, (b) their skills and talents, (c) greater access to opportunities, (d) awareness of their rights, (e) ability to take part in challenging neglect or violations of their rights, and (f) a sense of empowerment.

Second area of impact: parents and other family members. The children's parents and other members of their families demonstrate, experience or build: (a) a better understanding of children's capacities, (b) more willingness to consult with and take account of children's views, (c) improvement in the quality of their relationships with children, and (d) greater awareness of and sensitivity towards children's needs and rights.

Third area of impact: the programme staff. The staff demonstrate, experience or build: (a) a better understanding of children's capacities, (b) improvement in the quality of their relationships with children, (c) greater awareness of and sensitivity towards children's needs and rights, and (d) practices that reflect greater responsiveness to children's rights and needs.

Fourth area of impact: the community. Other community members demonstrate, experience or build: (a) changes in attitudes and better understanding, leading to enhancements in the status of children within the community, (b) greater awareness within the community, including local government, of the rights of children, and (c) more willingness to act in the best interests of children.

Fifth area of impact: programme initiatives and other institutions. Professionals, directors and managers demonstrate, experience or build: (a) changes in programmes and initiatives that reflect children's expressed concerns and priorities,

(b) a willingness to adjust programmes and initiatives in order to share more management control with children, (c) the participation of children in numerous other fora as an accepted approach towards childhood development and in order to capture the benefits of children's participation for the community, and (d) a transformation in the organisational culture of local programmes and institutions, as well as donors, that reflects greater respect for the rights of children.

Sixth area of impact: the rights of children. All the stakeholders demonstrate, experience or build: (a) a safer, more secure environment for children within their families and communities, (b) more willingness to consult with and take account of children's views on many issues of significance to their lives, (c) greater opportunities for children to participate in decisions within their families, their pre-schools and schools, and in the community, and (d) policies, regulations, laws and resource allocations that help establish better access by children to adequate educational and recreational facilities, promote greater respect for the rights of children and reduce rates of abuse and violence involving children.

Notes

1. Hart J, Newman J, and Ackermann L (2004) *Children changing their world: Understanding and evaluating children's participation in development*. Plan International (UK): Woking, Surrey, UK
2. See Gerison Lansdown's "Participation and young children" in this issue. See also: International Save the Children Alliance (2003) *So you want to consult with children?: A Toolkit of good practice*. International Save the Children Alliance: <www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/publications.html>
3. The three modes of engagement – consultation, shared decision-making and self-initiated or self-managed processes – are indicated by keywords in brackets in the descriptions here and below.
4. For more information, see Feinstein C, Karkara R and Laws S (2004) *A workshop report on child participation in the UN study on violence against children*. International Save the Children Alliance <www.crin.org/docs/resources/publications/participationworkshop.pdf>

Mexico

Pay attention to me!

Documentation and child participation

Kate Waters, Hine Fellow with Melel Xojobal*

Melel Xojobal, an NGO working with urban indigenous children and families in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, has begun to use documentation as a tool to explore children's participation in generating knowledge.

Child participation is not new to Melel Xojobal. Each of its three intervention programmes with children develops its own mechanisms so that children can participate and make decisions about that particular programme. However, decisions are also made at an institutional level that deal with the coordination of the intervention programmes, with long term strategy, and with institutional policies and values. Melel Xojobal has realised that it must incorporate child participation at this level too, and in doing so is asking itself how documentation can play a role in letting children co-define its values, policies, and strategic vision.

The department in charge of including child participation at a coordination and advisory is the Área de Fortalecimiento Institucional ('Area of Institutional Capacity Building' – AICB). It integrates information from Melel Xojobal's children's programmes in ways that stimulate learning and reflection both inside and outside the organisation. It oversees staff training, systematises and evaluates organisational experience, develops educational materials, and creates thematic knowledge databases. In terms of documentary methods, the AICB has found one way so far to include children's perspectives and opinions in Melel Xojobal's strategic planning.

Documentation and institutional evaluation

In the first half of 2004, AICB carried out a documentation process that included digitally

recording interviews with children participating in Melel Xojobal's Calles ('streets') project. In Calles, staff members go to public spaces such as squares and markets, to teach reading and writing skills, and to promote cultural reflection among children who work in the streets. The interviews focused on children's experiences with the programme and staff. The questions included: *What have you learned? What do you like best about what we do? What don't you like about what we do together? Are there days when you can't come to Calles? Why? Is it better for us to speak in Spanish, in Tsotsil, or in both languages? How do the other children behave during activities? Has anything bad ever happened while we were working together? What can we change about the programme to make it better?*

The children's responses are thought-provoking insights into how Melel Xojobal's educational strategies are functioning 'on the ground.' For example, responses to questions about how parents see the Calles programme revealed that they are overwhelmingly supportive of their children's attendance, yet at the same time, they depend on their children for economic support. One boy explained, *"When my mother sees you, she tells me to go with you ... she says, 'I want you to read!'"* Yet, when asked if he could come every day, he replied, *"There are days I don't come. I sell ice cream. I want to come, but mom won't let me – 'Go sell your ice cream' [she says]. If I don't sell a lot she scolds me."*

Children also shared the difficulties they encountered in the programme. One resonant theme was physical aggression among children: *"There's a boy who hits a lot,"* Elias, 8 years old, said. When asked what he thinks when this happens, he replied, *"I don't want to be here!"* While the consistent efforts by Calles staff



The children's responses are thought-provoking insights into how Melel Xojobal's educational strategies are functioning 'on the ground'

have led to a big reduction in hitting, the children's commentaries suggest that the team may have to revisit this issue. In the meantime, the children have their own ideas about how staff members should handle problems that arise.

Asking the children for suggestions and opinions on how to handle issues, or how things 'should be', was a central interview component. One of the themes the children were most adamant about was that staff members continue to speak both Spanish, the national language, and Tsotsil, their own indigenous language. Julio, aged 8, explained that he didn't understand much Spanish, but he did understand everything in Tsotsil. Nonetheless, when asked what should be spoken in the programme, he replied with certainty: *"I'd like you to teach us both! Spanish because I don't speak it much but I want to be able to understand it, and Tsotsil because it is my mother tongue."* Language is an important issue in all of

Melel Xojobal's projects, and the children remind Melel Xojobal that whatever theoretical debates about bilingualism it enters into on an institutional level, it must take their reality into account, in which Spanish is an economic necessity and Calles an important resource for language practice.

The documentary audio format was a large part of the children's participatory experience. But it was also a key learning experience for staff. Hearing the children's responses – the pauses, the rise and fall in voices, the tones and emotions – made for a more immediate, provocative, and revealing experience than the same material presented on paper. The challenge for the AICB now is to carry the power of this documentation into the formal institutional space. Currently, the interviews are being edited into short sound pieces, grouping together children's responses to each question, for a CD. The CD will be accompanied by a reflection guide that includes

observations and questions about the issues evoked by the children. One example raised by the children is the issue of parental pressure. This raises questions such as what strategies Melel Xojobal's programmes can implement with families so that an agreement is reached that allows children to balance responsibilities with time to attend Calles. Is Melel Xojobal disseminating information about its programmes to communities in a way that encourages participation from families? The CD and reflection guide will be distributed both to the Calles team and to Melel Xojobal's central coordinating committee as tools for analysing the advances and challenges in its programming.

Children have their own ideas about how staff members should handle problems that arise.

Documentation in institutional philosophy and public policy

Melel Xojobal's second initiative in documentation and child participation is aimed at promoting children's rights in like-minded organizations. One of its institutional objectives is to develop a policy on the issue of children's rights in relation to child work. All the children work part-time or full-time to contribute to the family income. Given the social and cultural context, Melel Xojobal feels that it can contribute an important anti-abolitionist voice to the child work debate.

The model for the process of policy definition is twofold: first, staff and volunteers conduct research and documentation projects on previously defined aspects of children's rights; second, Melel Xojobal participates in a 'research-seminar' process in which this material is reviewed and analysed. After the third seminar, Melel Xojobal will begin drafting and revising the policy paper.

In planning this policy definition process, AICB has faced the question: 'Who creates knowledge?' As the organisation moves through a learning and analysis process, who are the 'expert' voices to whom Melel Xojobal turns for perspective and guidance? It has

realised that the voices of authority are not just other organisations, fieldworkers, academics or authors. Children also have the voice of authority and the right to be heard in the halls of power, and it is Melel Xojobal's responsibility to carry them there.

Conclusions

Both of these initiatives are in early stages, and Melel Xojobal cannot yet offer final results and analysis. However, they already offer encouraging results and challenging questions about child participation in all levels of organisational life, and are causing Melel Xojobal to review some of its practices. Will Melel Xojobal establish permanent child councils to advise on various issues? Will it establish documentary projects that will share the perspectives of a wider segment of the population? How can children both inform other decision-makers and be included in decision-making?

For the time being, Melel Xojobal continues to depend on staff for key decisions, and it is likely that adults will always hold leverage in institutions. But documentary methods, because of their intellectual and emotional power, are techniques that can help them become better informed and more empathetic decision-makers. Children are prepared and willing to express their knowledge and opinions on their lives and on organisational life. What do their words and images have to teach us, and how will we make those words accessible to our institutions? They are talking. Are we listening?

* The Bernard van Leer Foundation currently supports the Lewis Hine Documentary Initiative, aimed at developing documentary projects on issues that are central to children and families. For more information please visit <www.cds.aas.duke.edu/hine>.

Zimbabwe
**On the way
to child participation**

Doreen Munyati-Nyamukapa, Director of the African Network for the Prevention of and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) and Dumisani Mnyandu, Project Officer ANPPCAN

Child participation, in the sense of enabling children to make their views known and having them taken into account during discussions and decision-making processes, is a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe – it first made an appearance together with globalisation. Cultural norms and values used to determine how children were perceived and, until recently, it was unheard of to talk of child participation in Zimbabwe: the child was there to be told, to listen or to be punished. Even today, children in rural areas have fewer opportunities for participation than do the urban children, mostly because rural settings remain more traditional than do urban settings.

But child participation is slowly gaining momentum. Our country's constitution allows certain rights such as freedom of expression, although for children – and especially young children – this is subject to parental guidance. In practice, child participation means involving children in activities that directly or indirectly affect them. They may be present for discussions and may air their views, perhaps in creative ways that allow them to express themselves, perhaps with some support from adults.

Examples

The most obvious example of child participation in Zimbabwe is our Child Parliament, which has child representatives from each constituency. It meets regularly to discuss children's issues and make recommendations that are passed on to legislators for consideration. Participation is voluntary, and the parents or caregivers have to give their consent. There is some criticism of the Child Parliament. For example, that it is not fully representative of

all children since it is composed mostly of urban and elite children. It is also unclear whether children under the age of five are represented at all. Moreover, some people argue that the Child Parliament is politicised and that children are told what to say. On the positive side, however, there is potential for children to effectively lobby for child-friendly budgets, quality education and improvements in health services. Additionally, it can be a good basis for a national and community peace-building process, as a culture of participation and dialogue is instilled at a young age. And it is also worth noting that the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation reinforces the benefits of the Child Parliament with a number of television programmes through which children can communicate their views and feelings.

However, most child participation takes place in two settings that share a belief in creative activities and processes as the most effective tools for ensuring that children under 9 years can participate in developmental work.

The first setting is the early childhood development centre/infant school. Currently, the African Network for the Prevention of and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) in Zimbabwe is working on simplifying the African Charter on the Welfare of Children. To do this, we are involving children by having them send drawings, paintings and poems about what would benefit them. These are then linked to relevant articles of the Charter.

The second setting is the art-oriented organisations such as Inkululeko Yabatsha School of Arts



Photo: Courtesy ANPPCAN

Implementing child participation requires sensitive adult guidance

(IYASA), the Children’s Performing Arts Workshop (CHIPAWO <www.chipawo.co.zw>) and the Amakhosi Theatre for Community Action. These organisations work with children of up to 18 years of age, are internationally recognised and, besides moulding their creative talents, also give children an opportunity to write poems and short stories, to put on plays and to use music and dance as avenues of expression.

Building child participation systematically

To move on from these achievements, we need a systematic approach to developing or implementing child participation that involves all stakeholders. We also need to follow principles such as:

- 1 projects should not discriminate on the basis of age, gender, abilities, race or ethnicity;
- 2 projects should address child-related issues that

have been established through consultation with children and other stakeholders;

- 3 children should not be forced to participate in activities, they should do so voluntarily;
- 4 there should be sensitive adult guidance;
- 5 there should be recognised limits and clearly defined boundaries to child participation;
- 6 organisations should have clearly defined objective(s) and effective ways of ensuring child participation;
- 7 organisations and personnel must be patient and flexible;
- 8 skills training camps or gatherings that encourage participation may need professionals such as medical personnel and social scientists who know how to manage children’s behaviours.

We also need to confront a number of challenges to child participation, as this new phenomenon

is facing some resistance from communities. The following are some of the challenges.

We need a systematic approach to developing or implementing child participation that involves all stakeholders

Culture (the greatest challenge). In most cultures, power in a family is distributed according to age. Thus, young children are at the bottom of the hierarchy of power and there is no way they will be given a chance to be heard. Countering this calls for strong lobbying and advocacy for child participation. One especially important area to tackle is the problem of girls being marginalised and restricted to activities within the family, while boys have the freedom to operate outside of the family at a young age. However, this is being challenged by improvements in education and by globalisation.

Lack of qualified support. There is a shortage of professionals who can work successfully with children, especially in the rural areas.

Inappropriate language. Adult language may not be appropriate for young children: discussion needs to be in terms that make sense to children if child representation in discussions with adults is to be successful.

Adult control. In Zimbabwean legislation, parents or caregivers are authorised to represent children. This puts a filter on the voices of children speaking for themselves and can reduce the extent to which children can participate in certain activities. Equally, children cannot engage in activities without some guidance from adults, and this may distort what children want to express.

Dubious motives. Child participation can be used to gain political mileage. This normally results in parents or caregivers refusing to allow children to participate.

The consequences of child participation, according to ANPPCAN

Positive

Children who experience participation at an early age will grow up appreciating certain freedoms and other human rights that are fundamental to human development.

Their self-confidence will increase as they develop their ability to speak publicly and articulate their opinions and concerns clearly.

They will develop their own social safety nets to cushion hardships and reduce stress and embarrassment.

They will gain increased knowledge and awareness about a broad range of issues and challenges that communities face. Thus they will acquire specific skills and abilities, such as interpersonal and communication skills, which are important for their cognitive and social development, and for their future roles in society.

Negative

Too much participation compromises time to play and energy for other activities.

An adult perspective: if they become too empowered, they may become very difficult to control with a tendency to claim to know everything.

The Netherlands

Learning to let go

Based on an interview with Jorien Meerdink, Director of Wetenschappelijke Educatieve en Sociaal-culturele Projecten

Wetenschappelijke Educatieve en Sociaal-culturele Projecten ('scientific educational and socio-cultural projects' – WESP) is a Dutch NGO established in 1989 by Jorien Meerdink. WESP believes that services should not only respond to the needs of children, but that children themselves should participate in the decision-making process. WESP developed the 'vraaggericht werken' approach (which in the context of working with children loosely translates as 'child-driven work') in which carers are trained to work with children in ways that allow them to co-determine what services do and how they deliver. WESP provides training and support to institutions to achieve this. This article focuses on one particular school – Vragenderwijs ('asking as you go') – as an example.

Child-directed learning

The term 'children's participation' is open to interpretation. Many schools claim they use a children's participation approach because they let children participate in making decisions about outings and play activities. WESP's vision of children's participation is that children, including young children, should be able to co-direct everything that affects them. This goes beyond involving children in the services that adults decide to provide – it means that the services themselves should be co-determined by the children.

This does not mean that the responsibility lies entirely with the children. The teaching staff have a professional responsibility, and this must be upheld. All schools are subject to national educational standards, and the teachers must ensure that the children fulfill these requirements. In WESP's vision, within these parameters, the children are able to learn at their own pace and at their own level, in ways that they prefer.

The Vragenderwijs School – an example of the child-driven approach

WESP mostly trains and supports staff in existing schools. In one case – the Vragenderwijs School – WESP established a school from scratch, entirely in consultation with the children. The children co-decided what facilities there would be, and they chose what and how to learn. When the school first started, there was no furniture, there were no books, pens or paper. Even the teaching staff were temporary because the WESP team wanted to hear from the children themselves who should work there. Some of these staff members were uncomfortable at first because they were not used to working in an empty room with no teaching equipment. Instead of having proper classrooms and the materials they felt they needed to teach, they were expected to ask the children what they needed and wanted. The teachers settled down soon, however, because the children quickly began to tell them what they needed. On the first day they bought pens, paper, play materials, and books. Within days the children and teachers had created a dynamic learning environment. This happened so quickly that the teachers were able to 'let go' of regular teaching practices, and trust the children that they would make the right decisions. This was a useful lesson. Teachers tend to want to have everything ready for children in advance, but this can lead to a situation where children are no longer stimulated to come up with their own ideas and become passive users.

On the opening day of the school, the children did as they pleased. A messy situation ensued. The staff then started asking the children questions such as "How does this make you feel? Can we make it better?" One of the older children suggested, "We have to come together at the end of every day and make a plan for the next day." A 6-year old said,



Children can choose to learn through means that they feel comfortable with

"That's good, but not at the end of the day because you're tired. We have to talk at the beginning of the day." They then suggested to hold a *kring* ('circle') session, first thing every morning. Each day now starts with the *kring*, in which issues are discussed, agreements made, and decisions taken. Also, since there were no schedules at first, teachers came in at different times, and children sometimes missed lessons. After complaints by the children, the teaching staff asked, "How can you know when there is something interesting on?" On the children's initiative, schedules were developed.

Joint activities

Vragenderwijs believes that childrearing and education are joint activities between the school and parents. The parents and the school draw up a plan together to update each other on the children's progress. The close contact with the parents allows the school to learn how the children are doing outside the school. The staff are often told that many of the children feel more at ease now. Some children

had been unhappy at their previous schools, some had even stopped going to school, and others had been expelled. These children now look forward to going to school.

When asked, the older children at Vragenderwijs, who can compare this school to 'regular' schools, said they prefer Vragenderwijs. They can choose what they want to do, and they can choose to learn in ways and means that they feel comfortable with. This helps them to confidently tackle the subjects that they find interesting or difficult. Many children who were insecure about their capabilities, either because they did not perform well or because their high intelligence made them dysfunctional, flourish at Vragenderwijs School because the basis of their learning is doing what they are good at.

WESP trains teachers in the philosophy that children learn better if they are stimulated rather than forced to learn. It explains that different children will learn different things at different times. Parents as well as teachers, however, do have to get used to this approach, and they have to learn to trust the children and to let them direct their own learning programme.

Can all schools successfully adopt the child-driven approach?

Although a number of schools have adopted the child-driven work approach successfully, some schools failed to implement it. These tend to be schools where the approach was enforced by the principal, or where the teachers did not feel comfortable asking the children their opinions. If teachers do not support the approach, then children will not be asked the right questions in the right way. At the same time, teachers cannot be expected to listen to the children when the principal does not listen to the teachers. The starting point of the approach is an ability and a willingness to make changes based on children's opinions. Without it, real participation will not be possible. WESP emphasises that where the approach has not worked, it has never been because of the children. There has never been a situation where the children were not able to take this on – the problem has always been with the organisation.

South Africa

Hey mum, that's me on the radio!

Based on an interview with Adele Mostert, Manager of Productions and Marketing, ABC Ulwazi

Community radio is big in South Africa, with over 100 stations across the country reaching different interest groups, language groups and so on. Using radio to communicate educational and developmental messages, ABC Ulwazi also produces educational programmes for and by children and young people, and distributes them to community radio stations.

ABC Ulwazi believes that community radio has a unique role in allowing children to express themselves and to show that they can be active participants in their own communities. It is working to get more children's programmes on air, and to encourage communities to give children a space too. Apart from addressing children, its programmes are also designed to talk to caregivers about children's rights and to motivate them in their work with children.

ABC Ulwazi is doing pioneering work especially for very young children (under 9 years), who are seldom heard on radio anywhere in the world. It produces programmes at its studios in Johannesburg, and it develops projects to involve children and young people at the stations that it works with in various provinces across the country.

Through the Khuluma uKhululeke – Speak Free project, ABC Ulwazi helps teenagers in local communities to develop the skills necessary to speak to and interview children under 9 about their views on early childhood development and on children's rights issues. Much of this is through working with stories upon which young children comment. Comments are edited into short pieces for broadcasting. Comments are used by writers for ideas and case studies, or to illustrate an issue.

The materials gathered from young children contribute to a 30-minute weekly radio programme which is scheduled to run for six months – a total of 24 programmes. To add to the local materials, ABC Ulwazi contributes a maximum of 10 minutes per programme. This draws heavily on oral tradition and – given that it is broadcast in KwaZulu Natal – on Zulu folklore to present the sometimes abstract topics in accessible ways. The idea is to help the local presenters of the radio shows to stimulate debate and discussion with listeners on specific early childhood development topics.

The first phase of the project – essentially a pilot project – focussed on the development of a methodology for involving under-9s and culminated in the production of the first Khuluma uKhululeke – Speak Free programmes to test the techniques. This was a series of ten radio programmes that included the voices of children recorded at ABC Ulwazi's workshops, a three-minute children's radio drama, and a social worker giving expert advice on topics raised in the episode.

The realities

ABC Ulwazi's original brief sounded simple: to produce children's rights radio programmes for young children. The challenge came in how it was to achieve this. Not only did it need to produce programmes for children, but it also needed to engage children in the production process so that the programmes were made *by* children.

Early childhood development centres were the starting points for developing a workshop methodology. Here, the children were all in one place and workshop facilities were easily organised.



Radio drama is an effective medium where children respond best to hearing other children's voices

The children were comfortable with their familiar surroundings and with one another, and the principal helped organise the children in the right place and the right time.

To make the recordings, members of the ABC Ulwazi team or the mentors at the local radio stations go to an early childhood development centre. There they do a session with the children to get them used to the recording equipment: they invite the young children to come up and speak into the microphone to tell something about themselves, for example. Actual discussions with the young children follow, and these are based on stories that touch on children's rights, prepared in advance to stimulate their ideas. From these, children often improvise their own stories and dramas, and these are fed into the programme as it is developed.

Centres are selected on the basis of their enthusiasm, organisational skills, punctuality, reliability and the friendliness of the children. Also, a mix of different environments and community issues is sought. One

clue to a centre fitting these criteria was observing whether the children introduced themselves. This showed that the children felt open to communicate and that their views and opinions were respected within the centre's environment. Children who made their way to the front row, who were eager to communicate with the microphone and who expressed their opinions were sought out. But some of the quieter children were also included in smaller groups, in which they had space to express themselves.

Completed programmes are played back to participating groups. This serves a research purpose: to gauge the children's responses to the programmes. The aim being to observe their reactions – what do they laugh at, listen to, enjoy, ignore? Afterwards, the teacher/facilitator engages with the children, asking questions to see if the messages were received.

Conclusions

It is difficult to judge the listenership among children – at present it may be quite small. But by having more and better-quality children's programming, ABC Ulwazi is encouraging both a culture of children listening to the radio and a culture of children's radio programming. It feels reinforced in this by knowing that radio drama is an effective medium in educating children on particular points, and that children respond best to hearing other children's voices. The hope is that children can grow up hearing themselves and their issues on radio, given the growth of the community radio sector in South Africa and the significance of radio as a developmental and educational tool.

One question that ABC Ulwazi cannot answer at this point in time though is how viable it really is to work with such young children. At the moment the work is experimental. Even though most children today grow up media savvy, ABC Ulwazi feels that, as media have less of an impact in rural areas, children there will continue to live in more traditional situations, where the belief still is that 'children should be seen but not heard'. It is therefore in the rural areas that initiatives such as the Khuluma uKhululeke – Speak Free project are needed most.

Scotland

Beyond expected roles

Young children as social actors

Linda Kinney, Head of Early Childhood, Stirling Council Children's Services

Central to Stirling Council's approach to early years education and childcare, family support and community-based daycare for vulnerable and other children is that it gives children the opportunity to move beyond their expected role as recipients of services to become social actors entitled to impact on the decisions affecting their lives.

In Stirling we believe that children are giving us very powerful messages. We see and hear them as small babies as they gurgle and cry, and we observe the way they move and how they 'listen' to the world around them with all their senses. We see in our young children the many and varied ways in which they engage with each other and with the adults around them, we hear them talk and laugh, we watch them explore, we witness their curiosity and also how they 'listen' to the world around them with all their senses.

Spending time with young children has led us to the belief that as adults we have a great deal to learn from our youngest children, about children themselves, about the world around us and about ourselves.

It is this belief and the opportunity to share inspirational practice with our colleagues in Scandinavia and Reggio Emilia¹ which encouraged us to think about the ways in which we listened to children in Stirling and about how to go further.

Although many of our nurseries in Stirling were actively engaged in listening to children and consulting with them, we began to explore more formal consultation methods. The point was to make the processes and outcomes of consulting with children – and the impact of their participation –

more visible, both to the children and to the adults. As a result of this, a range of techniques to elicit the views of our youngest children and to encourage their participation began to develop. One technique was small group discussions, using pictures or samples of equipment, to make decisions on a range of topics. The example from practice below shows how this technique was used.

Purchasing new resources

Children (3–4 years olds) had asked if the nursery could have more musical instruments so that everyone in the group could have one each. In small groups, the children were shown samples of available musical instruments from a catalogue. The instruments were discussed and there was lots of talking between children and staff and explanations of the different types of instruments and the possible options. The children were then invited to choose from a particular range. One instrument in particular caught their eye: they were very excited by the possibility of having a large drum. Faced with the choice between buying several small instruments or one large drum, the majority of children decided that they would choose the drum, although they understood that this meant there would still not be enough musical instruments for everyone in the group.

The impact of these discussions with the children was significant both for the children and the staff:

- some children had difficulty in accepting that the decision of the majority of children did not match their decision;



Selecting and discussing items from a catalogue

- some staff had difficulty in accepting the decision of the children;
- some staff were concerned that it may adversely affect those children who found it difficult and for some staff this led to a dilemma. What should they do for the children who 'lost out'? How best should they deal with the children's emotional response?

These outcomes of what appeared to be initially a straight forward formal consultation with children about nursery resources led the nursery staff into the following:

- dialogue and reflection around professional and personal values, including the role of staff in supporting children's choices;
- their responsibility for, and feelings about, individual children's reactions;
- consideration about the democratic process, in particular the differences between what may be in the best interests of the individual and the group;
- further consideration about adult–child

relationships, in particular the recognition of the adult–child power base and the implications of changes in this.

The impact of engaging in more formal consultations with children and making their voices heard also had implications for the wider service. As a result, children's voices are more visible in the nursery; changes are taking place in the planning for children's learning and the organisation of nursery space to more readily accommodate the children's interests; and adults are gaining valuable insights into children's early learning as well as their own learning.

Listening to young children has become a way of thinking as well as working in Stirling. We are currently engaged in researching and exploring approaches that will support this new way of working and thinking; and we are documenting the outcomes and impact of listening to children on our early years policy and practice.

Photo: Courtesy Stirling Council Children's Services

Further reading

Websites

The Child Rights Information Network (CRIN)

A global network that disseminates information about the Convention on the Rights of the Child and child rights amongst non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations agencies, inter-governmental organisation (IGOs), educational institutions, and other child rights experts. Established in 1995, CRIN has a membership of more than 1,400 organisations in over 130 countries. Its objectives are: (1) to meet the information needs of organisations and individuals working for children's rights; (2) to support and promote the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; (3) to support organisations in gathering, handling, producing and disseminating child rights information through training, capacity building and the development of electronic and non-electronic networking tools.

<www.crin.org>

Children as Partners (CAP)

Children as Partners (CAP) is a project of the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD), based at the University of Victoria, Canada.

The aim of CAP is to support young people and adults in working together so young people have opportunities to participate in their families, communities and broader civil society, and bring to life their right to participate as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Building on the many successful examples of child participation work that is already done, CAP

aims to connect everyone around the world who wants to promote the participation of children in matters and decisions that affect them.

CAP wants to create widespread support for children's participation and to be a mechanism for new partnerships, renewed commitments, greater accountability and practical action.

<www.iicrd.org/cap>

earlychildhood.org.uk

Website from the Early Childhood Unit (ECU) at the National Children's Bureau in England. This site contains information on specific topics in early years care and education. At the moment, there is a section 'Listening as a way of life', where the following factsheets can be downloaded: Why and how we listen to young children; Are equalities an issue?; Finding out what young children think; Listening to young disabled children; Listening to babies; Supporting parents and carers to listen: Guide for practitioners.

<www.earlychildhood.org.uk>

Child Workers in Asia: South Asian Task Force on children's participation

As the Asia region is large, diverse and conflict-ridden, there is a dire need for a mechanism to facilitate regional-level dialogue and co-operation among child rights defenders and the advocates of child participation. Recognising this, Child Workers in Asia and its South Asian partners organized a meeting in Kathmandu in 2002 to put their thoughts together. The meeting unanimously decided to establish

a South Asian Task Force on Children's Participation to promote collaborative actions in the region.

<www.cwa.tnet.co.th/sa_task_force_on_child_participation/south_asia_task_force_on_cp.htm>

Books

Children's rights: Voice

Nicola Edwards
Save the Children UK/ Evans Brothers Limited
2004; ISBN 0-237-52554-2

Children's rights: Voice looks at the rights of children to express their opinions and to have a say in how they live their lives. It shows how, by getting involved and playing an active part in their world, children can help to improve things. Children's stories from Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, Nepal and Brazil show children making their views heard and playing an active role in their communities.

<www.savethechildren.org.uk>

Never too young

How young people can take responsibility and make decisions
Judy Miller
Save the Children UK
2003; ISBN 1 84187 075 7

This practical handbook shows how young children under the age of 8 can participate, make decisions and take responsibility for their actions. It provides early years workers with information about why participation works,

and tried and tested techniques for involving children in the decisions that affect them.

<www.savethechildren.org.uk>

So you want to involve children in research?

A toolkit supporting children's meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children
Save the Children Sweden
2004; ISBN 91-7321-088-9

Available for download:
<www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/So_you_want_to_research_apr2004.pdf>

So you want to consult with children?

A toolkit for good practice
International Save the Children Alliance
2003; ISBN 82-7481-099-6

This toolkit is based upon the experience of Save the Children in helping to facilitate children's meaningful participation in the process leading up to, and including, the 2002 UN General Assembly Special Session on Children.

It is mainly aimed at governments, international agencies and NGOs which want to involve or consult with children in a meaningful way. It is not intended for project workers or researchers working on their own unless they are involved in structured consultations or focus group work.

Available for download:
<www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/childconsult_toolkit_final.pdf>

Children & young people as citizens

Partners for social change
Save the Children South & Central Asia Region
2003

In South and Central Asia the thought and philosophies of all religions have significantly influenced the traditional definitions of children’s rights and obligations. While some attitudes toward children and childhood provide spaces for children’s participation and citizenship, the dominant ideas and principles are contrary to recognizing them as persons, and thus severely limit children’s participation and citizenship rights. This set of publications compiles learning that resulted from a study of the region. It provides a wealth of examples of children’s participation and citizenship in families, communities, schools, work places, local government bodies and other settings.

<www.savethechildren.net/nepal/citizens.html>

Listening to young children: The Mosaic approach

Clark, A, and Moss, P.
National Children’s Bureau
2001

Outlines a new framework for listening to young children’s perspectives on their daily lives – the Mosaic approach. This approach has been developed with 3–4-year olds in an early childhood institution and has been adapted to work with children under 2 (including pre-verbal children), children for whom English is an additional language, keyworkers and parents. The aim is to find practical ways to contribute to the development of services that are responsive to the ‘voice of the child’ and which recognise young children’s competencies. Many of the examples and case studies involve very young children.

<www.earlychildhood.org.uk/resources>

Journals, newsletters

Children and young people’s participation

Child Rights Information Network
October 2002

Through a series of regional overviews and thematic case studies, this issue of the CRIN Newsletter reviews how far children’s and young people’s participation has progressed. The overviews present the state of the art in each region, examine key barriers to effective participation and suggest specific recommendations, based on experience, to improve future practice. The thematic case studies describe examples of children’s participation in a variety of contexts.

Available for download: <www.crin.org/docs/resources/publications/crinvol16e.pdf>

Children’s participation in HIV/AIDS programming

International HIV/AIDS Alliance
December 2002

This two-page newsletter explores some of the challenges to children’s participation and describes how organisations have made their children’s programmes more participatory.

Available for download: <www.aidsalliance.org/_res/ovc/Reports/OVC%20Newsletter%202002.pdf>

Children in Europe

Children in Europe is a collaboration between a network of national magazines from eight European countries. Its main aim is to enable the exchange of ideas, practice and information, focusing in particular on young children.

The first edition of this magazine (September 2001) is on listening to young children, showing how this issue is becoming an important subject in many European countries. It brings together articles on practice and research, drawing on different theories and

disciplines, raising many questions not only about how to listen, but also about what listening means and why it matters.

As well as English, *Children in Europe* is available in Italian, Catalan, Spanish, Dutch, Danish, French and German.

<www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/pub_ciem.htm>

Manuals, others...

Starting with choice

Inclusive strategies for consulting young children
Save the Children UK
2004; ISBN 1-8-84187-085-4

Starting with choice provides early years workers with clear, practical guidance on consulting young children, and a range of techniques to help them to express their views and make choices. It also looks at when consultation can be effective, and how it fits in to the foundation stage guidance, and how to train and support early years workers to gain the skills they need.

<www.savethechildren.org.uk>

Child participation

ROOTS series No 7
Tearfund
2004

This book looks at the importance of including children in community life and in project planning, implementation and evaluation. It includes ideas and tools to help organisations integrate children into their planning within a project cycle framework.

www.tilz.info

Creating better cities with children and youth

A manual for participation
David Driskell
UNESCO / Earthscan Publications

2002; ISBN 92-3-103815-X (UNESCO)
ISBN 1 85383 853 5 (Earthscan)

A practical manual on how to conceptualise, structure and facilitate the participation of young people in the community development process.

Case studies from project sites help to demonstrate the methods in action and show how they can be customised to meet local needs.

This manual is an important tool for urban planners, municipal officials, community development staff, non-governmental organisations, educators, youth-serving agencies, youth advocates, and others who are involved in the community development process.

Order form at: <www.unesco.org/publishing> or <www.earthscan.co.uk>

Understanding and evaluating children’s participation

A review of contemporary literature
Plan UK/ Plan International
October 2003

This review examines current approaches to the evaluation of children’s participation in development. Its principal focus is on children’s participation in local level activities, both child-led initiatives and community development processes involving adults and children together.

Available for download: <www.plan-uk.org/action/childrenindevelopment>

Promoting children’s participation in democratic decision-making

Gerison Lansdown
Innocenti Insight, 6
UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre
2001, ISBN 88-85401-73-2
Other languages: French, Italian

In this Innocenti Insight, Gerison Lansdown examines the meaning of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which

says that children are entitled to participate in the decisions that affect them. Lansdown takes a close look at the full meaning of this Article as a tool that can help children themselves to challenge abuses of their rights and take action to defend those rights. She also stresses what the Article does not do. It does not, for example, give children the right to ride roughshod over the rights of others – particularly parents. The Insight makes a strong case for listening to children, outlining the implications of failing to do so and challenging many of the arguments that have been levelled against child participation. It is, above all, a practical guide to this issue, with clear checklists for child participation in conferences and many concrete examples of recent initiatives.

Available for download: <www.unicef-icdc.org/publications>

A journey in children's participation

The Concerned for Working Children
2002

The Concerned for Working Children has been working in partnership with children for the past 25 years to enhance their participation and realise their rights. This document puts together some of the experiences and perceptions related to children's participation that have been gathered over the years and tries to convert these into principles and tools that would further the pedagogy and praxis of children's participation.

<www.workingchild.org>

Creating space for children's participation:

Planning with street children in Yangon, Myanmar
Partners in Development- A World Vision Discussion Paper
World Vision Australia
2001

An evaluation of a programme with street children programme in which the key objective was to empower the participants (especially the 'users' or 'beneficiaries' – the children) to evaluate and be involved with project decision making.

Available for download: www.wvi.org/wvi/publications/publications.htm

Results-based management (RBM) and children's participation

A guide to incorporating child participation results into CIDA programs
Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
2003

This publication provides a summary of learning on good practices in child participation, steps to consider when planning child participation within CIDA projects and programs, as well as a checklist for child participation in CIDA projects. The tool also contains two sample project plans and describes how to include children's meaningful participation in the following: (1) logical framework analysis; (2) child participation strategy; (3) work breakdown structure; and (4) project performance measurement.

Available for download: <www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/childprotection>

Evaluating and researching young people's participation in public decision-making

Perpetua Kirby
Carnegie Young People Initiative
2002

This report examines the different ways in which the involvement of young people in decision-making could be measured and evaluated. It recommends a number of different ways of effectively evaluating work in a variety of settings. As a result of this report, Carnegie YPI is now planning the production of an evaluation toolkit.

Available for download: <www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/cypi/publications/measuring_the_magic>

Forthcoming publications on children's participation

Can you hear me?

The right of young children to participate in decisions affecting them
Gerison Lansdown
Publisher: Bernard van Leer Foundation
Expected release date: First quarter 2005

Many of the key players spearheading the debate on the Convention on the Rights of the Child have been NGOs whose involvement is predominantly with older children. Their active engagement in the promotion of child participation has derived from a rights-based analysis of children's lives. It is rooted in recognition that children are entitled to be involved in decisions that affect their lives.

However, the Convention on the Rights of the Child extends the right to be listened to and taken seriously to all children capable of expressing views – and that, of course, includes younger children.

This paper argues that there is an urgent imperative to begin to explore what this means in practice for children under eight and how it can be implemented.

Beyond listening: Children's perspectives on early childhood services

Alison Clark, Anne Trine Kjørholt and Peter Moss
Publisher: Policy Press Bristol
Expected release date: Autumn 2005

The starting point for this book is the burgeoning interest in listening to children. There is evidence of this interest at international, national and local levels. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989 has increased awareness of the importance of children's participation,

including recognising the importance of their views. There have been moves at a government level to introduce mechanisms for listening to the views and experiences of children. At a service level, there has been a growth over the past 15 years in organisations seeking the views of users. This has begun to include children and young people, where children's views are in some instances gathered about health and welfare services, but less frequently about education. The language of consumerism, too, has had an impact in this area, with children increasingly viewed as consumers not only of products like clothing but also of services, consumers whose preferences can be sought.

There has, however, been far less attention given to listening to young children (i.e. those below the age of 6 or 7). One difficulty relates to the methods necessary for listening to and responding to the views and experiences of young children, including those who are pre-verbal. There are also ethical considerations in considering young children's abilities to participate together with their need for protection.

These debates raise a number of questions which this book seeks to address by taking a critical look at how listening to young children is understood and practised. It is based on leading examples of work in this field by practitioners and researchers from a number of countries. Each chapter is rooted in the everyday lives of young children, in particular as lived in early childhood services.

News from the Foundation

Discussion day of the Committee on the Rights of the Child

The rights of young children

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been ratified by more countries than any other UN Convention, but the rights of the youngest children are sometimes overlooked. As mentioned in the last edition of *Early Childhood Matters*, the Committee on the Rights of the Child organised a Day of Discussion to address this issue. It was held in Geneva, Switzerland, in September 2004, and attended by 140 participants from international and human rights agencies, governments and NGOs.

Participants concluded that the rights of young children were often severely violated – particularly the right to life of girls, the right to stable relationships with parents and the right to care before and after birth – and that one of the most difficult challenges is cultural attitudes toward families. There was wide consensus that the importance of the early years is demonstrated by scientific evidence on brain development, economic cost-benefit analysis and research into human development.

In his keynote speech, the Executive Director of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Peter Laugharn, argued that the CRC needs to be interpreted in ways that address both the vulnerability and capacity of young children; we should recognise that early childhood is a time of rapid development which needs to be supported not only through formal schooling but in a wide variety of settings. He also emphasised the need for well-targeted information and popular demystification of the principles of children's rights and child development for communities, parents and children themselves.

Many of the speakers urged the Committee on the Rights of the Child to issue a 'General Comment' on the implementation of the CRC in early childhood. Such a Comment would become part of the 'jurisprudence' of the CRC. Professor Jaap Doek,

Chair of the Committee, could not give a definite commitment but promised that this would get very serious consideration.

Further information at: <www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc>

A major multisectoral initiative on psychosocial support for children impacted by HIV/AIDS

During discussions at the International AIDS Conference in Thailand this year, it became apparent that psychosocial support (PSS) for children impacted by HIV/AIDS is not receiving the attention it deserves. As a follow up to these discussions, the Bernard van Leer Foundation hosted a meeting of 25 experts in South Africa in November 2004.

It focused on four areas: the need for greater understanding of the social and emotional effects of HIV/AIDS on children's development; the PSS implications of the long-term threat of social instability caused by mass orphanhood; frustration with the superficial, jargon-like way that the term 'psychosocial support' is used, creating the need for a clear and shared definition; and the lack of models and indicators for assessing the psychosocial status of children and determining the effectiveness of interventions.

Participants tackled the need for a more systematic programmatic framework around PSS – including how it can be included in multisectoral work – and links to other experiences that may inform PSS work, such as child development theory and programming experience, children in conflict and child protection.

They also planned a series of interventions at the major HIV/AIDS gatherings through 2005 with the objective of bringing PSS for children onto the agenda of the next International AIDS Conference in Toronto in 2006.

New and forthcoming publications from the Bernard van Leer Foundation

Stories we have lived, stories we have learned

Robert Zimmermann, Editor

Expected release date: First quarter 2005

The Bernard van Leer Foundation began the Effectiveness Initiative in 1999 to explore the attributes of a number of effective early childhood development programmes. Each programme was widely recognised as 'effective' in the broad sense that it was meeting basic developmental needs and enhancing the health and welfare of young children and their families, and had shown a good track record for a minimum of 10 years. The Foundation assigned teams to observe the programmes close up and talk with personnel and beneficiaries.

Several years and a great deal of data and documentation later, *Stories we have lived, stories we have learned* has been prepared on the basis of those teams' reports. It is grounded in the philosophy that gave rise to the Effectiveness Initiative: stakeholders alone know what impacts a programme has had on the daily lives of their children, spouses, neighbours and communities, and so are uniquely qualified to assess its effectiveness.

The future will be better

A tracer study of CCF's Early Stimulation Programme in Honduras

Cristina Nufio de Figueroa, Myrna Isabel Mejía Ramirez, José Bohanerges Mejía Urquía
November 2004; ISBN 90-6195-074-0

When children are living in a poor community with few services, all aspects of their lives need to be addressed – which is what the programme of the Christian Children's Fund in Honduras attempts to do. This report illustrates the difference a comprehensive programme can make in the lives of children, their families and the community as a whole. It studies two villages, one with the programme and one without, and shows far-reaching effects in many areas. The programme children felt emotionally secure; they were well-behaved and mixed well with their peers of both sexes; and their health was better than the

comparison group children. But above all, the programme children had internalised values and a sense of self – and they had hopes and dreams for the future.

Twenty years on

A report of the PROMESA programme in Colombia
Marta Arango and Glen Nimnicht with Fernando Peñaranda
November 2004; ISBN 90-6195-075-9

A beautiful location and extreme poverty may seem an unlikely combination, but that was the lot of the people living on the Pacific coast of Chocó in 1976. This was the setting for the PROMESA project, which aimed to influence the physical and emotional health and the intellectual development of the area's children. *Twenty years on* describes the development of PROMESA and its effects on the children, their families and the whole community.

All activities flowed from three basic assumptions about social change: that there needs to be a critical mass; that there must be a cumulative effect that accelerates the rate of change; and that in order to achieve sustainable development there is a need to empower people at all levels. One essential feature of the programme is that outsiders never worked directly with the children, instead they trained local people – mostly women – to implement the programme.

There were improvements at all levels: in health, nutrition, sanitation, etc. But the most striking changes were in the children and in the women who implemented the programme. PROMESA still exists and is run entirely by the local population.

Single copies of the above publications are available free of charge on request from the address mentioned on the back cover. These publications are also available to view or download at: <www.bernardvanleer.org>