

Emerging maps of effectiveness

Ellen M Ilfeld

in consultation with Tom Lent, Leonardo Yáñez, Arellys Yáñez, and Judith L Evans

To examine in some depth what makes early childhood programmes work, the Bernard van Leer Foundation launched the Effectiveness Initiative (EI) in January 1999, in partnership with participants in the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development. The question that is being explored within the EI is ‘What makes early childhood programmes effective, in a variety of contexts, for diverse participants and stakeholders ranging from children, through parents and community members, to policy makers?’

This article discusses how the processes of the EI are revealing factors that can be significant in influencing project effectiveness; and it lists and discusses a number of these factors.

The motivation for the EI came from the fact that, as increasing numbers of donors are providing funding for early childhood programmes, they are turning to the Foundation for advice about how to invest their money effectively – that is, where to place it so that it would best support young children's growth and development. This is logical: the Foundation has been involved in funding programmes for young children and their families for over 25 years. However, when these donors asked, ‘What makes a programme effective?’ we found that we could not readily supply an answer.

The evolution of the EI

Beneath this rather imposing mega-question about programme effectiveness, there is another set of questions at the core of what we in the early childhood development (ECD) community do. These include:

What is our work in ECD teaching us?
How can we get better at what we do – for the sake of children, and for the sake of personal and organisational accountability?

As the EI was being created we talked with key people in programmes that

many considered effective. Ultimately ten projects joined us in this exploration, all of which have at least a ten-year track record. They represent geographic diversity and are illustrative of a variety of approaches.

In addition to being grounded in the in-depth study of ten specific programmes, the EI is designed to be a cross-site, cross-agency collaboration and exchange that stimulates ongoing dialogue about effective programming. Furthermore, it is designed to test the application of qualitative research methods, well tested in other

development arenas, to the field of ECD. The goals of this effort are two-fold: to gain deeper insights into what makes ECD programmes effective, and to activate international dialogue on effectiveness, that takes us... ‘beyond our present scant measures and indicators of programme success.’ (Evans and Salole, 1999*). As a result of the work with these ten projects we hope to be able to develop methods and maps for examining other programmes in the future.

To accompany each site in its application of the EI process, teams

were created consisting of four people per site. The teams were formed of ‘insiders’ (people related to the project) and ‘outsiders’ to design, explore, engage stakeholders, plan, implement, coordinate and communicate the process and findings. A Coordination Team was recruited by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to act as the centre of this spider web of exploration, action research, advocacy, communication and dissemination of learning and practice.

Each team began with its own core questions, derived from its reasons for participation in the EI; some used a common Analytical Framework. All teams used and developed participatory methods and tools along the way. Each team engaged the host organisation in the process (to varying degrees). In addition, each team had its own internal dynamic of operating together. Today, teams are at varying points in the process that includes: the setting up of a framework (a plan and way of working together); the gathering of data through the use of qualitative and participatory methods and tools; the analysis of an overwhelming multitude of data; a reflection on

findings and insights with the people with whom the data were gathered; a plan to disseminate and communicate their process and content inside and outside the project; and a plan for advocacy.

As we proceed, we are realising that the journey – and what it is teaching us – is at least as interesting as the destination: answering the original question, ‘what is effective?’

At this point we are beginning to think that effectiveness is as elusive as the elephant in the Indian story told by American poet John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887) who based the following poem on a fable that was told in India many years ago.

The Blind Men and the Elephant

*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall*

*Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
‘God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!’*

*The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, ‘Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ’tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!’*

*The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
‘I see,’ quoth he, ‘the Elephant
Is very like a snake!’*

*The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
‘What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,’ quoth he;
‘Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!’*

*The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: ‘Even the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!’*

*The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
‘I see,’ quoth he, ‘the Elephant
Is very like a rope!’*

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!*

The moral of the story:

*So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!*

This Hindu tale about the six blind men exploring an elephant is often cited to illustrate the idea that we tend to believe that our perceptions about a part of something holds true for the whole thing: when we experience the trunk, or the tail, or the side of the elephant, we conclude that we now know the nature of the whole. In the traditional tale, the

Programmes included in the Effectiveness Initiative

Madrasa Resource Centre (MRC) Kenya

The Madrasa Project was created to provide a preschool experience for young children (ages three to six years) to help prepare them for school and provide basic Koranic teaching. The programme has been expanded to Zanzibar and Uganda. The MRC, based in Mombasa, Kenya, provides training and support to the country offices.

Associação da Criança Família e Desenvolvimento (CFD) Mozambique

Since 1995, the CFD (the Association for the Child, Family and Development) has focused on a variety of community-based activities, which include enabling 500 community network groups to systematise spontaneous ECD activities.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) India

Since 1972 SEWA has been committed to the empowerment of women, and the creation of autonomous unions for women who work in the informal sector. Since 1989 SEWA has been organising and operating crèches (for children from birth to three years of age) for women working in the tobacco industry in the rural Kheda district and, more recently, in urban settings.

Association for the Advancement of the Ethiopian Family and Child (ALMAYA) Israel

ALMAYA originated in 1985 as the Community and Educational Project for Beta-Israel, an ancient Jewish community in Ethiopia, which immigrated to Israel. The project trains workers from the Ethiopian community, develops educational materials to enhance the community's Ethiopian heritage, and educates others about the Beta-Israel community's Ethiopian origins and current life in Israel.

Community-based Family Education (Mt Pinatubo) Philippines

This programme was initiated with communities affected by the eruption of Mt Pinatubo. Based on an assessment of local culture, programmes were developed with the community and include early childhood activities, parent education, and micro-enterprise projects. Income from the latter is shared equally by families, the cooperative and the programme.

Proyecto de Mejoramiento Educativo, de Salud y del Ambiente (PROMESA) Colombia

This integrated community-based early childhood programme was designed initially as an alternative participatory approach to ECD that could serve as a basis for a model of integrated social development and as a research and development project. Having begun in 1978 with 100 families in four small farming and fishing villages on the pacific coast of Colombia, the programme now serves approximately 7,000 families along the coast and in the interior, and variations of the approach are being implemented elsewhere in Colombia and in other countries.

Programa No-formal de Educación Inicial (PRONOEI) Peru

This began as a nutrition programme in the 1970s, and evolved into a community-based preschool. Later it became a model for non-formal preschool and was adopted by the Ministry of Education for national dissemination.

Samenspel (Playing together/Joint action) Netherlands

Samenspel was established in 1989 as a small-scale project to test strategies for reaching immigrant families (primarily from Morocco and Turkey) and to explore ways to encourage mothers with young children to participate in play afternoons. Training programmes for teams of multi-ethnic play leaders gradually developed. Samenspel groups can be found at playgroup and community centres and within self-help organisations and immigrant organisations.

Águeda Movement – Bela Vista Portugal

The Águeda Movement began with the creation of the Bela Vista preschool, and is a conscious effort to provide for children who are socially marginalised. Outreach efforts to raise awareness led to more inclusive community-based actions, and activities to reduce duplication among Portugal's various social services, and increase access for children and families that are not being served.

Madres Guías (Guide Mothers) Honduras

This home and centre-based preschool programme is designed to help children make the transition easily from home to preschool and then to primary school. Madres Guías are local women trained to work with families in their homes and with the children as they enter preschool. There is also a radio programme associated with the effort that focuses on providing child development messages to the wider public.

men argue over who is right – and in some versions even come to blows over it. The moral is that we often argue out of ignorance, and believe our version of the truth to be the whole truth.

However, it is time for a modern retelling of the tale. In this version, the men stop arguing once they realise that they have all had very different, but valid, experiences of the elephant. They devise a plan for trying to create a composite of their experiences and, at the same time, they call upon other villagers (perhaps those with the gift of sight) to add their perceptions of the elephant to the discussion. They call upon the elephant handlers, trainers, breeders, and scientists to all come and give their input. Then, despite their inability to see a whole elephant, they are able to arrive at a pretty good composite understanding of the elephant, complete with insights into its habits, behaviours, and what it is like to live and work with the elephant. They are now also able to understand how their intimate encounters with the elephant fit within and contribute to the larger understandings of the beast.

Two and a half years into the Effectiveness Initiative we are seeing the teams of insider-outsider researchers deriving extensive data, and their findings, insights and lessons are flying fast and furious. Reading many of the other articles in this edition will give a sense of what has been achieved so far. Our current challenge as facilitators of this far-reaching activity is to help participants in each of the programmes that are involved in the EI to engage in a collective construction of their understanding of the ‘elephant’. To facilitate this collaboration between the 10 programmes, we have needed to develop tools for recording, sorting and representing the diverse learning that is happening, to characterise not only findings but also process.

To create what will be an ongoing dialogue, the Foundation’s Coordinating Team has sponsored two week-long workshops to bring various sub-groups of the EI investigative teams together for intensive sharing of findings and collaboration. At each meeting, our understanding of what this matrix of activities can do for us (as participants, and as researchers into effective ECD) has deepened. Each workshop has taken

us deeper into the specific details and understandings emerging from each site, and because of that, our collective understanding is increasingly derived from, and based on, the data.

Using the notes from the meetings, summary reports written about the meetings, and the programme-specific reports circulated, a team challenged with the task of organising the cross-site analysis met to pull together the collective insights shared within the two meetings into a composite discussion. This gives us a larger, shared map of what makes programmes effective in various contexts. A similar composite of insights has also begun to emerge, showing how the EI process has served to build capacity for greater understanding within programmes and in some cases has spurred more effective action.

One software tool that can be used in this work is Atlas-ti, an application that allows the user to identify key themes within the text, identify quotations in which these themes appear, link the themes into families, and map them graphically. The software allows the coding of data by staying true to the

language and context of the original, and then the pulling out of both the themes and accompanying quotations within any number of groupings.

Insights into the EI process

The following themes emerged from the first two workshops that attempted to make cross-site comparisons.

Informal spaces for reflection.

The team from Portugal used this phrase to highlight the importance of creating time and opportunities for people involved in a project to engage in self-evaluation and self-criticism, and to deepen their understanding of what they are doing. The simple fact of having ‘extra’ funds earmarked for reflection, not tied to service delivery and child-family outcomes, allows projects time to take stock of what they are doing and how this relates to the goals of the programme and the realities of the diverse stakeholders in the process. There was broad agreement, based on data from various sites, that to provide ‘space’ – both literally in terms of places where people can meet informally, and figuratively, in terms of time, permission, and funding – is a crucial element in



Honduras: the 'Fishing' tool in operation
photo: Luis Méndez, CCF Honduras

allowing the people at all levels of the project (from beneficiaries to staff to community members and visitors) to assimilate what the project has to offer, and to contribute to it.

A shared value across the sites is starting with what people know and perceive. This is not surprising, since it was a value embedded within the conception of the EI and probably served as a selective factor in negotiating with projects that wished to participate in the EI. Several sites addressed the question of how to engage in open-ended investigations that would allow them to investigate diverse perspectives and experiences. At the Israeli project, for example, interviewers used one major question: 'tell us about Almaya...' This allowed them to hear how various interviewees thought about the programme, and to derive the issues and concerns from the participants themselves.

The tools for gathering information in most sites focus on pulling together a composite portrait of the programme. As one participant pointed out, a portrait is more than just a likeness showing the lines of the face – when

done well, it captures the essence of the person being drawn. Different portraits of the same person, or in this case of the same programme, will provide very different interpretations and details. To create these portraits, sites used a variety of tools, including project timelines, participatory learning type maps and charts, interviews, photos and visual documentation, and so on. (these methods are being gathered and detailed in an EI toolkit).

Better lenses and honesty.

The EI process is challenging participants to take their investigation deeper, and to find better lenses for viewing their work. Some of the teams began their investigations with plans to interview diverse stakeholders on their opinions of effectiveness. They have been challenged by the EI collective discussions to look at whether such interviews can provide a full perspective. Asking informants why a programme was effective (with no real certainty that it was effective for the person being asked) does not get to an understanding of how the programme worked, what worked, when, under which circumstances and constraints, and with what kinds of outcomes.

In each site EI participants have wrestled with the balance between honesty and political sensitivity. If a programme went off track because a donor demanded certain practices, how can the insiders on the team risk telling that story honestly? We have seen that all of the programmes deal with socially marginalised populations, and that, in fact, political considerations affected many of the decisions, actions, and sometimes failures. Yet in ongoing programmes, naming and identifying these barriers can be threatening to the continuation of the programme or the cooperation of necessary agencies. One 'finding' we have agreed upon is that it takes courage to engage in this type of evaluation, and that we need to devise ways to articulate the challenges, mistakes, and problems that do not endanger that programme.

Several of the team members have noticed that there are clear filters on the stories being told and information being reconstructed. Some filters are important to respect and maintain, such as protecting the privacy of individuals, and the confidentiality that is part of any social service activity. But other filters related to the power of leaders

who wanted to control the image of a programme, or donors who wished to impose certain goals or meaning on the programmes' activities, or staff who just revised history to fit their own purposes. The use of a combination of insiders and outsiders helped the teams to recognise filters with greater clarity and devise creative ways of working with them. Two common kinds of filters appeared to be the rose-coloured glasses (this programme was wonderful, perfect, problem free), and the use of sacred cow concepts, such as 'participation' or 'it started with the people' to describe situations that in fact were not really participatory or in fact started only with two people who were unusual within the community.

One of the benefits of sharing data across the sites is that it helps us gain clarity on what we see and what we miss. The process of presenting findings in terms of the data has turned out to be important. Several of the progress reports contained observations and conclusions that gave rise to questions and discussions among the group, along with a recognition by the presenting team that they needed to now take their investigation or analysis deeper.



Colombia: AWC meeting in Cartagena
photo: Teresa Moreno, Bernard van Leer Foundation

There was general agreement among the teams that problems and mistakes can be points where a lot of learning can take place. However, the willingness to admit to, examine and learn from mistakes or problems appears to relate to the role of individuals in power positions within the programme. If a programme director or donor or board does not appreciate the learning that can come from mistakes, then it is too dangerous for staff members or the leadership to acknowledge problems.

One challenge of the EI process is to find ways to remove the value judgement about problems, so that we can gain deeper insight into when and how difficulties actually spur participants' to solve problems, and when they instead damage morale or block programme functioning.

The discussions of problems and mistakes that worked led to the reminder that the EI is not about identifying best practices, but rather

about gaining understanding about how any practice must be suited to the context, and done in ways that allow it to be effective. We are seeing repeatedly that what appears to have been significant in a history is not so much the creative format or design of a programme, but the people at the centre of that programme and *how* they do what they do. Mistakes are sometimes made by good people trying their best, in circumstances where one's best is not really supported adequately.

This relates directly to the question of honesty – programme providers and communities are working in rough and daunting circumstances, and there was evidence throughout the sites that donors and political leaders had made choices and decisions about those programmes without clear understanding – and honest recognition – of the situations.

One's own language.

The following is taken from the Progress Report from the Pinatubo Project in the Philippines:

...after the workshop held at the Hague in October, a decision was made by the Philippine team, that the team members and the Pinatubo staff would use Filipino in all written work related to EI activities.

After two workshops with some parents and the EI team, and several consultations with the Pinatubo staff about the EI activities, the team leader noted how much more comfortable they were sharing details both verbally and in writing and how much more accurately the information was being documented when everything was in Filipino. The

team leader felt that the data gathering and analysis that could be done would naturally be more precise, richer and in greater depth if they were encouraged to use Filipino. On the part of the two researchers (members) of the EI team assigned to work full-time on EI activities within the Pinatubo programme as well as the Pinatubo staff who were all involved in the activities, there was a feeling of being liberated from the anxiety of working in both Filipino and English. So the work of translating all the material – including documentation of workshops – would then be assumed mainly by the team leader and the Pinatubo Project Coordinator, also a member of the EI team.

The decision to use one's own language in conducting the research (chosen by many but not all of the teams), rather than using the language of the project funder has turned out to be significant in allowing teams to get at issues that are important to the programme participants and staff. In some cases, such as the Philippine example cited, this decision freed the EI team to work more effectively, although they must still

work not only in Filipino and English, but also with the languages of the programme participants, the Aeta.

The concept of using one's own language was broadened through the cross-site discussions to a commitment to trying to stay true to the language of the experiences we are investigating. That means using the names that come from the data to assign 'theme codes' within Atlas-ti, and writing down the words people use when taking notes in meetings, rather than summarising what was said, or reducing it to jargon. If someone talked about the programme carrying on, we made a conscious effort not to translate that into 'sustainability'. Because of that, the maps of themes that are emerging contain many synonyms, each giving another shade of meaning to the ideas being expressed.

In addition, a conscious effort evolved to unpack concepts – to try to define the terms and the language in talking about the specific data, circumstances, or context which gave rise to them. We have seen that our goal of understanding what goes on in a programme is related to our ability to stay true to the experience, words, and

details, and then to distil the meaning from those, rather than paraphrasing early in the process, and then finding ourselves stuck in the same, often over-generalised, vocabulary that characterises much of the discourse in ECD circles.

Living documentation.

Within the EI we have experimented with various methods of recording conversations, so that the resulting notes could both capture and facilitate better discussion. Among these is the use of 'web' creation, where a concept or term is discussed and expanded upon, and notes are kept in a spider-web style chain of associations connected to that. To deepen this style of note taking, additional lists of 'related questions', 'comments and observations', and other relevant data are kept, so that participants can help to sort, categorise and relate their thoughts to what other people have said, and so that the discussion can be reconstituted later in narrative form.

The Israeli team contributed a description of the Talmudic format (discussed in an earlier edition of *Early Childhood Matters**) that allows for a central text to be presented together

with commentary and linkages to other scripture. Based on that model, we are experimenting with writing up the cross-site analysis into a form we are calling a 'living document', which will include a graphic image of the map of relevant themes, a brief definition or summary of the topic, a narrative text discussing the theme together with quotations and examples derived from the data, a section with questions that arise from this discussion, a section discussing implications for funders, a section for bibliographic links to relative research literature, and a column running down the right side of each section where readers can write comments, pose questions, challenge assertions, and contribute relevant data or findings from their programme.

The living documents will be written based on collective maps of themes, derived from the data. An initial mapping of data has yielded an emerging picture of a very large topic that was identified at the Cartagena cross-site meeting: 'acompañiento' (see page 53). This map, created out of the documentation from previous cross-site meetings, was presented to participants in the cross-site dialogue so that it could

be challenged, revised, and serve as a model for a variety of collective mapping exercises. From this work, an agreed upon map of themes will be used as the basis for writing up initial living documents, and for voluntary contributions of data from each site to 'fill in' the map with specifics from their work. This will allow each team to determine which of their data can be safely shared in the larger arena, and which needs to be kept confidential, 'translated' into more anonymous forms, or focussed for in-site or local audiences. We are also hoping that this process will spur teams to examine their data more deeply with some shared lenses, to give us greater insight into issues of common concern.

Taking back, giving back.

The example of challenging the maps with the participants, given above, reflects a process which teams have used within their own investigations. It has emerged as an important part of the EI process – taking back what we find to the people who generated the information, both to make sure we have understood what the contributors of the information meant, and to deepen that understanding by stimulating further

dialogue. In addition, taking information back creates a springboard for giving back to participants, not only by providing information on the other parts of the elephant, but also by creating the space for group and individual reflection.

Part of giving back is making sure that a good proportion of the research effort is focussed on topics of concern to the programme staff and participants, not just to the funders or ECD field at large.

Within the work of individual teams at the programme sites, and within the cross-site workshops, we have tried to find active and participatory ways of taking back, sharing, and deepening the information (getting beyond dry presentation and lectures).

EI as capacity building, activating processes.

Three of the teams (Philippines, India, Portugal) chose to see the EI primarily as a capacity-building activity, rather than as research. They integrated EI activities into their ongoing programme operation, seeing the Initiative as an opportunity for deepening reflection and self-evaluation among programme

stakeholders. As we learn more about how these tools can help programmes evolve, and how others have used their EI tools for activating effective reflection and capacity-building, we are learning how to use EI tools and insights to stimulate new and more effective ways of working to support young children, their families and communities.

What next?

In discussing how the processes of the EI are revealing factors that can be significant in influencing project effectiveness, and listing and discussing a number of these factors, this article leads on to the question 'How can all this mass of qualitative data be organised and worked with so that lessons can be drawn to guide future work in the ECD field? One approach to this complex task is discussed in the article that begins on page 53. ○

** See Early Childhood Matters 93; October 1999.*