



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

The voices of children

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

photo: SUMBI

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

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

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

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

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

Listening: its importance for adults

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

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

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

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

The benefits for children

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

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

problems with friends, the programme and their routines.

The importance for projects

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

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

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

How we listen to children

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

What children have told us so far

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

* In January 1999 the Bernard van Leer Foundation and partner organisations in the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development initiated a three year investigation known as the Effectiveness Initiative (E1). The overall goals of this initiative are to discover what we can about what makes an effective programme work, and to start an international dialogue on effectiveness that deepens our understanding of how to create and/or support effective programming for young children and families.

Early Childhood Matters 93 (October 1999) gives a very full introduction to the E1. It can be accessed at www.bernardvanleer.org and printed copies are available free of charge from the Bernard van Leer Foundation on request.



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