

Effectiveness for Children

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

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

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

This has left a gap:

A cursory analysis of data on children suggests that, aside from some information on health ... and education, most development agencies do not as a rule collect much information about children and childhoods. Much of what has been compiled is written by adults rather than by children themselves and reflects a paternalistic attitude on the part of adults who feel that they know about children and childhoods because they have themselves gone through childhood. There is very little [distinct and separated] data on children’s lives and relatively little is actually known about children’s lives¹.

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

What constitutes a personal achievement for a two year old may be quite different from what is defined as such by an adult experimenter ... The experimenter who puts a puzzle in front of a child most likely defines success as completion of the puzzle. But a two year old may make a circle or a train out of the puzzle pieces and evaluate her accomplishment in terms of that goal. For these reasons, observing children in situations in which success is defined by an adult provides limited evidence on young toddlers’ reactions to achievements².

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



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

philosophical concepts³ and that of children of seven to grapple successfully with political issues⁴. The consequence of this kind of failure is that programmes are not as effective as they could be.

Childhood and children's views

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An unfinished job

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

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

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

In the next edition

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

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

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

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

Some possible questions about the second area include:

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

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

Jim Smale
Editor

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

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

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

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

