

The story behind the story: tracing San children in Botswana

Willemien le Roux and Gaolatlhe Eirene Thupe



Botswana: Children of the Earth project
San preschool children of Bere, Ghanzi district.
Photo: Matthias Hofer

In this article, Willemien le Roux, founder of the Bokamoso Preschool Programme, and Gaolatlhe Eirene Thupe, its current Coordinator, reflect on their experiences in carrying out a tracer study on participants in the programme. This currently operates in 13 San settlements in the Ghanzi District of western Botswana and incorporates three main hypotheses: that San children who have gone through preschool will be less likely to drop out of formal schools; that parents will participate more positively in the formal education process if their children are somehow 'lured' into learning through play; and that the introduction of languages in an informal way will break through children's resistance to other languages and give them a head start in primary school. The reflections of the authors are complemented by an example from the programme of the depth and richness of information that tracer studies can reveal (see box on page 24).

We were surprised when the Bernard van Leer Foundation said it wanted to reprint our study¹ of the Bokamoso Preschool Programme in Botswana. We did not go into the experience with the intention to change anyone's ideas with it, we are practitioners and we went into the study for ourselves – it was not meant to impact policy.

The process of doing the study was very important for us, we hoped for several outcomes and we also wanted to reinforce and test our own assumptions.

We saw our own programme as a cultural bridge for the San children; we wanted to prepare them to take the strain of the transition to primary school. We felt we were getting stuck. Were we reaching our goals? We wanted to see what we could change to broaden the scope. We were constantly running into contradictions, so we needed tools to convince other people that the project was working, that what we were doing was worthwhile.

There was opposition to our work, some people were sceptical and said it did not make sense, that we were going backwards by teaching the children in the preschools in their mother tongue. And there were primary school teachers who blamed the preschools for making the children feel more free.

We are not researchers and at the beginning we had an advisor who was linked to the funder. She is a sociologist and provided research guidance. She planned the study with us and we designed the questionnaire together. But she took another job in another country and we were left on our own. We were stuck, we had started the process, we had the basics, but not enough research knowledge.

We had our doubts from the beginning about using questionnaires as we knew that, especially among the mostly illiterate San people we work with, the written word arouses suspicions. Our communities have had many people asking them questions and they feel nothing is ever fed back to them. The San suspect that people such as researchers, journalists and film makers have been making money out of what they have told them. We felt that the process of asking the questions would alienate people and would create expectations. So we decided not to use the questionnaire and to do it in our own way, in our own time, using a style of questioning according to what we knew would work and according to what we knew was there. We had to do it informally, otherwise they ask themselves 'where is this information going?' and you don't get the real answers.

The method we used was to go to social gatherings with the community motivators. We would sit with the people, gathering information through chatting and talking with them. We picked up people on the road, gave them lifts, and got further information or confirmation during the ride.

For example, one question we needed to know was if they had any income, and often it meant trying to find out how many cows they have. If you ask this directly they would answer that they have none – hoping to get something from the interviewer since many aid programmes in our area are aimed only at the so-called destitutes. So we would go and sit with people in their homes and within the general conversation would ask them about their routines: 'If, in the evening, you go to the kraal² to see if your cows came home, what do you do if one has not come?' Through talking with them about caring for the cattle we gradually could learn how many they had. They never would have given us the answer had we asked the question directly.

Then we went away and tried to put the information on paper. We sent the data to the researcher who analysed it and sent it back but there was a long lapse between data collection and analysis. We were very disappointed with her

report because the numbers did not represent what we *knew* so we had a second round of data gathering.

We went to the schools again and checked records of children who had been in the preschools and might have dropped out of primary school, but there were many difficulties: lack of records; false records; transfers of children and teachers; inconsistent spelling of names in the San's click languages; and other inconsistencies. Schools are given equipment and support on the basis of numbers of children, so we suspected that sometimes more children were registered than actually attended. There was no way to check the validity of the data, and people in the education department shared their own frustrations with us. Names changed because schools could not record children's names in their own language, so names were recorded as they were 'heard'. We developed strategies to try and verify data. We collected all the names of the dropouts and then went to training sessions for primary school teachers, and checked with groups of teachers to see if they could identify the children.

But still the results were 'insignificant' statistically and we had to find other ways to show what was there.

Disciplining San children in Botswana

In San society, children are brought up as equal to adults, hence parents rarely resort to corporal punishment, yet physical forms of punishment were widespread in the Botswana school system. This fed back into the behaviour of parents as this extract from a group discussion with San parents shows.*

Question: *Do San ever use corporal punishment?*

Dada: I beat my children when they were small because I knew others were later going to beat them, and it helped them to get used to that. But I hit them in the right way, never with the fist. When a child is small, and he/she touches something dangerous, we would pinch the child on the back of his hand or slap him lightly on the hands, to teach him.

X'aega: We talk to our children. We talk to them a lot, and everybody talks. If a small one does something wrong, we hit him on the hand softly. When I was small, and I used to be naughty, I was disciplined by my older uncle. My

father would not discipline me, but the elders would get together to discuss about me, and then my uncle would do the talking.

[Comment: This would only be for things like stealing, breaking other peoples' possessions, or antisocial behaviour. This was checked with the people from other settlements, and they agreed to the same system.]

X'aega: I have sent my two children to preschool, and I have had to beat them on their behind to force them to go. I walk with them all the way to school, beating them if they want to turn back. But then, once they have accepted that they should go, I talk to them every day about what they have done at school. That way they know that I am interested. But they also like the preschool. They are not scared.

Habe: If you beat a child too much, they become stubborn, and you cannot win that child over again.

Question: *Is there a way in which you can change the behaviour of a very*

naughty child to become disciplined? What if the child does not listen any more?

Dada: It is better to give the child a reward if she/he has done something right, than to beat him/her when doing something wrong. You can always bribe a child to do something, if he knows he will get something afterwards.

X'aega: My oldest child left school, and refused to go to the hostel. She has no more clothes left to wear and I will not force her to go. I do not have the money to pay for the food they eat at school anyway. If a child refuses something, let him go. Never force a child.

Dada: If the child has done something wrong to you, and you complain to me, I will go with the child to your house, and explain the wrongdoing. I will then give the child a beating there, or I can ask you to beat her for me. My sisters, or my mother, are also responsible to take care of these things.

Question: *I have seen small children hitting their parents in the face, even with a stick, and people just laugh. Why?*

Ohomatcāa: People know that children still do not know everything, and if you are too forceful with children, you can make that child very weak. It is important to let the child feel strong.

Xguka: Sometimes I have tried to beat my child, then she tells me not to do it. She also says to me when I tell her to do something: 'I will only cooperate if you do not beat me.'

Dada: We teach children to have respect, but it takes time. Respect is something very important. If you have respect, you do not laugh at people with disabilities, or at weak people. People should not laugh at others.

* le Roux W (2002), *The challenges of change: a tracer study of San preschool children in Botswana*, Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections No. 15 (see page 58)



Botswana: Children of the Earth project, San children standing behind a wall. Photo: C Visser

In our third round of data gathering we went qualitative. We developed several strategies:

- parents were interviewed by parents – our driver was also a parent and got very involved.
- Parents were interviewed by trainers.
- Teachers were interviewed in groups.
- Trainers were interviewed.
- Teachers and parents provided information through anecdotes and we began to use direct quotes and anecdotes to tell the story.
- We used the many books on the San as reference points as well – it put the information that we were collecting in context.

Then we put all this together in our original study report. All that we could do was to provide a snapshot of the situation, trusting that the reader would be able to see beyond the limitations of what a normal 'scientific' study would have been – we know there is a story behind the story. We found confirmation of things we had to

improve and we found what we also knew intuitively through experience.

This was a very valuable experience for us because it reinforced what we knew. From that experience we have learned to work more with the parents, making it more of a two-way flow; we are working with the primary school teachers to explain better what we are doing; it is helping us to change attitudes such as by learning more about the background and culture of the children. Overall we have used the study to widen and deepen the programme. ○

1 The challenges of change: a survey on the effects of preschool on Basarwa primary school children in the Ghanzi District of Botswana was published in 1995 by Kuru Development Trust and is now out of print. A revised and updated version was published in 2002 by the Bernard van Leer Foundation as *The challenges of change: a tracer study of San preschool children in Botswana* (see page 58).

2 An enclosure for cattle