

Early Childhood Matters is a journal about early childhood. It looks at specific issues regarding the development of young children, in particular from a psychosocial perspective. It is published twice per year by the 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.