

Realising the right to education in multiple contexts: The interplay of universal rights and cultural relativism

Background paper prepared for a symposium at the International Transitions Research Conference, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, 11–14 April 2007



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Cover:

Pritisuni Giomango, 5½ years old, has run the few meters home from school in the remote community of Kharigoda Village, Giajapati District, India. She is very fortunate to have such a facility nearby and she enjoys the educational experience.

Photo: Jim Holmes

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Introduction

The purpose of the symposium ‘The young child’s right to education: The aims of education in multiple contexts’¹ was to review early childhood programmes in the light of the right to education set out by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and elaborated on by General Comment 1 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, on The Aims of Education (GC1), and General Comment 7, on Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood (GC7).

At the time the CRC was drafted, ‘education’ was widely equated with ‘schooling’. Although there was never the assumption that states should universally provide pre-primary school programmes, nonetheless some have committed to doing so. This is welcome, but brings the danger of imposing school systems onto earlier age groups when young children in fact learn better through play, sensory stimulation, social contact and other activities that tend to be marginalised in school.

GC7 provides the rationale for addressing early education as a rights issue, not a luxury. For disadvantaged children, access to learning opportunities as young as possible can radically improve their quality of life and strengthen all aspects of further development – cognitive, emotional, social and physical. The benefits of this are well documented not only in terms of realising child rights, but also promoting human development and increasing social capital.

The first section of this paper briefly reviews the relevant sections of the CRC and the two relevant General Comments. The second part then outlines the conceptual framework behind the new programme launched by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, ‘Successful transitions – the continuum from home to school’. In the third part, three of the Foundation’s partner organisations present illustrations of how child rights are introduced in three different disadvantaged contexts. One works among rural children in India, where state-run pre-school provision is inadequate. Another looks at children in Israel from a context of involving children with differing developmental abilities in mainstream education. Lastly, the Polish case considers children in rural areas where access has drastically diminished since the years of transition to a market economy. Part four consists of commentary from Joseph Tobin, of the Arizona State University, who is currently implementing a five-country study on ‘Children crossing borders’, funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. Part five is a response by international children’s rights consultant Gerison Lansdown.

1. The right to education

Article 28 of the CRC enshrines the right to education, and Article 29 sets out its aims. These include the “development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” and the “preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society”. Also central to considering education for young children are Article 3 – “In all actions concerning children... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” – and Article 5, which refers to the “evolving capacities” of the child to exercise rights.

¹ The symposium was one of six symposiums held at the International Transitions Research Conference, organised by the University of Strathclyde, in Glasgow, Scotland, 11–14 April 2007.

The right to play and recreation and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (Article 30), and to engage in one's own culture, religion and language (Article 31) are also particularly significant to bear in mind as young children progressively learn through engagement with the world around them.

GC1 notes that education must be "child-centred, child-friendly and empowering" and makes clear that education goes "far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities". The CRC does not specify at what age education should begin, though GC7 "interprets the right to education during early childhood as beginning at birth and closely linked to young children's right to maximum development" (paragraph 28).

In paragraph 31 of GC7, the Committee "recommends that States parties pay greater attention to, and actively support, a rights-based approach to early childhood programmes, including initiatives surrounding transition to primary school that ensure continuity and progression, in order to build children's confidence, communication skills and enthusiasm for learning through their active involvement in, among others, planning activities."

While calling on states to take the lead responsibility for ensuring pre-school programmes, GC7 repeatedly emphasises the need for partnership between state, communities and parents in delivering these services. Paragraph 29(b) notes that state programmes should be "developed as far as possible in partnership with parents", paragraph 30 "acknowledges a key role for parents, wider family and community", and paragraph 31 calls for "the empowerment and education of parents". Paragraph 32 makes clear that private sector providers of services to young children are duty-bearers to the same degree as those in the public sector.

2. The Bernard van Leer Foundation's transitions programme

'Successful transitions – the continuum from home to school' is one of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's three new issue areas, through which we are now organising and positioning our work. This work consists of funding projects in the field – there are currently over 50 active projects in the transitions programme, including the three from which contributions are presented in the next section – together with funding studies and publications, to disseminate knowledge and provoke discussion.

All transitions we make in life mark turning points socially, and often biologically too. Transitions are often marked by special events, ceremonies or rites of passage. They denote new social expectations, responsibilities and status. The individual is expected to grow into their new role, supported by the community around them. More than any other life phase, early childhood entails a succession of transitions as young children rapidly develop and progress from private spaces in the home into public or collective spaces such as community play groups, childcare centres, pre-schools and schools.

Young children eagerly seek new challenges that test and apply their evolving capacities in all respects – physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally. Successful transitions are certainly challenging and therefore rewarding. However, they should not present young children with obstacles they cannot reasonably be expected to overcome. Every child will have a different starting point which needs to be respected.

The Foundation's transitions programme is concerned with two angles. First, the structural and systemic factors in childcare, pre-school or school environments that may act to exclude children. Second, the strengths and

weaknesses that children bring with them into these new situations. Working to build children's strengths can help to offset any limitations that those environments have. And well-designed childcare, pre-schools and schools can help to overcome the multiple effects on young children of disadvantaged circumstances that undermine their development and coping mechanisms. This interplay among different environments is crucial.

We are focusing on three main topics in our work on transitions, a choice informed by a combination of our current expertise and a scan of work being done by others to identify possibilities for useful future contributions. These topics are access to early education, language development and entrenching rights in early education.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a learning organisation, committed always to refining our understanding. But we are also an advocacy organisation, intent on sharing messages when we feel they are sufficiently established. In terms of transitions, we start with two key messages. The first is that schools should focus attention and resources on the first years of schooling. Most primary schools prioritise resources towards the later years, to strengthen exam results, yet the greatest challenge is supporting children's learning experiences in the first years so they are motivated and able to do well later on.

The second key message is that significant improvements are possible in a relatively short time frame. The long-term benefits of investing in transitions, in terms of creating human capital for future generations, are often too distant to interest decision-makers. But investments in early childhood also pay off in two other time frames: the immediate benefit of realising child rights, and the short-term benefits of improving the development of children in such areas as language fluency, literacy, numeracy, awareness of their rights, social identity and knowledge of the world around them.

3. Insights from the field

3.1. India – Movement for Alternatives and Youth Awareness (MAYA)

By Parijat Sarkar, Programme Co-ordinator, ECCE programme

The Indian government has been involved in early childhood care and education for a long time. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) started in 1975. It primarily functions through centres – *anganwadis* – that engage a teacher and a helper, and is today the largest state-driven initiative in the world to address the needs of children aged 0–6 years.

However, there are endemic problems. The ICDS programme covers only 22 percent of the total eligible population of 0–6 year olds. *Anganwadis* workers are not considered state employees but volunteers who are paid an honorarium. A 'one size fits all' approach leaves little scope for adapting to local needs, contrary to the recommendation of GC7 in paragraph 31: "[States] are encouraged to construct high-quality, developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant programmes and to achieve this by working with local communities rather by imposing a standardized approach to early childhood care and education."

Quality of the *anganwadis* is inconsistent: infrastructure can be poor, with lack of adequate kitchens or toilets, or children may be excluded on the basis of caste, or effectively excluded by the requirement to use only the official state language in *anganwadis* regardless of what the children speak at home. When they can afford it, parents are increasingly opting for private pre-school care rather than the state-run *anganwadis*. But the recent mushrooming of private facilities, many of which are questionable quality, may not be a good thing either.

Anganwadis tend to focus on health issues, so pre-school education is neglected. This negatively affects transitions to primary schools. *Anganwadis* workers have lower educational qualification requirements than primary teachers, lower pay and lower status, and there are practically no instances of joint training for teachers from the *anganwadis* and schools; primary teachers usually visit *anganwadis* only to find out how many children they can expect to enrol next year. This is mirrored by a lack of coordination and shared vision at ministerial level between the Department of Women and Child Development, which is responsible for children aged 0–6, and the Department of Education, which looks after children aged 6–14.

To add to the problem, parents often insist on enrolling children in primary school before they are ready. This is because primary schools operate for a full day, while *anganwadis* take children off their parents' hands for only half a day, and they offer more reliable meals.

Another crucial aspect for children's development is their participation in decisions that concern them. In India, neither the pre-school nor the school system is set up to encourage children's active participation. Primary schools operate by rote learning and children are seen as passive receptacles for knowledge. Even in *anganwadis*, teachers tend to sit at desks with children seated in rows in front of them. GC1, paragraph 12, notes: "It should be emphasized that the type of teaching that is focused primarily on accumulation of knowledge, prompting competition and leading to an excessive burden of work on children, may seriously hamper the harmonious development of the child to the fullest potential of his or her abilities and talents." This kind of education does not help children in evolving their capacities as individuals in society.

At MAYA, our experience of organising early childhood care and education (ECCE) centres and closely following children's transitions into schools has made us realise that government primary schools are not ready to take in children who have had positive learning experiences in their early years. Children who have attended MAYA centres sometimes become so bored of the routine work, they come back to the ECCE centres for extra stimulation.

Our field experience suggests that government statistics underestimate the dropout rate from primary schools – officially around 40 percent – because children can be enrolled on paper without attending on a daily basis. This is often true of disabled children, who in practice can be discouraged from attending despite the existence of programmes that are supposed to make it easier for them to access school. Our experience also suggests that government statistics overestimate the number of children who are functionally literate and numerate on completing primary school.

MAYA believes stakeholder ownership of education is a critical systemic factor in improving this situation. *Anganwadis* and government schools typically make little effort to encourage communities to articulate their needs and expectations; there is inadequate information sharing and accountability, and a lack of structures to develop a joint vision.

In line with the clear recommendations of GC7 outlined earlier in this paper, the government should focus on building community capacities and institutionalising community involvement in education. Parents should be encouraged to articulate their expectations of government primary schools, as this makes them less likely to want their children to drop out to enter the labour force. Communities should be facilitated to take on the responsibility for devising their own learning paths, mobilising resources – both local and governmental – and monitoring their own facilities.

3.2. Israel – The Center for Advancement of Functional Capacities

By Rami Katz, Director

Changes in society are making home–school transitions more difficult. Children spend less time with their families, and the sense of community is weakening. They are reaching school less communicative and less disciplined. Children are also spending more time with computers and televisions, and subsequently find school activities boring. Academic work is expected at younger ages, diminishing the opportunities for age-appropriate play and ultimately making children less capable of learning.

In the last decade, Israel has made progress in mainstreaming developmentally challenged children into the regular school system. But often those children are given individual therapeutic attention outside the classroom, which can stigmatise. It is better to change the whole classroom experiential environment to include function-building experiences that improve competence development in all children.

Our programme is set to achieve this kind of classroom environment, based on the Neuro-Developmental-Functional Approach (NDFFA). This means learning how children develop various sensory-motor abilities, how to spot a child having trouble and how to support him or her effectively. In teaching the NDFFA to educators, we have two goals. The first is to improve educators' tolerance, empathy and acceptance of every child by helping them to understand children's behaviour in terms of their development. The second is to improve the educational experiential environment by showing educators what experiences are needed to build and improve the child's basic developmental functions.

The Children Friendly Kindergartens programme is fully in line with the 'child-centred' approach set out in GC1 and the emphasis in GC7 on children's right to maximum development. The CRC is clear that children with special educational needs should have access to regular schools, and child-centred pedagogy should accommodate them. The disabled child should be able to enjoy "a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in society". Education should be organised so that he or she can achieve "the fullest possible social integration and individual development" (Article 23).

Although most of our work is with educational staff, we also address parents by encouraging them to meet with their children's educators and visit the kindergartens, including special workshops. In general, our programme and NDFFA principles have been well received by parents and educators alike.

But we are encountering two areas of concern. The first is that economic difficulties are squeezing education budgets, and it is often difficult to explain to public officials the importance of spending money on this work with young children in promoting academic achievements at later ages.

The second is the increasing litigiousness of our society. Educational organisations are becoming too cautious about safety and potential legal liabilities. Instead of enhancing safety awareness and discipline, taking away items such as trampolines, sleds and sand boxes deprives children of much desired sensory-motor challenges. Kindergarten teachers are also becoming more hesitant about touching children, fearful of sexual harassment or abuse lawsuits. This 'no-touch mandate' seriously endangers the child's emerging ability to communicate, and sense of well-being and security.

3.3. Poland – Comenius Foundation for Child Development

By Teresa Ogrodzinska, President

There is a popular Polish saying that translates as “children and fish have no voice”. This deep-seated cultural attitude lies behind a lack of political will to implement fully the provisions of the CRC related to education and young children.

Poland’s pre-school education attendance rate is one of the lowest in the European Union, particularly in rural areas, where the average is only 14 percent. The quality of provision varies widely between municipalities, whose responsibility it is. Unlike in most EU countries, Polish legislation does not provide for any form of early education other than pre-school: there is no alternative system of supporting parents with young children, such as childminders, play groups or children/family centres. Parents from marginalised social groups are especially disadvantaged, and there has never been a concerted effort to develop special educational programmes targeted at equalising opportunities.

Not enough significance is attached to the subject of transition. There are few links between teachers at pre-school, ‘0’ class – the year prior to compulsory primary schooling starting at age 7 – and primary schools. There are no mechanisms for them to develop educational and developmental strategies together. Nor are there mechanisms which give parents a voice; teachers are not trained to involve them.

Comenius Foundation is advocating to change the legislation on early education. We implement our ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ (WTANP) programme in cooperation with rural municipalities, aiming to improve educational opportunities for children in areas without pre-schools by introducing alternative high quality educational schemes. The ultimate aim is to develop a new systemic solution – a new form of education for young children – that will be available to all municipalities in Poland.

The programme helps establish pre-school centres for children aged 3–5 in small towns and villages where there are no pre-schools. The curriculum focuses on children’s self-esteem, self-reliance, creativity, curiosity, respect for others and social skills. Children have the right to choose the activities and cannot be forced to participate in them. They work in mixed-age groups, helping and learning from each other. Disabled children also participate and seem to be adapting very quickly.

Parents are invited to run the activities and can be present all the time, establishing an important precedent in co-operation between teachers and parents to support the child in the first transition from home to an educational institution.

We conducted a study on the impact of the WTANP centres which revealed encouraging results. The rate of attendance doubled in municipalities with WTANP centres. Children perform very well at pre-school preparatory class and in the first classes of primary school. WTANP children showed higher self-esteem, more psychological independence and greater expressiveness than those who attended other pre-schools. Most parents join in activities, and this has forced some local authorities to extend the opening hours of the centres or to establish new centres in other villages.

However, feedback from primary school teachers revealed a problem. Not all teachers were happy with the fact that WTANP children are typically very curious, ask many questions, like to work in groups and get easily bored

when they merely have to listen and follow teachers' instructions in the traditional classroom manner. Some teachers considered them to be troublemakers who interrupt during the lesson.

We therefore saw the need to develop, together with partner organisations, a three-day training programme to bring together teachers from pre-schools (including WTANP), year '0' and primary schools. The 'Successful transition to school' training programme aims to develop teachers' skills and knowledge on the process of transition and adaptation, and improve co-operation between pre-schools, schools and parents.

Feedback from the training has been positive. Many teachers were surprised to learn about the difficulties children encounter in adapting to school, and that it is possible to use pre-school methods in primary school too. They also appreciate learning new ways of involving parents.

4. Commentary by Joseph Tobin²

I would like to begin my comments by drawing attention to the tension between universal and local values. As an anthropologist and an unapologetic cultural relativist, I worry about statements of universal rights because: (1) they are not local or grounded in cultures; and (2) they can function as a form of globalisation, of the dominance of global beliefs, values and sentiments over the local. When the rights of children are applied to ECCE, I am concerned specifically about the way this approach separates and potentially opposes children's interests with the interests of their families.

My fear that notions of universal rights of children to ECCE will disenfranchise parents is not paranoid or fanciful. This is the history of the field in many countries. ECCE has a colonialist history that is still with us. That having been said, the Bernard van Leer Foundation transitions programme and the three contributions from the field presented in the preceding section are careful to emphasise the need for interventions to be culturally sensitive and to not impose a standardised approach. I applaud this sensitivity to the local context and to cultural values.

I particularly like the word 'transitions' because it acknowledges the interactions in young children's lives of the worlds of home and school, and points to the challenge of becoming acculturated to more than one world. Young children cross borders every day, from the culture of home to the culture of school. When their families have recently moved to a new country, this daily border crossing is all the more challenging. This is a transition not only of time (from infancy to childhood) and of space (from home to school) but also of identity – a daily transition from home to the new host society, as represented by the school, and back again. Children of recent immigrants enter pre-school as members of one culture and leave as members of two.

I am currently directing a Bernard van Leer Foundation-funded study, 'Children crossing borders', in which we have been interviewing immigrant parents and their children's pre-school teachers in five countries. We have been finding many conflicting notions about best practice. Many immigrant parents want a more explicitly academic curriculum, while teachers advocate a more play-oriented approach. Some immigrant parents are not comfortable with the way female modesty issues are handled in their children's pre-schools. Teachers argue that they have an obligation to be gender neutral, and tend to view the immigrant parents' positions as being backwards and not in the best interest of children.

² Joseph Tobin is Nadine Mathis Basha Professor of EC Education at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA.

In our project we are focusing less on the rights of children than on the rights of families, and less on defining universal notions of quality than on developing strategies for cultural negotiation between ECCE staff and the parents they serve. Promoting an acceptance of diversity and anti-bias strategies are necessary but not sufficient. The next step is to help ECCE providers develop the willingness and ability to enter into cultural negotiation with the communities they serve. Although in some cases parents and providers who engage in such a cultural negotiation will have arguments that cannot be resolved, we believe that in the majority of cases a willingness on both sides to engage in such discussions will lead to reasonable accommodations and compromises by both sides.

Parijat Sarkar (Section 3.1) eloquently articulates the need for decisions about ECCE programmes to be local and culturally contextual. I would suggest that it is no accident that such a strong argument for community control rather than top-down imposition of programmatic ideas is being voiced here by a scholar located in a country with a long, direct and relatively recent experience with colonisation and decolonising. The challenge is to facilitate without imposing. The trick is to provide technical assistance, support and training without subtly and sometimes unconsciously introducing the values and concerns of the technical assistants, funders and trainers and thereby undermining local control.

I agree with Rami Katz (Section 3.2) that fears of being sued are used to justify reducing children's freedom and practitioners' range of activities in ECCE settings in many countries. We need to stand up and speak out against the moral panics that periodically sweep through the world of ECCE. I would like to add that we need to help educators work with the whole range of diversity in their classes, diversity in culture and social class as well as in ability. We must watch out that an over-reliance on developmental psychology by early childhood educators does not lead to the importance of culture and context being overlooked.

The success of the WTANP programme (Section 3.3) shows that policy-makers should be imaginative and not always seek to create pre-schools that follow the Monday-through-Friday, 40-hour-a-week structure of the factory workweek. I very much like Teresa Ogradzinska's emphasis on mechanisms for parent-teacher dialogue and the need in teacher preparation programmes for attention to dealing with parents. When ECCE staff members talk to parents, they usually give parents information and rarely ask parents for input. Teresa Ogradzinska calls for "co-operation between parents and teachers." I prefer the term 'negotiation', to emphasise that these conversations can be difficult and require compromise from both sides.

5. Commentary by Gerison Lansdown³

Children's rights do not appear from nowhere. They derive from a broad understanding of what is needed to enable children to flourish and to grow up as tolerant and responsible citizens. Implementing universal rights in a culturally sensitive way is a challenge, but not an insuperable one – although the principles are universal, the way they are implemented can and should respect local contexts. Indeed, the CRC explicitly includes this obligation.

³ Gerison Lansdown is an international children's rights consultant.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation's focus on transitions is welcome in that it places primacy on the experience of the child, rather than on service providers or institutions. That the programme is rooted in rights is important for a number of reasons:

- By stressing **universal entitlement** it throws light on the barriers facing the most marginalised children – such as girls, indigenous children and children with disabilities – and the need for inclusive provision that adapts to the individual needs of children, rather than requiring children to adapt to a rigid, predefined approach.
- It emphasises **children's agency**, their right to participate, express views and have them taken seriously in accordance with age and maturity. This requires a re-evaluation of children's roles in relation to both peers and adults. Children are recognised as decision-makers, contributors, negotiators, mediators, peer educators and protectors.
- It respects the **dignity and integrity** of children, the right to protection from all forms of violence and abuse. This necessitates a commitment to positive discipline: all forms of violent, humiliating and degrading treatment are prohibited, and strategies must be found, in partnership with children, for non-violent conflict resolution.
- It gives primacy to **the best interests of the child** in designing childcare, and not to accommodating the needs of working parents – although, obviously, this is important.
- It requires **a holistic approach**, recognising that rights are interdependent and indivisible. It is not possible, for example, to ensure girls' right to education without also addressing issues relating to discrimination (in the curriculum, by teachers and within the community), early marriage, domestic labour, violence in schools, etc.

Parijat Sarkar's contribution (Section 3.1) touches on the challenges involved in a rights-based approach to education. In terms of realising the right of every child to access ECCE, the problems are not only gaps in provision of places but also barriers such as language, physical and cultural inaccessibility, and lack of parental appreciation of the value of education.

This contribution provides a powerful indictment of centrally driven provision which denies opportunities for local communities to develop and take ownership of the education provided for their children. However, in the list of potential stakeholders, I would like to see a greater emphasis on children themselves. I would also like dialogue among community partners to address the issue of grounding provision in children's rights – in particular, non-discrimination, a commitment to the best interests of children, and to listening to children and taking their views seriously.

I strongly endorse concerns over lack of co-ordination across ministries. In addition to education, health and child welfare departments, additional government departments need to be involved in developing co-ordinated policy frameworks for ECCE. These include finance (for adequate resources), public works (for accessible location and design), social development (for poverty reduction and child labour implications) and child protection (to raise awareness of ending all forms of violence against children).

In Rami Katz's contribution (Section 3.2), the drift towards 'no-risk' societies indeed spells disaster for children and needs to be high on the agenda. It is encouraging to see the emphasis on developing inclusive classroom environments. Often, attempts to provide inclusive education are not sustained because failures which arise from a lack of training, resources or organisational willingness to change are wrongly blamed on the principle of inclusion itself. The new Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities should strengthen understanding of the demands of a genuinely inclusive education system.

I recognise the need to have a broad understanding of child development, but it would be useful to see a stronger emphasis on the contribution that children themselves make to their own development. Early years educators need to be encouraged to create opportunities for children to build their own capacities through participation.

One of the most interesting features of the WTANP programme described by Teresa Ogrodzinska (Section 3.3) is how actively engaging parents and children as partners in the development of the centres mobilises significant additional resources – in contrast with the more traditional approach, where expertise is seen to lie only with the professionals. The active engagement of parents means that there is more opportunity for continuity and consistency of experience between home and the centre – an important dimension of a transitions approach.

An additional idea might be to introduce regular systems for feedback and evaluation by the children. This is not only a means of review to strengthen the centres, but gives children opportunities to develop skills in critical analysis and to take responsibility for their environment. This promotes creativity, skills, confidence, self-esteem and self-reliance.

It is encouraging that the programme is seeking to build bridges with schools: children who have experienced respect for their rights can face significant difficulties when they enter a different cultural environment. However, such training for school teachers should not only promote greater understanding of the challenges in the transition process but also explore the possibility of introducing rights-based approaches into the school environment.

Conclusion

Article 3 of the CRC talks about the best interests of the child being the primary consideration. These cases have discussed the role of the state, municipalities, parents, communities and professionals in deciding what those best interests are. One group, however, has been conspicuous by its relative silence in this dialogue about how policies and programmes can serve children's best interests: the children themselves.

This underscores why child rights required explicit recognition in a United Nations Convention and associated General Comments. The CRC sets out to right the imbalance of power in which children are rarely seen as rights holders on an equal footing with older people; this is particularly true for young children, who have long been presumed incapable of communicating their interests. Children's rights are often subsumed under the rights of their caregivers or families or communities. The struggle to excavate children's rights is not so different from past struggles to excavate women's rights.

When the foundation invited Dr Tobin and Ms Lansdown to comment on these papers, we expected that cultural relativism and universal rights would be put forward as two ends of a spectrum. The reality is that these two factors are in constant interplay. The CRC recognises that local positions about young children must be taken into account, and those local positions in turn are constantly changing as they are exposed to global influences – including the idea of children’s rights.

The Polish expression about children and fish having no voice is echoed by the English expression that “children should be seen and not heard”. It is not coincidental that different cultures have such similar proverbs. Yet programmes which give children the opportunity to participate in decisions which affect them offer striking examples of how children perceive their lives, and the profound understanding they bring to visions of the future. If we are to do justice to the rights of children, then adults must find ways to hear children effectively, whether as researchers, policy-makers, parents, educators, donors or programme designers.

Perhaps in the future cultural idioms will no longer talk about the silence of children, but that it takes a generation to learn how to hear them.

About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through “Strengthening the Care Environment” we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable parents, families and communities to care for their children.
- Through “Successful Transitions” we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school.
- Through “Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity” we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

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