

Following Footsteps: ECD tracer studies

What happens to people after they have been in an early childhood programme? Is a child different at the age of 10 because she was in a programme when she was four and five years old? Does a 12 year old benefit because his mother was in a parenting programme when she was an adolescent? Do people really change because they participated as parents, or were trained to work as caregivers, in an ECD programme?

To help answer these kinds of questions, the Bernard van Leer Foundation launched a programme of tracer studies in 1998 to follow the footsteps of former participants in early childhood programmes, five or more years on, and find out what had happened to them. This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* is about these tracer studies, and reviews their nature, what they can do, and how their approaches, methodologies and findings fit with more formal investigations. It has been put together by Ruth N Cohen, Senior Programme Specialist at the Foundation, who is the coordinator of the studies.

The tracer studies presented in this edition include those of past participants in a range of projects, many of them supported by the Foundation – a complete list of those completed so far can be found on page 14. Although each is distinct from the others, most share a number of common characteristics:

- they follow up the progress of the children, their families, programme staff, the communities or the organisations, five or more years after they participated, to find out how they are faring;
- they are generally small in scale (tens rather than hundreds of respondents) and short in duration (months rather than years);
- they are qualitative rather than quantitative in nature;
- each is designed locally and overall control is in the hands of the programmes, even when the study is undertaken by independent outside researchers;
- the emphasis on qualitative methods and the use of quotations means that reports help readers to get to

- the 'story behind the story';
- the methods used are understandable for virtually all those involved in the study; and
- the studies are manageable in a wide variety of circumstances.

Tracer studies were not invented by the Foundation. Instead as Ruth N Cohen shows (page 8) we made connections between the ideas and methods of a handful of studies that were known about in 1998, and designed the studies around a set of fairly open parameters that were used to encourage early childhood programmes to undertake similar studies. We saw this as a pilot exercise in which methodologies could be explored and developed and, while we were hopeful, we really had little idea of the outcomes.

Why tracer studies?

As Ruth N Cohen points out (page 9) academic research is valuable but it is also expensive and, by its very nature, often long term and inflexible. We were looking for another form of research,

one that would be more immediate, achievable by smaller programmes that did not have access to vast resources, and adaptable to local needs and capacities. The point was to gain useful insights about actual impact – or the lack of it – on children, people, families and communities, and how this looked when considered in relation to the aspirations of the project.

We recognised early on that these insights would often be personal and subjective rather than objective; would be hard to substantiate by, for example, statistical measures; and would need sympathetic sifting and consideration. In addition, we soon saw that some of the emerging data could be linked to something that is often underrated: intuition about what is happening. That doesn't mean that the data necessarily confirmed intuitions or feelings, rather that they helped us to see how accurate these were.

In some ways, the most exciting outcomes from the studies were that they gave us insights into aspects of



Honduras: Early Stimulation Programme (Christian Children's Fund)
Enrique, playing with softdrink cans.
Photo: Elaine Menotti, HART Fellow from the Centre for Documentary Studies, USA

programmes that we did not even know were there; and that they showed in very real ways the kinds of changes that early childhood programmes can make to people themselves.

Generally, as David P Weikart puts it: 'The tracer studies ask difficult questions regarding effectiveness of services that the broader field of research and evaluation often overlooks' (page 16). They represent a practical research tool that can allow programmes in the field to look deeper into their own work. This is especially so because they are locally determined and controlled. Ideally, they can be such a natural part of a programme's operations that their processes and findings feed back to enhance quality, effectiveness and effects for all concerned.

How tracer studies fit with more formal investigations

Tracer studies should not be seen as alternatives to more formal investigations: they should be seen as complementing them by adding findings about aspects of programme effectiveness that fixed-focus, quantitative studies are unlikely to reveal. For example, quantitative research can reveal the number of those whose behaviours were seemingly changed in specified ways by their

association with early childhood development programmes.

But it is less successful in revealing the story of how people have changed, the impact that this had on their lives, and the ways in which this has fed through into their families, communities or societies. Both sets of findings are necessary and have to be considered together.

A similar argument can be made about research that sets out to test or validate hypotheses or theory. Most of those related to early childhood development come from rich 'Western' countries and, in some settings, aspects of them may sit uneasily with such factors as local cultural understandings, practicalities and environmental realities. Research that sets out to demonstrate the adequacy of such hypotheses and theories may be set up to take account of these but much of it is conceived from a distance with only secondary local involvement. Of course such research is valuable but again, its usefulness may readily be complemented with the outcomes of tracer studies because these come from an approach that is almost at the opposite end of the research spectrum. Tracer studies are unhindered by having to relate to any formal theory; originate from within projects; and set out to learn from what

is there – especially from the kinds of personal outcomes that participants reveal. In addition, the mass of information that results is often of immediate use: knowing about actual impact on people can be directly related to the conceptualisation and operation of a programme, changing or refining how effectiveness is perceived, modifying or adding to the programme's objectives, and perhaps fine-tuning programme content or changing the ways in which it is structured and run.

The articles in this edition

Most of the articles in this edition are arranged in four groups and together offer readers a tour of different aspects of the tracer studies. We start with an article that serves as *an introduction to these tracer studies* (page 8). Written by Ruth N Cohen, it outlines the Foundation's reasons for enabling the studies, then focuses on how the tracer studies were set up and implemented, and on how the resulting data were analysed. It concludes with a review of some of the findings; and is complemented by an overview of the studies so far (pages 14 and 15).

Theory and practice

A group about theory and practice starts with a contribution from David

P Weikart (page 16) that sees tracer studies as both an opportunity and a challenge for the broader field of educational research. For him, the studies provide an opportunity not just because of their wide geographic and cultural settings or because each of the participating projects is fundamentally democratic, but because they look at project participant outcomes over time. In seeing the studies as a challenge, he means that they are challenged by the mainstream field of research and evaluation; that many of the tracer studies focus on programme ideas undergoing development; and that interviews with participants and judgments are highly suspect as outcome information. None-the-less, he concludes that the tracer studies generate many lessons, and that the broader field of educational research and evaluation can learn extensively from them.

How do you conduct the right kind of investigation into something as complex as programme impact on people in the medium to long term? In the Following Footsteps tracer studies workshop in Jamaica in 2002, participants considered this in some detail. One question they explored together was whether researchers should come from inside or outside the projects. The chart on page 19 sets out their deliberations. Their



Honduras: Early Stimulation Programme (Christian Children's Fund)
Pedro Aguilar and Madres Guías in session.
Photo: Elaine Menotti, HART Fellow from the Centre for Documentary Studies, USA



Kenya: Mwana Mwendu project
Preschool children clearing up after play.

ideas are complemented by those of Professor Kathy Sylva (page 20). She reviews the importance of comparison groups and the significance of sample sizes. She also points out how qualitative and quantitative studies can not just coexist, but combine to offer more meaningful findings and interpretations.

To complete the group on theory and practice, the article by Willemien le Roux and Gaolathe Eirene Thupe (page 22) reflects on the issues that arose for them as they set up and

operated a tracer study on participants in a preschool programme for San children in western Botswana. It can be seen as an example of how theory and practice really look when you are actually engaged in a study. It also shows one outcome: a snapshot of the situation that trusts the reader to see beyond the limitations of what a normal 'scientific' study would have been. It concludes that 'we found confirmation of things we had to improve and we found what we also knew intuitively through experience.'

Reflection and planning

The second group of articles covers reflection and planning. The first feature by Susan Branker (page 26) consists of an argument for fitting tracer studies into a system of monitoring and evaluation that is built into the Caribbean Support Initiative. This is a Foundation-supported, five-year regional programme on parenting initiatives. The second feature – by Celia Armesto Rodríguez – discusses the importance of analysis and reflection as organic elements of the Preescolar na Casa project (page 29). The project, which operates a parent education programme in rural areas of Galicia, North Western Spain, once rejected tracer studies as irrelevant but is now re-evaluating them as valuable tools that can help to further enhance programme effectiveness.

In her turn, Myrna Isabel Mejia describes how the Early Stimulation Programme for children aged zero to six years that is run by the Christian Children's Fund (Honduras), decided that tracer studies met the project's need for a qualitative study to assess the impact of the programme on the quality of life of the children and their families (page 32). She goes on to show how the studies adapted and evolved to cope with the realities of the work; and how the unforeseen topics that arose through

the study were incorporated into its findings without distorting its original purpose. The final feature in this group is another product of the Jamaican Workshop mentioned earlier: a chart that records the reasons why projects undertook tracer studies (page 34).

How these tracer studies were conducted

The third group of articles looks especially at how tracer studies were carried out. Miri Levin-Rozalis and Naama Shafran discuss a tracer study that involved a very particular group of people: Ethiopian Jews who arrived in Israel in large numbers and who had to adapt to a very different way of life (page 36). The study looked into the impact of the Parent Cooperative Kindergarten operated by Almaya for children aged 18 months to 4 years, focusing especially on how well former participants in the kindergarten programme acquired tools necessary to better integrate into Israeli society.

Using a children's carnival as a method in a tracer study sounds unlikely, but S Anandalakshmy shows why it was appropriate and how well it functioned (page 38). This novel approach brought together huge numbers of respondents who had been involved in the childcare centres and crèches of the Self Employed Women's Association situated in the State of Gujarat in India. Just as

important, it sucked in relevant Government officials so their help could be enlisted to gain more space for the crèches.

Findings

The fourth group of articles surveys findings of tracer studies. The first, by Ann S Epstein, Jeanne Montie and David P Weikart (page 40) is about a study of elements of a parent-to-parent programme that no longer exists, in current programmes offered to families with young children at the same sites. The study specifically sought similarities to the philosophical principles and implementation guidelines of the original model.

In the next article in this group, Jean D Griffith (page 42) discusses the effects of the Adolescent Development Programme in Trinidad on a sample of 40 young men and women some 10 years after their participation, and compares these with another group with similar characteristics. Dr Roli Degazon-Johnson (page 44) then discusses the findings of a tracer study of the Teenage Mothers Project in rural Jamaica. The study was a follow-up to an earlier piece of research that traced the impact of the project on mothers and children who were participants between 1986 and 1989.

Anne Njenga & Margaret Kabiru from Kenya (page 46) focus on gender differences in reporting the findings of a tracer study that looked at the effects of training for preschool teachers on the children they have cared for, in the Embu district of Kenya. From Ireland, Brenda Molloy concludes this group of articles by reporting on a seven-year follow-up study of mothers and children who participated in the Community Mothers Programme in Ireland (page 48). This is a home visiting support programme that supports the development of parenting skills of first time (and some second time) parents of children aged 0 to 24 months who live in mainly disadvantaged areas.

Policy and programming

Can tracer studies affect policy? This is a question that Ruth N Cohen put to four people associated with a wide variety of different studies, in a range of settings (see page 50). While acknowledging that no study can conclusively show a causal link, three of them saw that the results of the studies have contributed to changes in thinking and, very possibly, to shifts in the allocation of resources.

In the final article in this edition, Henriette Heimgaertner, Foundation Programme Specialist with responsibility for developing ECD

programmes in a number of countries in Central and Western Europe, shows how the Foundation itself can learn from the tracer studies (page 54). She examines five projects and, as an example of what can be gleaned, identifies two 'programmatically landmarks' (timings or opportunities) that the tracer studies show to be especially significant if projects are to be effective. These are: the most opportune time to offer support for parents; and the time of transition from preschool to primary school.

What next?

Essentially, this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* is a 'sampler' that we hope will encourage you to look in more detail at the tracer studies that have been completed. A full list of publications about these can be found on page 58. For the future, we are also considering compiling all of them onto a CD rom. More information on this will appear on our website – www.bernardvanleer.org – in due course. Meanwhile the studies themselves can be downloaded from the website and hard copies are available from the Foundation at the addresses shown on the inside and back covers. These are free of charge for single copies.

We are also considering a further series of tracer studies to both enhance our knowledge about what works in ECD

programmes, and to develop tracer studies as a practical evaluation tool for use by projects. In terms of adding to our own knowledge, we are also interested in hearing about any experiences you may have.

We expect to publish *Introducing tracer studies* by Ruth N Cohen during 2003. This will focus on the approaches and methodologies of tracer studies; and will be a practical guide for those interested in implementing similar studies in their own settings. ○

Jim Smale
Editor

Our apologies for the long delay between this edition of Early Childhood Matters and the previous edition. We expect to resume normal publication during 2003.