

# Following Footsteps: why, how and where to

Ruth N Cohen

*The author, as Senior Programme Specialist, has coordinated a series of tracer studies for the Bernard van Leer Foundation since 1998. These studies have all set out to follow the footsteps of former participants in early childhood development (ECD) programmes to find out what has happened to them five or more years after participation. In this article, she sets out the Foundation's reasons for launching the series. Drawing on examples from the studies and on discussions during the five-day Following Footsteps tracer studies workshop in April 2002 in Kingston, Jamaica, she then reflects on how these tracer studies were set up and implemented and on how the resulting data were analysed. Finally, she introduces some of the findings, showing how these can affect both practice and policy.*

To the man or woman in the street it seems fairly obvious that a small child whose health, nutrition and material needs have been attended to, who has been stimulated and given loving care and attention, is more likely to do better in school and later life than the child who has not had such benefits. This is the basic premise on which many early childhood programmes are based, but very few programmes have tested whether the facts fit the theory. And while intuition is often very

underrated, the gathering of empirical data can do much more than help us discover whether our instincts were accurate: it can give us insights into aspects of our programmes that we possibly did not even know were there.

Many questions arise from this supposition, particularly those that concern the effects of programmes on individuals – for example: in what ways are children changed and how does this impact on the ways in which they

experience and manage their lives? And what of the adults involved in the programmes – the parents, paraprofessionals, paid workers, community members? Are they changed by their experiences? And if so, how and with what kinds of consequences? Were the changes planned for and anticipated? Or accidental and unforeseen? Were the changes good or undesirable? What did the programme do that seems to have caused change? How good was it at

bringing about desirable change? What can it learn from former participants that could enhance its effectiveness in the future?

Perhaps we should also admit that one motivation for these studies was professional curiosity – where did all the children go? What happened to them some years later? Did the ECD programme make any difference to their lives in the medium term? To find out, we used a strategy in which each

participating programme set out to generate a mass of qualitative, often subjective, data: the thoughts and reflections of the people concerned, as they responded to questions. There was no way of knowing beforehand what any of them would report – especially since none of the programmes that participated had originally planned to do a follow-up study. To cope with this, these tracer studies assess and analyse data sympathetically, holding on to the importance of what people say about what happened to them and how it changed them, while trying to synthesise meaningful lessons that can feed into practice. This may seem daunting but, as the articles in this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* show, it is possible, even when outcomes were negative.

### Beyond evaluation

It was not pure coincidence that the Foundation decided to explore this form of study at the time that it did. The Foundation first supported a major early childhood programme in 1965 and now has over 30 years of experience working in this field. Throughout this time we have stressed the importance of evaluation but usually only during and at the end of a project or phase of a project.

During the mid-1990s we started to think beyond evaluation, to dig a little deeper, to see a little further. We carried out an internal project to summarise the experiences of more than 120 programmes that we had supported over the years (see the Historical Project Database at [www.bernardvanleer.org](http://www.bernardvanleer.org)) and this experience raised many questions. One outcome of our questioning was the Effectiveness Initiative, an in-depth investigation into what makes ECD programmes work for the people who take part in them (see *Early Childhood Matters 93, 96 and 99*); and another was this set of tracer studies. There is, in fact, some overlap in that several of the programmes involved in the Effectiveness Initiative have undertaken a tracer study as part of their investigations.

Another major consideration was the need for data on the effects, and effectiveness, of early childhood programmes outside of the rich Western countries. Much of the practice in early childhood has been based on theories developed in the West, and research findings have come from longitudinal studies carried out in industrialised countries. Such studies are expensive and, by their very nature, long term. We were looking for another form of research, one that would be achievable by smaller programmes that

did not have access to vast resources, and that could be adapted and moulded to fit local needs and capacities.

### The nature of these tracer studies

The tracer studies reported on and discussed here are summarised in the table 'The studies so far' on pages 14-15. They are diverse, not least because of the diversity of the participating programmes: each is unique in terms of its setting, the resources at its disposal, the ways in which it seeks to do its work, the communities with which it is engaged, and so on. However, the programmes also have important characteristics in common – for example, all are implemented by locally-based partners; and their objectives all centre on developing and improving the lives of children and their families and communities in the here and now, based on the belief that this will lay the foundations for improved opportunities in the future. This mix of diversity and commonality is actually reflected in these tracer studies: each is unique in its response to the same kinds of factors that make



Kenya: Mwana Mwende project  
Siblings at the toy making workshop.  
Photo: Joanna Bouma

each of the participating programmes unique. But common to all is implementation with local partners, and the objective of discovery for the purpose of improvement.

The programmes involved are all action projects: they have not been conceived or implemented as research studies in which children/families have been



The Netherlands: Samenspel project  
 Fingerpainting during a visit to the Bernard van Leer Foundation  
 Photo: Angela Ernst

randomly assigned to 'treatment' or 'control' groups; and participants have not usually been subjected to tests or other research instruments. Because each of the programmes studied is different in its target group, in its context, and in its strategies, the methods used to trace former participants and discover their current status are almost as varied as the original programmes.

Coupled with that diversity is an openness to whatever comes out from

the research, to the unexpected and to the surprising. This openness is valuable, governed as it is by the specific foci that each tracer study has, because whatever the tracers discover can be seen as an opportunity to learn and to understand.

#### Creating a tracer study

What should be the main considerations when contemplating a tracer study? What are the objectives of those involved in such a study? These

questions have many possible answers, as is demonstrated especially in the table 'Why we did a tracer study' on pages 34-35. In addition, Willemien le Roux and Gaolatlhe Eirene Thupe explain the origins of, and objectives for, the Bokamoso Preschool Programme tracer study in Botswana on page 22. These included wanting to reinforce and test the assumptions of practitioners. In passing we should note that it was this study, carried out 1993-1995, that inspired the Foundation to look seriously at tracer studies. For its part, Preescolar na Casa in Spain considered and then rejected the idea of such a study more than five years ago. But later, as Celia Armesto Rodríguez explains, 'the idea of going beyond the current reality persisted' and she details the many issues and questions that the project team are exploring because, after 25 years of operation, 'assessment continues to be a challenge that can be enhanced by initiatives such as tracer studies' (page 29).

#### The research questions

Key to the design of any study is to ask the right questions. This could mean questioning assumptions that may not have been previously articulated. Devising these questions is something that can usefully be done through a participatory exercise in which all

participants and stakeholders can have a say. And it is at this early stage that other questions need to be answered as well. These will include some that determine the nature of the study, for example:

- whose agenda is being followed – that of the programme, community, parents, funders, policy makers, a mixture?
- Is the objective to understand, to change, to persuade, etc?
- Where and by whom are the research questions to be generated?
- What is the focal unit – children, families, caregivers, the process of change, etc?
- In what ways is the context being taken into account?
- What assumptions does the study make about the programme?

Then there are questions about how the study is to be done:

- what will be the basic design?
- Is the study to be mainly qualitative, mainly quantitative, a mixture?
- Who are the informants, the sample?
- Will there be a comparison sample? (see article on page 20)
- What is the timeline for tracing (how many years back)?
- What is the timeline for carrying out the research?
- Who is on the research team and what will be the nature of the team?

- What are the research instruments, the tools?
- Are the findings going to be interpreted as well as reported?
- What form will the report take (who is the audience)?

The question of who should undertake the study – inside or outside researchers – led to animated discussions and sharing of experiences during the Jamaica Following Footsteps workshop in April 2002 because people from all ‘sides’ were present. The positive aspects and the challenges are summarised on page 19, but the consensus seemed to be that a mixed research team of insiders and outsiders is the best solution. However, as Myrna Isabel Mejia puts it, ‘it is necessary to clearly define the role of the inside personnel in the research process so that objective results can be obtained’ (page 32).

Questions that were *not* asked during these tracer studies concerned hypotheses and that is because these tracer studies were not developed in response to specific hypotheses. All the early childhood programmes we are dealing with here have the basic assumption that the programmes are ‘doing good’ but they seldom design their programmes around hypotheses. We therefore believe that tracer studies should be as open as possible and

should not set out to *prove* a specific hypothesis: that the programme is the best ever, or that a specific strategy is the best method, or that the children get higher grades in school. A tracer study needs a specific focus, but within that it needs to be open to whatever comes out from the research, to be open to the unexpected and the surprising: whether it fits assumptions or not, it is an opportunity to learn and to understand.

#### Methods and approaches

As the articles in this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* show, with tracer studies there is plenty of choice when it comes to methods and approaches. Here the advice of Professor Kathy Sylva during the workshop is very relevant: ‘Where design is concerned, be methodologically promiscuous, adventurous, eclectic.’ And a perfect example of this comes from India where the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in Gujarat identified a novel and highly culture-specific method. S Anandalakshmy describes how SEWA organised children’s carnivals for large numbers of former crèche and preschool centre participants and used the event to interview children and mothers. They also invited Government officials, gave them visible roles and lobbied them to



Trinidad & Tobago: Servol project  
Forres Park Life Centre. Father with two preschool children helping with learning numbers

give the programme support (page 38).

The best laid plans can go astray and this can happen with research as in other spheres of life. In this kind of study it must be remembered that research is not a linear process, and much of it is like trying to find your way through the forest. It is a matter of continually keeping the context in mind – the people, the community, traditions, beliefs, resources, services – and of being alert and open to the unexpected.

#### Analysis of data and reporting

The qualitative nature of the data that tracer studies like these produce creates a major challenge for analysis. This involves a balance between the detail and particularity of what has been discovered on the one hand and, on the other, finding ways to create patterns from the data that will allow useful lessons to be drawn for future practice. To do this it is necessary to create categories that are suggested by the nature of the data and to allocate the data to appropriate categories. But the same data will often need to be used in

different categories. It is a bit like cutting the cake in different directions – horizontally, vertically, crosswise – several times over. Each cut (each grouping) reveals a different reality about the cake; and the data are in play throughout to remind people of what they have to contribute.

Ideally, the establishment of the categories and the allocation of data to the categories, should be a collective effort by a team of people with different perspectives because, for example, the data could suggest one set of categories to an outsider, another to an insider.

How does this work in practice? An example of how data can be analysed at different levels can be found in the report of the tracer study of Almaya's Parents Cooperative Kindergarten in Israel. The chart on page 15 includes Almaya's findings about a shift for former programme participants in the axis that runs between individuality and community – findings that arise from cross-cutting analysis in which the precise information in the original data remained visible.

The ways in which findings are reported will depend very largely on the intended audience and the objectives of the study. In some cases it might be possible, or advisable, to have different

versions in different formats, not with the intention to mislead or misrepresent, but to ensure that each audience gets the material it is most interested in, and in the ways that make it most useful. Whatever method is used, the voices and the words of the respondents must come through – a few quotations can enliven the duller of reports, and they add reality. After all, as Jean D Griffith (who researched the study in Trinidad) told participants in the Following Footsteps workshop: 'We are operating on the principle that as human beings we cannot be reduced to any formula. No matter how well or how scientifically designed, the research cannot give us the reality of this human psycho-physiology.'

There are many questions that can arise during the processes of analysis and reporting. Some of these will be related to the original research questions and the design and implementation of the study. Some of the others could be:

- why didn't we find what we expected to find?
- If the results are not strong, is this the fault of the research methodology or the programme?
- What are the implications of the fact that children are going into a nationally determined educational system?
- What can/should be done with these

data, these findings? Can they influence programming? Can they influence policy?

- Who should we communicate with: are there links to other areas, programmes, or services such as primary schools?

#### *Learning and who benefits*

From the discussions during the Following Footsteps workshop in Jamaica it was obvious that project staff and leaders felt that they had learned a lot from these studies and their processes and findings. In particular, they had gained a deeper understanding of the capabilities and aspirations of the people they were working with; and a definite recognition (or reminder) of how essential it is to be inclusive (not only children, not only mothers, and so on). It was also fascinating to see how the need to frame research questions had stimulated deeper thinking about the objectives of their work and the strategies used. Workshop participants felt that they had become even more aware of the communities and services around them and of how, in some cases, these were letting down the former participants (for example: poor schools, lack of employment or training opportunities).

We are all still at the early stages of learning and the more deeply we look

into the studies that have been carried out so far, the more possibilities there seem to be. The studies have an unusual blend of quantitative and qualitative research and findings, and this has led to very wide learning possibilities applicable within and across different groups of participants.

At local level such groups include participants in a programme; staff in the field as well as those who plan, monitor and supervise programmes; and members of local communities. At regional/national level they can include those who plan and/or implement other ECD programmes, those who are involved in non-ECD programmes such as health or education, and those who plan/implement policy and/or allocate resources. In the Caribbean there is 'a dearth of knowledge about the impact of various interventions due to insufficient measurement and inadequate mechanisms to do so' and Susan Branker, who is the Project Manager for the Caribbean Support Initiative\*, sees many possible benefits in the use of tracer studies at different levels and for varying purposes (page 26).

At the Bernard van Leer Foundation we can all use and learn from the methods and the findings to help with planning, developing and monitoring programmes.

We can also inform ourselves as we share our learning and resources with the field of ECD in general and with our partners and peer organisations. In fact, the tracer study tool fits well with our aspirations to improve our learning. We anticipate using these tools in the future to critically look at the validity of knowledge and skills a project is trying to impart because, as Henriette Heimgaertner explains, ‘The studies provide a rich source of information and some challenging food for thought for those of us engaged in defining parameters for programme development’. In her article on page 54 she gives just two examples from many available: parent support programmes, and the continuum between preschool and primary school.

But there are very many other topics that arise in the studies so far available. To name just a few: gender roles; the impact on implementing staff; ways to reach teenagers; influencing parenting practices now and in the future; influencing the health and nutrition of children and families; transition to the formal school system; language/ cognitive development; social/ emotional development; personal presentation; and those sometimes ill-defined concepts like empowerment, self-esteem, self-confidence, motivation, reciprocity/mutuality, ethos of equality,

attitudes, beliefs, norms, philosophy, values, tolerance, understanding, socialising children into society’s norms, preparing children for the future, discipline and moral guidance.

To get a full picture it is necessary to read the tracer study publications (see pages 58 and 59) but to give some indications of the breadth of coverage and insights, some short excerpts are included in this edition of *Early Childhood Matters*: disciplining San children in Botswana (page 24); what is happening with family support programmes in the USA (page 40); attitudes to parenting and nurturing the children of former participants of the Adolescent Development Programme in Trinidad (page 42); what happened to the children of participants in the Teenage Mothers Programme in Jamaica (page 44); gender differences, role models and social change in Kenya (page 46); and motivations for volunteering to become a Community Mother in Ireland (page 48).

#### *Affecting policy*

From the table ‘Why we did a tracer study’ on page 34 it is obvious that the eight studies described had varying objectives, were aimed at different audiences, and were intended to be used for different purposes. For those who carried out the studies, the process

has been an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of effects and impact and, where the programme still exists, to adjust and develop it. This can, of course, have effects that spread much wider than the original programme, but the question remains: can Following Footsteps affect policy?

The article on page 50 brings together experiences from four very different contexts – USA, Kenya, Ireland and Botswana – and shows that this is possible given a number of specific ingredients: the original programme must be strong and of good quality; the research process needs to be transparent as well as rigorous; and the right

people have to be approached in the right ways. And then there is the special importance of figures. Despite our emphasis on qualitative approaches, there is no doubt that policy-makers, politicians and many funders are influenced by large numbers of respondents and by cost-benefit studies. But those figures need backing up with the words of real people, with the

stories that show us where their footsteps led them. ○

\* The Caribbean Support Initiative is a Foundation-supported, five year regional programme with a thematic focus on parenting initiatives in early childhood development.s



Spain: Preescolar na Casa project  
Preparing lunch together  
Photo: Maria Xosé Miranda Barros in La Coruña on one of her home visiting days