

The challenge of assessment

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The author is a member of the Preescolar na Casa project team, coordinating and organising the training and evaluation of professionals. The project operates a parent education programme, focused on child development and education within the family context, for families in rural areas of Galicia, North Western Spain. In this article, the author shows how analysis and reflection have been organic elements of the programme throughout its long life, and why tracer studies – once rejected as irrelevant – are now being re-evaluated as valuable tools that can help to further enhance programme effectiveness.

The events leading up to the report that follows date back to 1977 when Preescolar na Casa (pnc, Preschool Education in the Home) was begun, a parent education programme in child education that has now been in operation for 25 years.

Twenty-five years is a considerable length of time in which to demonstrate that utopia can sometimes be achieved. And we say utopia because in 1977 it was not easy to imagine that we would be where we are today in the field of education. We are here, however, and

this may possibly be due to the determination of the people who promoted the programme – people who along the way tried to instil in professionals the inescapable need for a continuous analysis of the reality in which they were intervening as the most efficient way of carrying out a project successfully.

So much so that assessment, within a context of reflection-based action, is inherent in the dynamics of the programme, in planning, process and outcome alike. It is a basically qualitative

approach, which takes note, among other elements, of the expressions of satisfaction of the immediate participants (children and parents), the professionals who run the programme and the rest of the community.

Subsequently, this qualitative assessment was enhanced by a more formal plan, an assessment plan that attempted to analyse the programme as a whole. Between 1994 and 1997, a set of tools was conceived that would enable quantified data to be obtained.

At the time when we were defining the assessment plan, we were already thinking about analysing what happened to the children who had taken part in the programme and who had moved on to primary school. Although we thought the information would be interesting, we rejected this line of research because we felt it would be difficult to isolate the effects the programme might have had on the children and their families from other influences that we are all subject to. In reality, we also did not support this form of research because we did not



Spain: Preescolar na Casa project
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believe in this kind of analysis, and we had doubts about the information we might obtain. We rejected the idea and carried on as planned, analysing what we had at the time.

However, this seemed an incomplete response. The idea of going beyond the current reality persisted and we heard about some studies along these lines supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation – tracer studies – and the dilemma emerged again. Do we really know what impact the programme has? Do we know the scope of our intervention in the different areas? And what is more important: are we interested? Do we want to know?

Tracer studies

We became interested and the Foundation provided us with relevant information (previously published studies) and invited us to take part in a workshop that would deal with tracer studies in depth.

After analysing the information, we were faced with several questions, the most important being: what is to be

gained from carrying out studies of this kind?

Other more specific questions from each stage of the study are detailed below.

1. It is obvious that the family and early childhood support programmes are beneficial to the participants. What are studies of this kind intended to show? Do the findings enable us to obtain sufficiently striking and conclusive data to demonstrate to society how necessary each programme is, or do they simply verify what is already taken for granted? Is it worthwhile making the effort to demonstrate something that is obvious from the start?
2. What global assessment/conclusions can be reached from the tracer studies as a whole?
3. What is derived from the conclusions and verified data? What steps are taken as a result of the analysis?
4. What happens when the outcome is not what was expected, not what we were looking for?

- What other kind of information is obtained that was not sought initially?
 - Are these data used? Do they help to redirect the programme intervention? Do they modify the original research plan?
5. Who is responsible for the research method? Who decides what is going to be investigated? What determines which aspects are to be taken into account?
- It seems logical to think that the objectives of each individual programme would be what indicate and define the steps to be taken, but is any aspect of tracer studies introduced – perhaps a standard feature?
6. The type of assessment varies from one programme to another.
- Who decides which type is to be implemented?
 - What advantages or disadvantages are derived from its being external/internal to the programme – or a combination of both?
 - Would results vary according to the type of assessment?
7. Who decides which tools to use for the analysis?
- Would the information that could be sought depend on the model chosen?
 - Is the continuous assessment that is carried out in each programme designed so that data can be gathered that will allow analysis of the programme's impact?
 - Is progress checked from one year to another?
 - Are the ways in which the programmes influence the target population and the community in the shorter term analysed?
8. When analysing the results, are differences observed in the length of time of the intervention/duration of the programmes? In other words, is there a relation between duration and achieving the desired impact?
- As a result of taking part in the Following Footsteps tracer studies workshop in Jamaica, many of these questions were answered. The most difficult task now remains: trying to respond to these ideas as a team,
- because our response will define the research method.
- Preescolar na Casa is clear that it wants to assess and be assessed in order to know the impact of its programme beyond the actual time of intervention. It is clear that the first step is to be willing to accept the information obtained, even if it is not what was expected. It is also clear that the analysis must embrace the whole programme, not just its outcomes. This is necessary so as not to lose sight of the essence of the impact for programming purposes: which elements in the programme determine what impact the programme has. Equally, the research should be qualitative and not just quantitative: many aspects that must be analysed are not quantifiable, yet they occasionally provide much more information. In addition, the study must address everyone involved in the education process: families, professionals, community, politicians, possible financial backers ... in short, society in general.
- Twenty-five years on, PNC defends assessment as essential to programme development. Twenty-five years on, assessment continues to be a challenge that can be enhanced by initiatives such as that of the tracer studies. ○