

Sharing experiences

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The author is the General Coordinator of Projects at AINCADEH, an independent research consultancy. In this extract, she introduces a tracer study of mothers and children who had participated in the Early Stimulation Programme in Honduras for children aged 0 to 6 years, that has been run by the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) since 1995. The programme is implemented by Madres Guiás (Mother Guides) for children 0 to 4 years in their homes, and by Kindergarten Aides for children up to 6 years in non-formal preschool centres. Having operated for approximately six years, the need arose for a qualitative study to assess the impact of the programme on the quality of life of the children involved and their families.*

The study was based on the comparison of two groups of children: one that had been in the programme and another that had not received any kind of intervention from institutions involved in projects of this kind.

Methodologically, the study consisted of three major stages or phases: designing the research; collecting information; and analysing the information. During each of these stages, a number of issues began to emerge that had not been foreseen, but which resulted from the dynamics of the study.

Designing the research

When it came to drawing up the design, determining the sample and defining the most appropriate instruments and techniques, several questions arose.

- Would comparisons between the groups produce the results expected of the study?
 - Would the results be obvious?
 - Could the results of the research affect the normal development of the programme?
 - Was CCF prepared for the results? How would CCF personnel react to them?
 - Should other elements in the programme be included besides mothers and children?
 - Were the planned methods (including observations, drawing, and meetings with the two groups) suitable for obtaining information?
 - Would it be possible to compare the two sets of information that would be obtained?
 - How could we use other tools and experiential techniques to enable mothers and children in the sample to have a closer communal relationship with the research team?
- Other issues also arose.
- That the parameters of the research are related to the following factors:
 - analysis of the different environments of the children;
 - data or secondary information that could be compared with the empirical data;
 - triangulation of the information, that is, corroborating information obtained from each source from different perspectives, and being able to crosscheck information with the variables and the units of analysis.
 - That indicators must be established so the progress of children in each group can be compared.

Fieldwork and collecting information

During the fieldwork, situations arose that had not been envisaged during planning and which prompted changes to the original idea. The following are examples of this.

- At the start of the field research, the participants in the programme could not understand why only a small number of families (the sample) could participate in providing information on the programme. They believed the information should be provided by everyone involved. They also thought that the study was motivated by CCF's intention to leave the community, and the fear of the researchers was that members of the sample group might conceal the benefits of the programme; and

- The CCF field personnel at the research site were also uneasy about the task in hand because they felt that the research also implied that their work was being assessed.

At the outset these difficulties made relations between the field researchers and those being researched difficult. It was necessary to organise seminars for the beneficiary group and for the CCF workers to explain the task in hand and remove the doubts.

Initial plans for the research focused more on mothers and children. However, during fieldwork it was considered necessary to take the opinions of fathers into account. This was to gain a more complete vision of the children's relationship with all the members of their families, and to define a more accurate profile of the father figure.

Analysing the information

The process of data ordering and analysis was initially carried out according to the focal topics of the research that had been envisaged in the plan:

1. attitudes of mothers in relation to the well-being of their children;
2. awareness of the early stimulation programme;
3. emotional and social development of the children;
4. behaviour of the children in the environment of other families;
5. performance of the children at school;
6. changes in family health and basic sanitation; and
7. changes in social and emotional development.

As we gathered responses from the different respondents and saw that they were similar, we had to decide how to analyse the information without losing sight of the purpose of the research. Should we, for example, structure the information in line with the original focal topics, or should the topics that arose from the information be allowed to effectively restructure the research?

This dilemma provoked serious discussions among the research team. Taking the first line would risk us misinterpreting the information, while taking the second line would risk us losing the total and integral meaning of



Honduras: Early Stimulation Programme (Christian Children's Fund)
Madres Guías teaching other mothers about illnesses

the study, of straying from the prime objective.

Finally a compromise was reached: it was decided to relate the information to the original focal points of the research; and also produce a summary of the most significant findings as a whole. In this summary, the findings from the analyses were related to the original foci of the research.

To conclude this introduction to the Early Stimulation Programme tracer study in Honduras, I want to stress that,

in studies of this kind, it is advisable for the research team to be made up of personnel from both outside and inside the institution. And it is necessary to clearly define the role of the inside personnel in the research process so that objective results can be obtained, without interference from the institution. ○

*The tracer study on the participants in the Early Stimulation Programme in Honduras will be published in English and in Spanish by the Foundation in 2003.