The implications of tracer studies for programme development

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Developing a programme of early childhood projects that aim to enhance young children's chances to succeed in life is a complex, non-linear and dynamic process that involves a variety of factors. These include:

- the exploration of life circumstances of children and families;
- needs analyses;
- the availability and quality of ECD and family support services;
- the social climate for children and families;
- the availability of research findings on innovative and effective concepts and practices;
- the organisational and outreach capacities of local partner organisations; and
- the opportunities to influence policy.

During the process of programme development, we obviously have to make many decisions and strategic choices and to do so we need information. Here, the findings of tracer studies have a special importance because they add new factors to do with impact over time, and because they help to show how programming can take these new factors into account. This article analyses the findings of five of the tracer studies using the lens of programme development. It is organised around two 'programmatic landmarks' that the tracer studies highlight. Programmatic landmarks are essentially timings or opportunities that the tracer studies show to be especially significant if projects are to be effective. The two examples discussed here are: the most opportune time to offer support for parents; and the time of transition from preschool to primary school.

Programmatic landmark 1: the key time for parent support

Parent support and parenting programmes are common features in projects that the Foundation supports. Reviewing the projects that we support shows that some focus on parenting at the time that parents are preparing for the birth of their first child; some on teenagers who will be parents in the future, and may be preparing for marriage; and some on parents at the time when their children enter daycare or preschool.

Three tracer studies looked at the impact of projects that focused on parenting, one each from Jamaica, Ireland and Trinidad. The projects centred respectively on teenage mothers, first time mothers and teenagers who were yet to become parents. All three programmes embarked on a comprehensive training programme for mothers and future parents; and this encompassed not only information on childrearing and child development issues, but also life and personal skills. In addition, the projects in Jamaica and Trinidad included vocational training; while in the case of Ireland, many mothers went on to further professional training as a result of their involvement in the programme. All three programmes used non-

directive, empowering ways of programme delivery; and all three provided a range of options for programme participants rather than instructing them on what to do and how to behave. In addition, the programmes reinforced the existing strengths of participants and this led to sustained life management skills and positive parenting behaviour.

Good self-esteem, positive attitudes and purpose in life, good communication skills and engagement with and for the community: these seem to be essential qualities for successfully raising children. The Jamaican study is the most outspoken on these notions, drawing as it does on the mother-child relationship, how children engaged with their peers, and their attitudes to schooling and school achievement. Interestingly, programme outcomes were not limited to the children directly involved in the programme but extended to all subsequent children of mothers enrolled in the programme. In addition, the programme led to fewer siblings in the case of Jamaica and possibly also in the case of Trinidad, although the differences between the programme and the comparison group were not as marked here as in Jamaica.

Overall, the findings indicate that investment in young or future parents pays off and, even more important, that benefits are sustained well into the secondary school years of the children. In personal terms, enrolment in each of the programmes was a crucial turning point in the lives of many of the young parents:

> *It was the best thing that happened to me … life was not at an end*
> (a teenage mother from Jamaica)
>
> *If the programme was not there, I do not know how I would be looking at life today*
> (a participant from Trinidad)
>
> *I liked getting praise for the things I did even when nobody else praised me*
> (a programme mother turned Community Mother from Ireland)

Given such clear, positive and lasting outcomes, it is important for us in the Foundation to take a closer look at components such as the structure, content, implementation and timelines of the projects. In Ireland, outcomes were achieved on the basis of a maximum of 12 one hour visits in the year after the baby's birth. Moreover, the programme used volunteer women from the community for programme delivery who were supported by a small team of community nurses. In Jamaica, teenage mothers were enrolled in the programme for approximately 18 months, which included their pregnancy and a two-month break after the birth. While the mothers were following their course work, the babies were in a daycare provision staffed with caregivers trained by the programme. In Trinidad, the adolescent training programme lasted for 14 weeks, usually followed by a vocational skills training programme. What seems to have been significant was not so much the duration of the intervention, but choosing the right time. This appears to be when new parents are having, or are about to have their first child.

Programmatic landmark 2: the continuum between preschool and primary school

The creation of, and support to, quality preschool services has been one of the mainstays of the Foundation's programming over the years, frequently concentrating on helping countries, regions and communities to build up preschool services from scratch. One key concept here is child-centred learning that encompasses social and emotional development along with the development of cognitive training. In addition, principles of education for diversity inform projects that serve populations which include migrant children; while projects also provide culturally sensitive facilities for children who are members of minority groups.

In many ways, two projects – one from Botswana and one from Kenya – are representative of the kinds of preschool programming that fit the Foundation's approaches and aspirations. Tracer studies in these projects looked into the impact of preschool education by tracing children during their primary school years, reviewing not just primary school performance, but also the ways in which children were developing as people. In both cases we can see that children found the transition from preschool to primary school difficult, and that this resulted in absenteeism and sometimes high dropout and repetition rates.

Trinidad & Tobago: Child Welfare League
The President of the Child Welfare League holding a baby at the Port of Spain centre.

Why was this so? What was happening? It's very clear that learning methods in preschools took the development of children into account; that the physical environments allowed for movement, play and quiet activities; and that preschool teachers were trained to provide a caring, safe and stimulating environment for children. Also, there was space for parents to be involved and parents supported the preschools in many practical ways, not just by paying fees. Children coming from this sort of background found it hard to cope with formal, stiff learning environments and the harsh discipline that was at times exercised by primary school teachers. This was exacerbated by a lack of learning materials, especially those in the mother tongue of the children. Preschools often had other advantages over primary schools as well – for example, that preschool teachers were recruited from the children's own communities and that the home language of the children was usually spoken. In contrast, primary schools used the language of the majority population. The consequence was that children transferring to primary school experienced failure in the first or second grade in Botswana, and in the fourth grade in Kenya – the time when English becomes the language of instruction.

Interestingly, a participant at the Following Footsteps tracer studies workshop in Jamaica portrayed a similar situation in India:

> *In the crèches and preschools, the children really feel that they are loved, that their teachers care, they are from the same community. In the primary school the teachers are not from their community, some children survive the primary system, the ones who get some reinforcement.*

Moreover, particularly in the case of minority children, the different cultural background of the primary school teachers was the source of many misunderstandings and frustrations for children and parents alike. This is most evident in the case of the San children. The Ministry of Education of Botswana deployed primary school teachers to work in San settlements. They received no prior training in minority languages, cultural knowledge, the lifestyle of children or childrearing practices and this had serious

repercussions on the retention rates of San children in school. One example centres on the status of the child in the San culture: San children are brought up as equal to adults, hence parents rarely resort to corporal punishment, yet physical forms of punishment were widespread in the Botswana school system. A second example centres on the fact that primary school teachers did not speak the mother tongue of the children. This made children (and their parents) feel that the San culture was not valued by the teachers and also resulted in teachers using physical punishment as a way to discipline children. The attitudes of some teachers may also have exacerbated the problem: working in minority settings with children they regarded as inferior was often seen as demotion by teachers. This led to discrimination and a loss of motivation, expressed as a wish to be posted elsewhere as soon as the opportunity arose.

The problem of easy and effective transition might seem to be eased in those countries where preschools and primary schools are housed in the same compound, but this apparently does not necessarily foster cooperation between preschool and primary school teachers. There often seems to be an inability on the part of teachers and school administrators to build bridges between pre and primary schools, to take the best of both and devise transitions that ensure that the gains young children make in preschool are built on in primary school. On the positive side, examples from programmes elsewhere suggest that parents who have been involved in the preschool years of their children have successfully insisted that the best practices in preschools are incorporated into the primary school system.

But, as these two tracer studies show, many of the investments in the quality of preschool education and in the training of preschool teachers can count for little as children move into primary school. Both studies found a positive correlation between the training of preschool teachers and the quality of preschool education, but investment in preschool training does not guarantee sustained school achievement for children. A key factor here is the overall quality of the primary school environment: the commitment and skill of the director of the primary school appeared to play an important role in defining the academic standing of the school and in the provision of an enabling learning environment for children. A second key factor is appropriate training for primary school teachers so that they recognise the continuing importance of child-centred approaches and methods. What is clear is that, to sustain the effects of preschool education throughout the primary school years and on into further schooling, needs both a well-run school and well-trained teachers.

The lessons we can draw for programme development are that:

1. the preschool and primary school years have to be experienced as a continuum by children;
2. training for early years teaching must also include primary school teachers, while special managerial and pedagogic training needs to be provided for head teachers/school directors;
3. an introduction to the language of the primary school must start during the preschool years so that children have a good grasp of the majority language when they enter the new school system;
4. likewise, the primary school must ensure literacy in both the children's mother tongue and the language of the majority population; and
5. the cultural values and practices of minority groups must be introduced into the curriculum of the primary school system.

Conclusions

Overall, these tracer studies allow us to review programme impact over time. They also give us insights into the impact of monitoring and evaluation on programme evolution and development. For the San children this has resulted in the training of primary school teachers about what is important in early childhood development, and in training for teachers on cultural diversity. More recently, programme planning in Kenya now includes appropriate training of primary school teachers and shifting their focus to include both preschools and primary schools. ❍