Ready to talk:

explorations in Nicaragua and Venezuela

Jim Smale

In late 1999 I spent some time working alongside educators, project directors and leaders and directors and coordinators of projects and programmes in Nicaragua and Venezuela, many of these projects and programmes are supported by the Foundation. Our work was about the practicalities of ensuring that young children encounter the right participative environments in which they can express themselves readily, knowing that they will be listened to. Specifically, we tried out a wide and varied range of strategies and approaches for everyday use with young children, in 17 working sessions in 10 preschools and centres.

This article is a record of that work. However, we did not carry out a carefully structured investigation and the article should therefore be seen as a collection of experiences from which some tentative pointers for practice have been drawn by the people who did the work. These pointers are set out in a separate section (page 27).

We didn't see listening to children as an end in itself but as a first, crucial step in an exploration of how young children might participate more fully in all stages of programmes that are operated for their benefit. The article therefore also includes observations and reflections about the capacities of young children to participate by programme leaders, coordinators and educators from the City of Managua's preschool programme, from the Preschool Department of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education and from La Fundación La Verde Sonrisa (The Green Smile Foundation).

Work with young children should be done by those they know and trust. The work in Nicaragua and Venezuela was therefore in the hands of the children's own educators – the people who spend more time with them than anyone else except their immediate family members. Because of this, there's a particular character and quality to what was done: it was practical, set in the everyday, and dependent on the knowledge, experience and empathy of the educators. This also kept the objectives tight: to experiment with practical ways of helping children to express themselves; to explore what educators can usefully discover from young children; and to consider what they can and should do with the outcomes. It also defined the nature of the data that emerged, and the nature of the analyses of, and speculations about, those data: what is useful in practice and – taking the broader view – how this affects the

ways in which programmes are conceptualised, monitored and evaluated.

Just asking

The first two working sessions in Nicaragua were in centres in marginal communities in San Marcos, a suburb of the capital, Managua. One was actually the educator's home, the second was a simple shed. These centres are associated with the Movimiento Comunal Nicaraguense. Each session started with a warm up activity that the children (four to seven years) already knew. The educators then simply asked the children questions about the preschool and their reactions to it, what they liked and did not like doing, and what they wanted to be when they grew up. Each also developed further questions from the replies. Most children responded although many responses were minimal and very predictable – for example, 'I want to be a doctor' often followed by 'I do too'.

No public discussion developed between the children: everything passed through the educator. Neither educator, naturally enough in these first short sessions, took the discussions to a deeper level or generated discussions between the children.

Three points arose (and these recurred throughout the sessions with children): the first was that the educators and children functioned very well together, the children were responsive and gave every sign that they had plenty of things to share. The second point was that between themselves, the children whispered with some excitement, prompted each other, reminded each other about things, told each other what to do, asked each other questions, reported to each other. It was impossible to really catch or record these subtexts, annexes and asides. The third point was that, at the end of the session, the children immediately engaged in very intense discussions again between themselves, some of which were about the session we had conducted but most of which appeared to be about other things that were clearly interesting – even exciting – to them.

Drawing and talking

The third session was in Cuidad Sandino, Managua in the 'Los Cumiches' centre that is associated with the Centro de Educación y Comunicación Popular (CANTERA – Centre for Popular Education and Communication). Here two educators tried a different approach involving two groups each of four children. One group consisted of four year olds, the other of six and seven year olds. Led by their educators, the children simply drew what they wanted to and talked about their drawing as they produced it. Then the educators brought the two groups together and asked the children to talk about their drawings. Questions from the educators brought out more and the children commented as each presentation was made, picking up on what was being said, adding to it, discussing it. Each child was readily able to express what they wanted to and this seemed to be because their basic attitude is 'Let's try it and see where it takes us, and we take it'. Some of the points that emerged from the presentations and subsequent questioning were of clear importance. One theme that arose frequently was being hit:

> *Why is the doll crying?*
> *Because her father hit her.*
> *Why did her father hit her?*
> *Because she did something wrong.*
> *And how did her father hit her?*
> *Like this. (demonstrates)*

In this case, the educator was well aware of the violence that some children suffer and the centre already has a programme to reduce parental violence. Another point that emerged here was the educator's skill in asking simple direct questions that allowed children

to give more information. The educators also stimulated the children to produce more thoughts by making suggestions but were careful not to lead them.

The drawings and the information that emerged from three children were especially interesting. One seven year old boy was exceptionally articulate about what he wanted to be when he grew up. A six year old girl had very clear ideas about her ideal house. Questioned by her educator, it was clear that this was rather different from her current house – but she didn't seem to mind. One four year old child drew a complicated picture full of everything that was important to her. As she talked us through it, a full picture emerged of her life as she perceived it.

In a discussion with a larger group of educators afterwards, the two who had taken part in the exercise were very enthusiastic about what they and the children had done together. They recognised its potential for enhancing children's opportunities for expressing themselves; but they added that whatever was revealed had to be put with what else they knew about each child. They also indicated the importance of their empathy with young children and their long professional experience.

Children are capable

The fourth session was led by Dr Juan José Morales, National Director of Preschool Education, and included 11 coordinators of the Municipality of Managua and of the Ministry of Education. It took the form of a discussion about participation by young children and how to achieve it, and was at a more abstract level than discussions with the educators. It revealed a strong belief in children as individual people, who are capable of expressing themselves clearly, and who need educators to set the environment and make opportunities for them to develop their creativity and contribute their ideas.

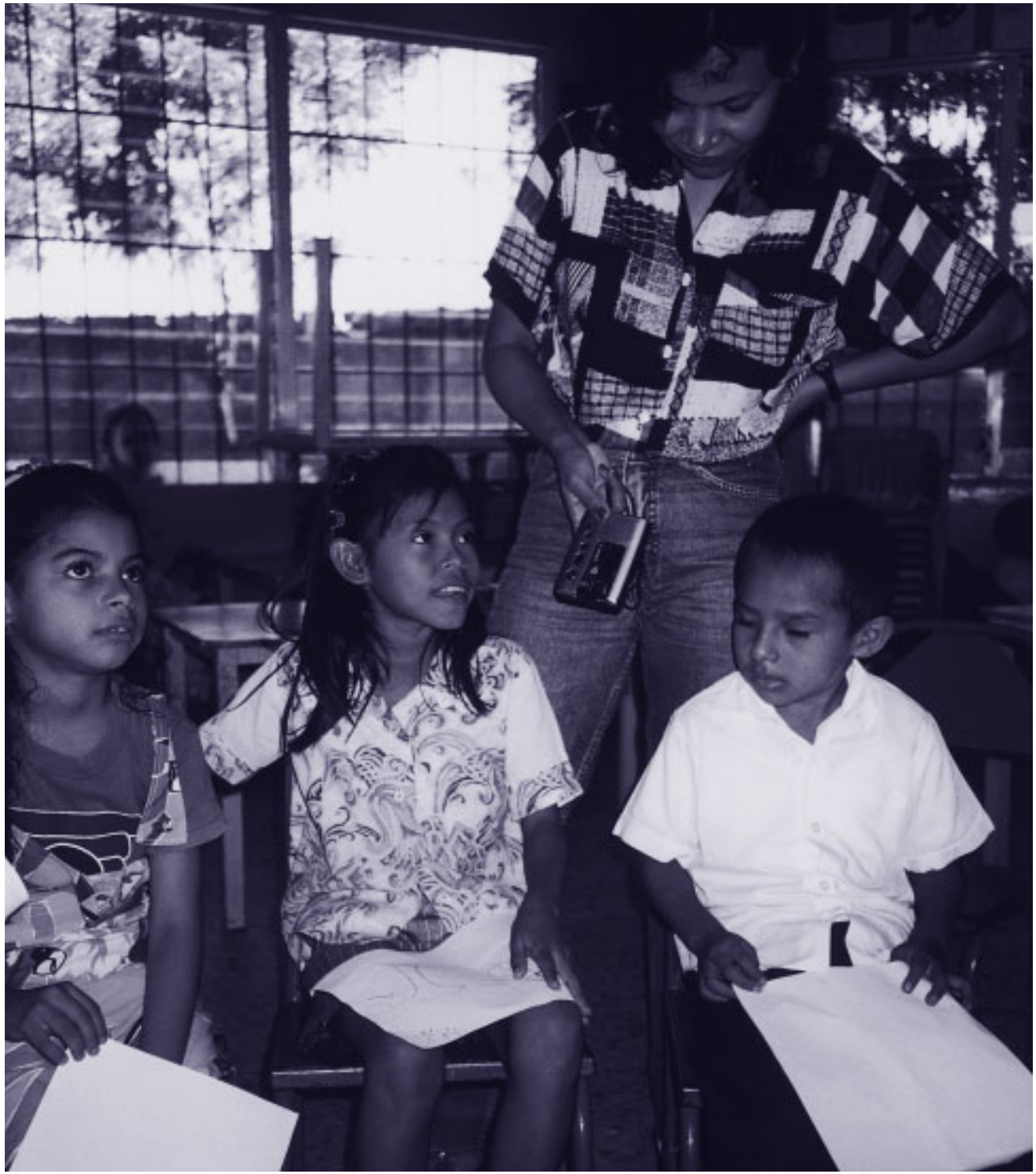
- *Children have lots of ideas: teachers have to be facilitators to help children express them.*
- *We have to see children as active and constant participants who are not just being directed by adults.*
- *We have to give them the freedom to express themselves, to investigate, to discover, to know, to contribute.*
- *Teachers need to be sensitive to each child, and the dynamics that help them to express themselves also have to be specific.*
- *We can ask them: 'What can we do about this?'; 'What do you think about this situation?'; 'What can we do to make it better?'*
- *We have to take into account everything children say and everything they know.*
- *We are weak in this, we are too locked into preparation for primary school.*

Clearly, the participants in this discussion appreciated the potential in young children and believe that it should be built up and built upon. However, for this to happen, all those who are concerned with young children's participation – parents, educators, community members, and policy and decision makers – must establish a political climate in which children are put at the centre, and seen as individuals whose contributions are expected, welcomed and taken seriously.

Getting it wrong

The fifth session took place in Villa Venezuela and Villa Canada, two marginalised areas of Managua that were severely affected by Hurricane Mitch and by flooding in October 1999. The sessions were in a centre associated with the Centro de Información y Servicios Asesoria en Salud (CISAS – Centre for Information and Advice Services in Health) and focused on

Nicaragua Los Cumiches Centre:
Drawing, talking about the drawing and recording
photo: Jim Smale



three approaches. The first was an adult stranger interviewing a five year old ... the child was overwhelmed and said absolutely nothing. Our conclusion was that the problem was not an outsider interviewing young children but the child not feeling comfortable and confident.

The second approach we tried was a 12 year old boy from the same centre interviewing the same five year old. Again this was unsuccessful for very much the same reasons. Later, in a different setting, with much more experienced young people in charge, it worked well.

We then ran a session in which 11, 12 and 13 year olds tried to recall the kinds of experiences, ideas and thoughts they had had as young children. They had some vague recollections about how they felt about a teacher, or some of the activities they were involved in but little more. Perhaps the only useful grain of information that emerged was from a thirteen year old boy who remembered just one thing about his school when he was about five or six:

> *I liked drawing. I used to like drawing (characters from a violent cartoon series for children).*

Nicaragua Marc Mataheru Centre: *Ask me what this means*
Drawing by one of the children from the working session

Again this approach worked better later on in another setting with a particular group of young people.

Working in groups

The next three sessions were in preschools associated with Comité Pro Ayuda Social (COMPAS – Committee for Social Support) in other marginalised areas of Managua. The first of these – and the sixth in total – was in the 'La Colibri' centre. Here one of the educators ran a session with a group of about 25 children aged four to six, asking them questions and generating a basic discussion about what they wanted to be when they grew up. This produced a lot of animated excitement and the same sorts of responses as elsewhere such as 'I want to be a teacher'.

It was clear that launching and sustaining this group discussion was easy for the experienced educator. Children knew what to expect of their educator, and were prepared to go with her, while the educator knew how to lead them through new, important activities. A group of 25 was practical, although the educator had to ensure that all children had the opportunity to express what they really wanted to.

The seventh session was in the 'Marc Mataheru' centre in a similar area. Here one of the educators ran a drawing lesson based on previous work on parts of the human body – she was building on what they already knew, and taking them further by getting them to express more. She did this by having each of the children discuss what they had drawn, then having other children amplify that. The whole of the session was done with the children using a microphone and this seemed to encourage several of them to speak very articulately, almost as if they were performing.

The educator then asked the children for topics that interested them from television, from radio or from their

own experiences. Topics that emerged included poverty, children begging on the streets, finding bombs left over from the civil war... and in the middle, one child recited the story of Little Red Riding Hood. The educator was quick to pick up each new topic and help each child express more and more. This meant that the session wandered around a lot but it clearly interested all children, and the educator always brought it back to the point.

She also ran a session asking children what they wanted to be when they grew up. This again produced some predictable (and perhaps unrealistic) responses. However, some of the children were able to justify what they had said – for example:

> *I want to be a doctor to help people get better.*
> *I want to be an engineer because they earn a lot of money.*

Afterwards, the educators of the centre discussed their thoughts about the participation of children. They were overwhelmingly positive, and talked about their respect for the children they work with and about their intelligence, cleverness, creativity and humanity. Their work with the children already takes account of these qualities and the educators want to do more work on getting children to express themselves. They agreed that, in principle, children's views should have more impact on the life and work of the centre.

The eighth session was in the 'Centro Integral Infantil Fernando Gordillo' where children between five and seven presented a puppet show of welcome for their visitors. This was impressive and the presenters were obviously very excited and involved. We discussed the idea of using puppets with the educator concerned and he said that young children identified closely with the characters that they are presenting. They make up their own dialogue and can thereby reveal not only their creativity, but their understandings, thoughts, and so on. He said that he was often surprised by the ideas they came up with through working on stories for the puppets to tell. The Director of the centre and the educators subsequently discussed their own work, drawing out the qualities that they saw children demonstrating. They too stressed the respect they have for the capacities and abilities of young children.

In discussions with Helia María Gutiérrez and Vilma Cuadra of COMPAS after these three sessions, they emphasised a number of points that have emerged over the years. These included the following.

- That there is a natural link between valuing creative activities and supporting the holistic development of young children effectively.
- That educators show their respect for children by the amount of intelligence, humanity and creativity they bring into their work.
- That by using puppets, drawings, language development and commentaries, the educators reinforce the impact of their teaching.
- That children don't mind being interrupted if they are expressing themselves naturally.
- That most children show a natural ability to develop dialogues.
- That as they draw, they are simultaneously identifying and refining their thoughts about the subject of their drawing.
- That individual attention is vital for inhibited children if they are to have the confidence and sense of security to participate in group sessions.

Applying the lessons

The remaining sessions were in Venezuela and built on what had been learned from the sessions in Nicaragua. The first Venezuelan session was in the 'Centro Comunitario de Atención

Preescolar' (CECAP – Community Centre for Preschool Care) in Los Cipres, a marginalised area of the capital Caracas built on a vulnerable hillside. Before we went on to work with the children, the General Coordinator of CECAP discussed the ways in which young children partly determine the content of the working day. These include making selections from the activities offered and developing these as they wished to, and developing dramatic presentations together. The Coordinator stressed the need to allow things to arise naturally from children and for the educators to pick up on these and help children to develop them in their own ways. In considering listening to children, she made clear that adults are most successful when they empathise with the young children. Although the educators are not experts in psychology, they are highly proficient in recognising young children's needs and wishes, and they are very good at knowing how children are responding. Skills and abilities like these clearly fit with more formal or structured attempts to understand what children are expressing.

Following this, one of the centre's educators explored three approaches with five children aged four to six: the educator asking questions; the children making drawings and then responding to questions from adults; and the children reflecting on their future in response to questions from the educator. As in other centres, the most successful approach was allowing children to draw pictures and then discuss what they had drawn. Again, as they talked about their drawings, the educator was able to help them to express more. She did this by bringing in additional aspects of the subject of each child's drawing and getting the artist to discuss these as well.

In the second session, a class of children aged eight to ten in the same centre tried to recall their experiences of being small. This generated a lot of enthusiasm and drew in other young people who happened to be passing. It was noticeable that the older the children were, the less they could recall, and that what they did say seemed to come mostly from what they must have been told – for example, being able to walk at one year old.

The third session in Venezuela was in the Centros Comunitarios de Aprendizaje (CECODAP – Community Learning Centres) with 11 adolescents from the Así Somos project that helps children establish their own social agendas. One outstanding feature of this project is that the older children undertake quite formal programmes of work with younger children, effectively acting both as mentors and enablers. Each member of the group made individual presentations about their work with young children and expressed their opinions about who and what young children are.

- *Four and five year olds are interested in any topic and are quick learners.*
- *They love to mimic.*
- *They have opinions of their own, they are not just parrots.*
- *The themes that they bring up include assaults, the absence of their parents and being punished.*
- *They love playing, making things, drawing (and they can be good at expressing things through that), singing and making music.*
- *I think that making music makes them more intelligent.*
- *The people who give them affection, they draw bigger.*
- *They get so much information from television.*
- *They watch cartoons on television and talk like the characters. This restricts their ability to express themselves – and they pick up bad words as well.*
- *When I work with them, I start from what they know.*
- *You can talk with them about their needs and about good things and bad things in their lives.*
- *One girl told me she is against abortion because she is alive.*

They then tried to interview two five year olds. Failing in this – as had their peers in Nicaragua – they discussed together how to proceed. They quickly decided that just two adolescents should try to interview each five year old. This didn't work well either. They again discussed the problems between themselves and came up with the idea of having the five year olds make drawings about the topics they wanted to discuss. As in other centres, asking questions about the drawings enabled the children to express much more than was in their drawings. But what was interesting here was that the adolescents managed to move beyond a simple questions and answer routine by sustaining a fluidity that almost turned the young children into storytellers.

A superstar in the making?

The fourth session in Venezuela was with David Ordonez Diaz aged five and his mother who is also an educator. David is very energetic and confident and will probably become a major figure in the broadcasting industry in the future. We recorded a question and answer session between him and his mother and he then interviewed his mother briefly before going on to interview another adult. He sought opinions on homosexuality and, after his mother had checked that he knew what the word meant, he listened very intently to the reply. This was an interesting illustration of something that had already arisen in discussions with programme coordinators: that young children are getting a lot of information from all kinds of sources and need to check it, amplify it and come to healthy understandings.

The fifth session was with a class of six year olds in the Do Re Mi preschool in the centre of Caracas. This was a more formal setting in which David did the interviewing. The children were rather subdued in responding to David's earnest desire to discover their attitudes to homosexuals and to children's rights. Later they interviewed each other about whatever they liked, but again they seemed reserved. Finally, we set up a 'television studio' in the classroom and they tried being television interviewers. Again this was not very successful: the children didn't animate the idea as well as we had expected. One clear reason for this is that we hadn't recognised that the context was different – that children were used to more formal approaches than we introduced. However, this does raise the question of whether children in informal settings are more agile in responding to new experiences than those in more formal settings.

The sixth session was in the same preschool with a class of two, three and four year olds. David did the interviews but the responses were again very limited. Later he took the tape recorder and about six of the children into a small play house. The outcome was predictable: a tape full of the happy sounds of small children exploring an exciting new experience: recording themselves and listening to the results.

The seventh session in Venezuela was with 12 young people between eight and twelve from the Asociación Ayuda a los Niños (AAN – Association for Helping Children). All were former street children who had been associated with AAN for between three and twelve months, building new lives or restoring their pre-street lives. These young people were able to recall their memories of being five or six years old without trouble, in contrast with the group of similarly aged young people in Nicaragua. They did this first individually, then in two groups where they reflected together on three good things that they could remember and three bad things. Each wrote their own memories down and later read them out, sometimes adding extra commentary.

Good memories included:

- *When they bought me the doll I really wanted.*
- *When I got to know new friends in school.*
- *When I was in a bookshop and I found some steps so I could reach the books I liked.*
- *When I was finally old enough to go to the meeting place – but that didn't last long because they closed it.*
- *When, in the second grade at school, I saw my name on the roll of honour for the first time.*
- *When I arrived at preschool and they told me that my brother had been born.*
- *Looking after my brothers.*
  When I was elected Queen of Carnival by the people in the building that I lived in.
- *Learning to swim: when I first tried I swallowed so much water that I nearly drowned.*
- *When I went to my first piano concert.*
- *When my brother helped me to talk and taught me how to do the work that I had to do.*

Bad memories included:

- *When for the first time I learned what it meant to be called a nickname, a nickname that expressed hate for me.*
- *When I first saw a coffin – it gave me nightmares.*
- *When my two best friends and I hit each other.*
- *When I wasn't allowed to go to the meeting place because I was too young.*
- *When we were in a friend's house, all of my family, for a fiesta, then the next day I heard my uncle had died. That was terrifying.*
- *When my mother and I were attacked and robbed – it happened so fast.*
- *When I heard that my best friend had been shot. This affected me more than anything else because we were always together.*
- *When at college they maltreated us children, hitting us on the head.*
- *When I fell off a two metre high wall and I asked my mother who she was because I had lost my memory.*

Discussing their recall ability afterwards, we wondered whether it is linked to the kinds of lives they have lived as street children. Their life experiences have been extreme in comparison to those of children who have enjoyed a safer, more stable and more loving environment. We speculated that these experiences have helped to make them self reliant, independent, capable, determined and resilient in their lives; and more reflective, alert and aware as they have drawn on their experiences, considered their situations and made their decisions.

The eighth session in Venezuela – and the 17th in all – was with Juan Angel Gouveia, a profoundly deaf young man who works with young deaf children. He reflected on what he has discovered in this work, offering deaf children's views of the communication problems they have and showing how these can be overcome.

> *Many parents don't understand deaf children: they think that because the children can't hear, have trouble learning to talk and can't express themselves, they are not intelligent. Many children tell me that their parents discriminate against them in comparison with non deaf children: they are told what to do, made to do things, manipulated and prevented from participating as non deaf children do. Some are also maltreated. The problem is that the parents lack knowledge and understanding, and treat their deaf children like objects.*
>
> *CECODAP has a programme that I'm involved in to educate parents about deaf children, helping them to*

understand how difficult it is for them to learn, showing them how to teach children to learn words. The best way is to teach the children sign language first. Using drawings, paintings, photographs and play all help as they learn what words are and how to use them.

Young deaf children can participate in many ways once they have learned to communicate and once people have learned to 'listen' to them. They love mime theatre because it's play acting and all kids love that – but, more important, it uses bodily and facial expression rather than words. They are also very good at using computers to show people the words that they need to.

This was a good session with which to complete the work in Nicaragua and Venezuela. Juan Angel has drawn particular experiences out of young deaf children. But, in many ways, these also highlight some of the more general adult attitudes and understandings that many young children encounter, and that often limit their potential to communicate well.

Conclusions

After experiencing so much in so many centres, I have no doubts about the quality of what children in these preschools and centres are offered: the curricula are broad, constructed around rights/needs of children and based on the concept of holistic development. The environments are welcoming, safe, purposeful and rich; activities are stimulating and highly participative; the educators are knowledgeable, experienced, and deeply committed to their work and the children they work with. And the children clearly want to be there, are completely engaged and respect – even love – the educators. They are confident, articulate, industrious, spontaneous, creative, full of fun and curiosity... and they are enjoying it all.

At times, they are also able to determine some elements of the programmes.

Venezuela Do Re Mi Centre: *David Ordanez Diaz (right) prepares for a glittering career in the media*
photo: Jim Smale

For example: centres may start with a session in which children choose what they will do from the range of possibilities that are on offer. Equally, educators are sensitive to how children are responding and make changes to the planned programme; and they expect children to initiate activities which they, the educators, support. There is even a sense in which children evaluate elements of the programme: their reactions are picked up by the educators who may then decide to change the immediate programming.

In other words, children already do participate to a limited extent in deciding what is included in their programmes and how these programmes are conducted. However, my view is that participation is largely understood as 'They come, we offer them a good programme, they participate in it'. Young children do not participate formally or directly in a programme's conceptualisation and planning stages. They only impact on the operation of the programme in the sense of affecting some elements of its day to day running and have only an incidental involvement in formal monitoring or evaluation. In this, they are well behind older children and this invites the question 'How much more is possible?'

In this context, it was very interesting to hear about the respect for young children's capacities that adults involved in early childhood programmes have. I didn't encounter any examples of what it means to build on those capacities by trying to bring young children into a broader and deeper participation in project life. But what would happen if – perhaps using techniques designed to exploit their creativity – they were invited to contribute their ideas, needs, perceptions, reactions, feelings and dreams as programmes are conceptualised? How would projects approach and manage that kind of change in process? What might be the nature of structures and mechanisms they would need to devise to make that change? How would they ascribe value to what young children contributed in relation to the inputs of other stakeholders? How might the nature and operation of the resultant programmes be changed? Following on from this, at what other stages of a programme could young children also participate, and in what ways?

Enabling children to express themselves freely and fully, knowing that they will be listened to, is a prerequisite for even beginning to consider the viability of such participation. The work that we carried out in Nicaragua and Venezuela explored a wide range of simple and practical approaches, methods and techniques to allow that expression. These complemented what – often empathetically or intuitively – educators already do. We couldn't take these approaches, methods and techniques very far in such a short time, and children revealed relatively little to us. But we were left with a strong feeling that, given time, they would enable us to hear what we have to know from young children, if we are to understand what they are able to contribute to programmes.

Warm thanks and acknowledgements

This article is the outcome of a collaborative effort involving over 100 people whose lives are dedicated to early childhood development: the educators, directors, committee members and parents of the preschools, centres and organisations who willingly changed their normal routines to make this work possible. In addition, hundreds of children participated in the work. The article belongs to all of these people.

A core group of directors, specialists and leaders was responsible for conceptualising and coordinating the work, and for helping to develop the article. They were: Aura Lila Ulloa (CANTERA, Nicaragua); Dr Juan José Morales (National Director of Preschool Education, Nicaragua); Helia María Gutiérrez and Vilma Cuadra (COMPAS, Nicaragua); Gustavo Hernandez (CISAS, Nicaragua); Luz Daniela Talavera (La Fundación La Verde Sonrisa, Nicaragua); Ada Ligia Portocarrero (Movimiento Comunal Nicaraguense); and Oscar Misle, Fernando Reviera, Soraya Medina, Elizabeth Hernandez, Catalina Martinez and Jenifer Quintana (CECODAP, Venezuela).

Building children's expressive capacities

Nicaragua Marc Mataheru Centre: *Getting into the world of small children*
photo: Marc Mataheru Centre

The ninth working session in Nicaragua was a meeting with the Director and the Head of Social programmes of the Fundación La Verde Sonrisa, and eight voluntary educators from seven marginalised areas of Managua. The educators work in the Casas de Atención Infantil (Childcare Houses) project. Most of the session was centred on an exploration by each of the educators of the nature of their work and the activities that they develop with young children. We also discussed helping children express themselves, and how they can participate in more profound ways. A range of points emerged: some were linked to mutual development of the preschools and the children who help to make them what they are; some were about using natural abilities that are being developed in children; and some were straightforward techniques that educators employed. Here is a range of the points that were made.

- *The educator is a facilitator. Children have to discover, to find out, to control their learning. This helps their creativity, helps them be curious, ask questions, think, understand cause and effect – by their own efforts.*
- *You have to give them options so they can choose what to do, opportunities for them to express how their lives are, how the world appears to them. They are better developed intellectually because of being in the preschool. They have opinions about what is happening. We have to expand opportunities for them to reflect.*
- *Creativity is important. Children are fascinated by playing with materials. They invent and tell their own stories, and we learn from them. Their imagination enables them to enter these stories and express how it feels to be in the situations in the stories.*
- *Painting and play are good for helping children to express what is in their heads.*
- *If they tell you what their father does by acting it, they show you all the details. They make jokes and puns as well. One of the tools the father uses is called a cat, so they make cat noises when they act the father using it.*
- *When we did the first evaluation, in very simple words parents said things like 'Juanito is more awake, he sings, he plays, he's more developed, he speaks more, he expresses himself better, he is better at communicating'.*
- *The small ones choose what we are going to sing and we give them little dolls to help them. They invent new verses.*
- *We tell them stories and they add to them, develop them, participate by contributing their ideas.* ❍


LA NAS Y NIN S TE EMOS
DERECHO A: DIVERTIRNOS,
JUGAR

Nicaragua Centro Integral Infantil Fernando Gordillo: *My puppet speaks for me*
photo: Jim Smale

Some tentative pointers

After each practical session, there was a discussion between the adults who had participated. The following views, observations, opinions, analyses and pointers for good practice offer the essence of those discussions. They are broken up under a number of headings for easy reference but shouldn't be considered in isolation: all emerged from complex operational contexts.

The children

To really understand what young children want or need to express needs medium to long term work.

Children in informal settings seem much more confident and ready to take part, with or without their teachers.

In individual discussions, young children can be open, confident and responsive as long as they feel comfortable with whoever is asking them questions.

Most children show a natural ability to develop dialogues.

Casually sitting next to young children in the middle of an animation and starting a discussion with them doesn't seem to inhibit them – although it can distract other children.

When children tell stories they can add to them with a little prompting, thereby demonstrating their creativity while also giving useful information.

Some children will spontaneously begin to talk about something without any prompting from the educator – to the extent that they actually get in the way of other children. This leads to diversions but can offer unexpected opportunities to get at more ideas from children. The educators can pick up on these and help children to develop them in their own ways.

During most of the sessions, the children were often engaged in dialogues, promptings and commentaries between themselves. Capturing that is hard but will undoubtedly amplify the quantity and, we felt, the quality of what the children are actually expressing. Similarly, after the exercises they moved spontaneously on through an interim stage that included some discussion/commentary about what they had been involved in, but then quickly settled around an agenda that they seemed to develop spontaneously among themselves and that seemed to evolve in an organic way. We will miss a lot if we can't find ways to have them share with us what they share with each other.

Using a microphone and amplifier resulted in many children performing, as if they were mimicking being on television. Alternatively, it may have been just the environment that the educator has – very skilfully – established. Either way, in performing, the children opened up opportunities for their educator to enable them to express more.

Topics in existing curricula can be used to help children express themselves – in one centre these included the human body and coping with discarded bombs.

Some topics seem to matter a lot to children even though these don't necessarily impact on them directly – for example: children begging.

Although David (see page 21) was one of a kind, he showed what a five year old can do. His awareness and depth of understanding, coupled with confidence and an ability to immediately take on a job and do it well, made him a kind of benchmark in terms of the potential that young children may have for participating in projects.

In a formal setting, the introduction of approaches that children don't expect needs good preparation.

Greater formality may anyway have made the children inhibited – they seemed almost frozen without the

Nicaragua La Colibri Centre: *This drawing is about ...*
photo: Jim Smale

guidance and support of their teachers. When we removed the formal structure of their day, they tended to drift down into a kind of unfocused restlessness.

Most older children could recall little or nothing about being five or six years old. However, a group of former street children (8-12 years) was able to recall a great deal.

Older children can be very adept educators. They can monitor their own performances, make necessary changes and yet constantly pursue their objectives. They can be astute in adapting their tone and manner to support the five year olds and make things easier for them; and they are readily accepted by the five year olds as interlocutors.

The educators

Educators communicate with children naturally, in their normal style, in their role as educators – someone who the children trust and are used to working with.

They are often most effective when they empathise with the young children.

They are highly proficient in recognising young children's needs and wishes, and they are very good at knowing how children are responding.

Their approach affects the nature of the interchange between them and the children but doesn't seem to affect the kinds of responses they get: the skill lies in ensuring that each child produces his or her 'real' response.

It is the educator's sensitivity to the nature of what each child is actually saying, coupled with the quality of the follow-up questions, that is likely to produce useful responses.

They are clearly comfortable in working with children's drawings and in moving quickly to take advantage of what comes out of them. It seems clear that they can readily go further in terms of getting at more important ideas from the children.

It doesn't much matter what the starting point is, a skilful educator can lead discussions in ways that enable topics to be explored. For example, in one centre, reciting the Little Red Riding Hood story led to the child putting herself in the heroine's place: 'She ran home so she wouldn't be frightened'.

Approaches, techniques, activities

Finding out from children can readily be incorporated into the normal programme: it doesn't need to be a special session – indeed, it may be better if it is simply introduced naturally and becomes part of the normal activities.

Approaches, techniques and activities of this sort should be planned in regularly and fit naturally within the centre's normal programme – and they should also be introduced as opportunities arise.

A fixed list of questions may provide some good starting points but should be used flexibly. Children should lead adults to what they want to explore.

Allowing children to draw something that is interesting to them and having them talk about what they have drawn allows them to express themselves. What they express may not appear in the drawings: they often reveal the content by explaining, or amplifying what they have drawn, sometimes in response to questions. In addition, as they draw they seem to be simultaneously identifying and refining their thoughts about the subject of their drawing.

Once the theme has been established, and the methodology and dynamic identified, launching and sustaining group work is relatively easy for an experienced educator: children know what to expect from their educators, and are prepared to go with them, while the educators know the children and know how to lead them through important activities.

A group of 25 seems practical, although it inevitably means that some children are left out. But it's not easy for all children to express what interests them when they are in a group: there's interference from other children's ideas which either leads to them copying the ideas of others, or to them being so swamped by what is going on around them that they express nothing.

We need to discover how these approaches, techniques and activities can be applied/developed to address more important and relevant subject matter and elicit responses from the children that are significant in programmatic terms.

Real effort is needed to develop approaches, techniques and activities that will enable programmes to follow up on what young children tell us. ❍