

# Quality learning at scale: a new goal for the Bernard van Leer Foundation

**Leonardo Yáñez, the Bernard van Leer Foundation's programme officer for Brazil and Peru, introduces the articles in this issue of *Early Childhood Matters* and explains the Foundation's past experiences, current thinking and future plans on the question of scaling-up early learning without losing quality.**

Why invest in providing quality early childhood care at scale? There are many answers to this question, each resonating with a different audience. Some see the value of childcare as liberating mothers to go to work. Some view investing in children as a means to ensure that the growing generation will be economically productive in a competitive world. Others are persuaded by the work of economists such as James Heckman that investing in care for young children makes sense as it helps to prevent problems in later childhood and adulthood that cost society much more to remedy.

Some see early childhood as the most effective time to intervene against social inequalities that are passed down from generation to generation. Others see children as the best entry point for efforts to seek a more just society, as it is often easier to mobilise broad political support in favour of social assistance for the children of the poor and marginalised than for their parents. Others again see the case as being made by the duty of states to ensure human rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Last but not least, early childhood is increasingly attracting the attention of scientists, academics and politicians, as evidence from neuroscience explains

more and more of the mechanisms through which the fundamental traits of personality are shaped by the quality of early stimulation and care. We already knew that children who benefit from quality early education tend to earn more, commit less crime, and build better relationships. Now we are finding out more about why.

Over the six decades of its existence, the Bernard van Leer Foundation has pioneered many innovative models of care and early education. We have supported curricula which put children at the centre of their own learning; which reach across a diversity of cultural, geographic and linguistic divides to reach the most disadvantaged; and which recognise the vital role of the family as a child's first educators.

## **Barriers to investing in quality services**

We have now reached the point where there is sufficient knowledge about what it means for a child's early care and education to be considered of sufficiently good quality. There are countless models of provision that merit expansion. The question becomes: 'What is preventing states from universalising quality services in early childhood?' You may think that

the answer is simply a lack of money. But a Brookings Institution study of seven countries, commissioned by the Foundation, revealed that lack of funds was not perceived as the main impediment. Other problems are more significant.

For example, in some states it is ethnic or linguistic or religious divides which lead to groups of children being deprived of quality care. In Israel, for example, programmes for children of Arab or ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jewish parents tend to have more limited funding and lack the minimum quality to ensure a positive developmental impact – teachers are insufficient in number and inadequately trained, and the infrastructure is poor. In the Netherlands, where the Bernard van Leer Foundation is based, children of mostly immigrant minorities from non-Western cultures (notably Turkey, Morocco, Surinam and Netherlands Antilles) are suffering most from a drop in quality of early childhood provision as the economic crisis causes it to slip down the political agenda.

In other states, the main problem is that local municipalities and regions have the responsibility for implementing early childhood programmes, but cannot meet the minimum quality criteria required by the state to release funds. This is a problem encountered in, for example, remote and isolated areas in the Amazon basin of Brazil and Peru and in the tribal communities of Orissa,

India – places where often the language is known only by the locals, and infrastructure is difficult to construct.

Finally, there are states in which there is no social demand for quality universal childcare because the concept is essentially unknown to its potential beneficiaries. The few services for young children that exist in Uganda, for example, have all been designed for the urban environment. Children in rural areas – the majority – would benefit from services such as home visiting, but parents do not call for them because they have never before experienced them. In Tanzania, the 37% of children who do have access to some type of preschool attend a classroom with an average of 74 children per teacher. In both cases, the rural poor especially need integrated learning, health and nutrition for children aged 0 to 8 years.

#### **Success stories at national level**

There are also success stories in maintaining quality when taking early childhood services to scale. On pages 6–11 we summarise a study of Cuba, commissioned by the Foundation and carried out by the Brookings Institution, which shows how inter-agency coordination in this poor and relatively isolated country has led to integrated services between health and education and integrated services for children from before birth. The Cuban experience has inspired programmes in other countries, such as Brazil's *Primeira Infância Melhor*

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Photo: Devi Roebers/SPOREN



(PIM) programme, in which visitors to vulnerable households – urban, rural and indigenous – carry a kit of health, nutrition and early learning stimulation materials. We at the Bernard van Leer Foundation have drawn two major lessons from observing these two sister programmes:

- Ensure that learning during the first 3 years is not the exclusive domain of the education sector. While all sectors must work together, the primary responsibility should be on the health sector, which is better positioned to reach and adapt to the vulnerability of target populations.
- It takes political will from governments and sectoral leaders to define these programmes as a lasting

priority in ways that will transcend partisanship.

The experience of the *Chile Crece Contigo* programme, described on pages 12–16, especially illustrates the second lesson, with backing from the presidential office being vital in mobilising support for the rolling-out of this comprehensive effort. As the newly elected president of Peru also sets out to make early childhood a priority, an article looking at Peru's previous experiences of delivering early childhood services at scale (page 17) identifies four lessons that could guide the new government.

Moving outside the Latin American region, one of the longest-standing successes in large-scale early

childhood services is the Head Start programme in the USA. Joan Lombardi, who knows the programme well, identifies five important factors that can guide other countries looking to emulate the programme's longevity (page 21). As well as the two lessons already mentioned, these include the importance of defining standards and monitoring how they are being met; training staff; and adequate 'dosage' (that is, the number of hours children spend in the programme).

Further interesting lessons emerge from the UK in our interview with Naomi Eisenstadt, who was initially in charge of the British government's Sure Start service. Among the many useful insights to emerge is that the speed at which the programme was expanded in the early years of the last decade, and its universal nature, with the vast majority of families seeing benefits for their children, ensured sustainability across a change of political administration even in difficult economic times (page 28).

A number of African countries are in the process of scaling-up their early childhood services, or making plans to do so. Two country case studies from Africa suggest useful pointers. On pages 33–37, Lynette Okengo identifies four factors that have helped Kenya to achieve preschool services on a significant scale, including decentralised training and community involvement. On pages 38–42, Linda Biersteker discusses the scaling-up of services for 0–4 year olds in South

Africa, drawing lessons which include the importance of communication and overcoming resistance to moving programmes beyond a purely centre-based modality.

#### **Other perspectives on scaling up**

As countries attempt to scale-up early childhood services, there is a vital role for international organisations in providing expertise and support. The World Bank is in the process of setting up a major effort to gather evidence on ‘what works’ in early childhood

1990s. On pages 56–61, Sarah Klaus describes how the programme grew in the face of successive challenges. We delve more deeply into Step by Step’s experiences in one country, Macedonia, on page 62.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation’s long-standing partner in the Caribbean, the Caribbean Child Support Initiative, recently became a foundation in its own right in response to our withdrawal from the region. On pages 72–77, Susan Branker and colleagues outline the debate within the

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development; this ECD-SABER initiative is outlined on pages 43–51. The OECD also assists its member states in refining their early childhood policies and programming, as its former Deputy Secretary-General Aart de Geus explains in an interview on page 52.

As well as taking a national-level perspective, we can address challenges in scaling up from the perspective of organisations who are leading the process. Notable among these is the International Step by Step Association, which operates in 28 countries and has had considerable success in scaling-up quality preschool services, especially in former Soviet states since the early

organisation as to whether scaling up should be pursued through a strategy of institutionalisation or organic growth. Another partner, the Self Employed Women’s Association in India, has successfully brought early learning services to its members on a wide scale; their story is told on pages 67–71.

Some models of quality early learning provision may be inherently harder to scale up than others. One of the most popular and best-known models in early childhood circles, for example, is the one which started in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia; given its fame, it is interesting that more schools have not adopted its approach. On pages 78–82,

Lella Gandini explores reasons why this might be the case in the USA.

Implicit to all the above efforts to maintain quality while scaling-up early childhood provision is a fundamental question: ‘What do we mean by quality?’ On pages 83–89, we précis a paper by Pia Britto *et al.*, originally published by the Society for Research into Child Development, which addresses exactly this question.

Finally in this issue, we approach the question of scaling-up early learning from a very different angle: as smartphones, tablet computers and other such devices increasingly penetrate even poorer communities, what is their potential to support children’s learning? Cynthia Chiong, from Sirius Thinking, explores the very early research that has been done on this question in a fascinating article on page 90.

### Concluding key points

From the articles in this issue, broader research, and this Foundation’s grantmaking experiences over the years, we can identify a number of key points.

- Early learning does not occur only in schools, but in children’s interaction with their primary caregivers and their physical and cultural environment. It is therefore not wholly the responsibility of the education sector.
- Children’s early learning relies heavily on healthy, safe and loving environments and good nutrition.

A programme for this age group should be holistic, integrating the various aspects of child development.

- Parents and caregivers are their child’s natural first teachers as they demonstrate affection, expose children to language, and make their world safe and interesting to explore.
- Good childhood programmes are based on strong popular demand. Parents, caregivers and service providers should be aware and active in defending the rights of their children.
- It is also necessary to sensitise national and supranational political bodies (agencies and regional organisations, parliamentarians, businessmen and celebrities) to lobby for more public and private investment in young children.
- Finally, it is especially necessary to promote quality early learning opportunities in communities with children in most disadvantaged social or economic circumstances. These are the children who most stand to benefit.

We have so far considered the questions of why to invest in learning in the early years, and what has prevented governments from investing heavily in these programmes. But really the most important question is: ‘Why has the early childhood community failed to persuade governments of the compelling case for public investment?’

We have lacked clear leadership to advocate vigorously for the

consolidation of early childhood policies, to overcome the current fragmentation of public and private budgets between countless institutions, none of which take a sufficiently holistic view of children. We must move from mere activism to strategic mobilisation. We must identify and assist stakeholders from different sectors with the will and the ability to represent the interests of children, particularly the poorest and most excluded.

We must also join forces with natural allies among donors, international agencies and civil society networks, not only in the field of education and childcare but in any other sector whose actions have a direct impact on early childhood – for example, social protection, infrastructure and trade. These partnerships should aim to create mechanisms to coordinate funds and ensure that they are used for their specified purpose. This is the direction that the Bernard van Leer Foundation will take, globally and in each of the countries where we operate.