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Learning from birth

Leonardo Yáñez, Programme Officer, Bernard van Leer Foundation

When you hear the phrase ‘early learning’, do you think of preschool? The importance of preschool is increasingly widely acknowledged all over the world. Yet by the time most kids start preschool, aged around 3, the most important building blocks for learning have already been put in place. That’s why this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* focuses on learning from birth to 3 years old.

In the first 3 years of life, children’s brains are far more active than those of university students. Just as their bodies need breast milk, their brains need affection, stimulation, and meaningful interaction – language, touch, eye contact, exploration, play. The more they get these things, the more successfully they will learn to decipher and classify objects, identify language patterns and make themselves understood, and develop relationships based on trust. These are the kinds of cognitive, social and emotional skills that underpin the passage through school and productive life.

While findings from neuroscience and economics together make a powerful case for societies investing more in children’s first 3 years, a huge challenge still lies ahead to persuade policymakers to see this life stage as a strategic priority. Data are scarce – many countries collect statistics about survival and health indicators for the under-3s, but we know much less about the extent to which their parents, communities and environments give them opportunities for exploring, playing and learning. We need more scientific evidence about what policies and interventions work.

And we need more case studies that will help political leaders to understand how best to approach the need for intersectoral coordination, given that multiple ministries – health, education, women, labour – typically need to work together if the early learning needs of 0–3 year olds are to be effectively met.

There are signs of encouragement. President Obama’s recent call for universal preschool in the United States was heard around the world, and helps early childhood advocates to gain the ear of political decision makers.

Further south in the Americas, Dilma Rousseff in Brazil and Ollanta Humala in Peru are among the new wave of Latin American presidents who have not only spoken frequently and passionately about the need to invest in young children, but have also committed resources and begun to roll out national programmes. Cuba, Sweden, Chile and Colombia are other examples of countries which have scaled-up programmes targeting very young children.

At the Bernard van Leer Foundation, we are doing all we can to help this trend along. One of our three strategic goals is to confront the challenge of scaling-up services that foster early learning, without losing the quality – which is always a risk when moving from small-scale projects to wider implementation, especially in tribal, isolated or extremely impoverished communities where there is particular need to respond flexibly to local contexts. Success requires not only political will and financial investment but also technical ability, logistical knowledge and management skills.

In the following articles, you can read about some initiatives that the Foundation is backing, as well as wider developments and context. We begin on page 7 with Joan Lombardi and Rebecca Sayre looking into the available data to give an overview of what we know – and what we don’t – about the state of early learning among children aged 0–3. Next, on page 13, we look at the neuroscience as Saul Cypel explains what is physically happening in the brain of very young children as they learn.

On page 18, David Kritt provides a valuable Vygotskian perspective on early learning, explaining why we should think of it as a process of co-construction between children and the people around them. The WHO and UNICEF are working together on a project called Care for Child Development, which will help caregivers to support their young children’s learning. They explain how on page 23.

We need more data to understand how young children learn and how we can help them, and on page 28 you

can read about how the Inter-American Development Bank is in the process of developing indicators in four Latin American countries. Staying in Latin America, on page 33 we talk to Osmar Terra, a paediatrician turned politician who masterminded the much-lauded *Primeira Infância Melhor* (Better Early Childhood) programme in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul.

On page 35 you can read about how Colombia is successfully using existing home visiting systems to promote a greater variety of play activities and materials in poor households with young children. On page 40, Venita Kaul explains the efforts that are underway in India to define a right to integrated early childhood development that could serve to underpin the delivery of early learning services.

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Susan Walker and Susan M. Chang, on page 45, look at the available evidence to guide public policy on home visiting and other kinds of early learning intervention. On page 50, we hear about how three municipalities in Peru are implementing home visiting programmes with the help of seed funding and technical support, an effort that has considerable potential to be replicated and scaled up. Back in Brazil, the impressive *Mãe Coruja* Programme in the state of Pernambuco is described on page 54.

How can fathers be more engaged in supporting the early learning of their very young children? That's a question asked by the UK's Fatherhood Institute and Brazil's Promundo in an article on page 57. Next, on page 59, Harouna Ba and Loulou Bangura explore how mobile technology is helping to monitor and improve children's health in remote rural villages, with potential



It is important to get data about the extent to which parents, communities and environments give children opportunities for exploring, playing and learning. Photo • Courtesy Asociación Red Innova

applications also in early learning. Last but not least, Yiğit Aksakoğlu shares the inspiring story of how a day-care centre in the Turkish city of Diyarbakır is transforming attitudes towards parenting in the local community.

We hope these articles will inform and inspire, but we are very aware that we still have much to learn about the best ways of supporting young children's learning in the vital early years. We urge you to join us at earlychildhoodmagazine.org, where you will find the articles from these pages presented in a format you can react to through comments and share through social media.