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Small children, big cities

John Cary

San Francisco-based John Cary, Curator of TEDCity2.0, is guest editor of this issue of *Early Childhood Matters*.

Well over a billion children are growing up in cities today, a number which will only climb in the coming years. It is nearly two decades now since UNICEF and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme jointly launched the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative, and increasingly policies and frameworks exist to address the needs of children in cities – but many challenges remain. How to connect abstract policies to the daily experiences of children, caregivers and parents? How to move the needs of children further into the mainstream of discussions about urbanisation? And how to involve children themselves, tapping the fresh thinking and creative energy of urban youth? Where their governments, schools and parents fail them, children themselves often innovate surprisingly effective and powerful responses.

This issue of *Early Childhood Matters* is being published to coincide with a conference held by the Bernard van Leer Foundation in New Delhi in November 2014, in partnership with India's National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA). On page 7, the NIUA's director, Jagan Shah, discusses the philosophical implications of making cities child-friendly 'as a way to inculcate in young people the responsibility and reciprocity on which all democratic societies ultimately depend'. As he says, explaining why child-friendliness is an objective that interests his organisation so much, it 'cuts to the heart of many overlapping problems and doesn't just benefit children'.

It is in emerging countries such as India that the majority of growth in the world's cities is occurring – and these rising cities often feature both expanding slums and a burgeoning middle class. In this context of inequality, the public space of the world's bustling cities has the potential to be the great equaliser among children. While some children may not be read to in their homes, they can often access the literary world and all that it promises through public libraries; while not all kids have the privilege of travelling, they can be exposed to nature in public parks and a diversity of people on public transport. It is in these common spaces that the urban child, no matter how rich or how poor, has the potential for mind-expanding experience.

When invited by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to guest edit this issue of *Early Childhood Matters*, I began to think about how Amsterdam – close to the Foundation's hometown of The Hague – had been the epicentre of an early movement pertinent to this issue from which the world's emerging cities can take inspiration. As Katie Crepeau explains (page 10), it was there over a 30-year period starting in 1947 that Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck designed and built over 800 playgrounds, putting both policy and pragmatism to work. The very first, in the city's Bertelmanplein neighbourhood, remains unchanged to this day. Crepeau spotlights two present-day initiatives in the same vein, focused on reintroducing play as critical to child development (and parental sanity).

Also taking a historical perspective on urban life for children in the Netherlands, Lia Karsten (page 14) observes that 'children used to be seen as resilient, whereas today they are primarily seen as vulnerable'. While something valuable has been lost in this transition, Karsten also believes in studying 'the positive aspects of what has become new practice'; as she explores, urban spaces are increasingly being claimed by middle-class parents as venues for 'public parenting'.

Andrew Slack (page 17) extends these themes of play and children's involvement in reclaiming urban spaces, describing an experimental 'Bureau for Re-Funification' that he and a group of young people piloted in Washington DC, as part of a Smithsonian Institute initiative. Slack founded the global Harry Potter Alliance, which encourages young adult fans to take real world action in line with the themes of their favourite books; fun is at the centre of Slack's every effort, but he sees it as serious business. He practises what media scholar Henry Jenkins has coined 'civic imagination', empowering children and adults alike with the capacity to imagine beyond the status quo.

At the other end of the spectrum from civic imagination is the concept of learned helplessness – a phenomenon in which, in the words of Gary Evans, 'once you conclude there's nothing you can do about an adverse stimulus,

you stop even trying'. On page 20, Evans, a professor in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University, surveys what we know about issues pertinent to child development in cities, from pollution to overcrowding to chronic noise exposure – the constant hum of a nearby highway, railway or flight path. The good news is that it's also possible to unlearn helplessness.

Any attempt to improve city life for children needs to start with a rounded understanding of what their life is now like – a practice called 'human-centred design'. On page 24, Marika Shioiri-Clark details her work in India, Nigeria and elsewhere to directly engage women and girls. As she puts it, 'you come up with ideas by meeting with real people and understanding a broad picture of their lives, what barriers they face, and where there are opportunities to make things better'.

That type of direct engagement is something that Deborah McKoy, Shirl Buss and Jessie Stewart (page 27) seek to impart to their students and through their own research with the Center for Cities + Schools at the University of California, Berkeley. They point out that 'while [young people] are willing and able to contribute meaningful insights about the places where they live, they are rarely involved in community redevelopment visioning and design processes.' That's something that can and should change.

For Monica Chadha (page 31), an architect by training, the greatest challenge is for urban planners to avoid being overly prescriptive as they design public spaces for children. 'Incomplete thinking about what children need', she warns, 'can be worse than not thinking about it at all, as it can lead to unexpected restrictions in circumstances that have not been properly considered.'

The importance of local nuance is also a theme taken up on page 34 by Peter Williams, Founder and Executive Director of ARCHIVE (Architecture for Health in Vulnerable Environments), who looks at the intersection between urban design and infectious disease. From tuberculosis in London to diarrhoea in Bangladesh, what needs to be done is well understood; the key to making

it happen is to understand the interplay among local stakeholders and what resources can be leveraged.

How to get a billion-plus urban children off to a better start in life is a complex question that will require sustained effort from a wide range of stakeholders, from government and foundations to communities and children themselves. We hope the articles in this edition, and the discussions at the New Delhi conference, will make a useful contribution to advance understanding and action on the issues involved.