ED 404 023   PS 025 033

AUTHOR   Amar, Jose Juan Amar
TITLE   Quality of Life and Child Development. Working Papers
                in Early Childhood Development 20.
INSTITUTION   Bernard Van Leer Foundation, The Hague
                (Netherlands).
REPORT NO   ISBN-90-6195-046-5; ISSN-1383-7907
PUB DATE   Nov 96
NOTE   27p.
AVAILABLE FROM Department of Programme Documentation and
                Communication, Bernard van Leer Foundation, P.O. Box
                82334, 2508 EH, The Hague, Netherlands (Single copy
                free; a small charge will be made for multiple copies
                to cover costs of printing and postage).
PUB TYPE   Information Analyses (070) -- Reports -
                Research/Technical (143) -- Reports - Descriptive
                (141)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Child Development; Childhood Attitudes; Children;
                Child Welfare; Community Role; Context Effect; Early
                Childhood Education; Economically Disadvantaged;
                Emotional Response; Family Influence; Family Role;
                Foreign Countries; Perspective Taking; *Poverty;
                Prosocial Behavior; *Quality of Life; Self Concept;
                Social Development; Socialization
IDENTIFIERS   Caribbean; Central America; *Latin America; South
                America

ABSTRACT
        In Latin America and the Caribbean, poverty is not
merely a problem of marginalized communities. It is the situation in
which 240 million people--50 percent of the population--are living.
This report describes research undertaken by the Quality of Life
Project, which aims to improve the situation of children in these
disadvantaged communities. The report begins with a discussion of the
economic situation in these areas and the response to it by
government and the people struggling with it. The report then moves
into an explanation of the project's perspective on two main themes:
quality of life and child development. In both areas the report
stresses the importance of understanding specific, interrelated
social contexts. The report then describes six studies carried out by
the project. The first investigated the perception that children from
disadvantaged backgrounds have of the world in which they live (based
on 12 fundamental concepts such as goodness, money, death, and
friendship); the second study investigated the development of
perspective-taking. The third study examined empathy and prosocial
behavior, while the fourth attempted to determine the perceptions
these children have of themselves. The last two studies examined the
family's and the community's roles in offering these children
protection from their harsh environment. The report concludes with a
discussion of doubts and concerns stemming from the research. (EV)

20

Working Papers in
Early Childhood Development

José Juan Amar Amar

Quality of life and child development

2

Bernard van Leer Foundation

About the author

José Amar Amar is a researcher attached to the *Universidad del Norte* (University of the North) in Colombia. He has worked for 17 years with an inter-disciplinary team, looking for alternative ways of meeting the needs of children living in poverty. In doing so, he has concentrated on the potential of the family and local community as natural educational agents. His recommendations have been used in several countries.

Over the last seven years, his research has been directed towards the study of a new way of understanding child development which he calls 'cosmovision'. This understanding starts from a basis of knowledge of the world and of chidlren's lives, and emphasises the importance of socio-cultural diversity.

This document highlights some of the essential aspects of this work.

20

Working Papers in
Early Childhood Development

José Juan Amar Amar

Quality of life and child development

4

QUALITY OF LIFE AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

On a cold winter's day in southern Chile, I arrived in a small village without electricity or drinking water. There was no doctor or health centre, the nearest school was six kilometres away and when I asked a number of inhabitants what they felt their most pressing need was, almost all answered a cemetery. Years later, in a similar village on the rugged Atlantic coast of Colombia, I was given the same reply.

I have had this experience many times. At first it seemed extraordinary that before so many real needs, people should give such importance to a place where they would rest after they had passed on from this world. But on living more closely with them – on a continent where a million children under the age of five die every year, where five out of every ten children who survive show signs of malnutrition, where four out of every ten children have no legally recognised father, where fifteen million minors live abandoned in the street and where a peasant's child can take up to twenty years to finish primary school according to statistics on repetition and drop out – I came to understand that for them, death represents the last hope they may have of attaining a better life.

Today, the world counts one thousand five hundred million people living in conditions of poverty. Deprivation characterises their daily life: being poor means not having access to drinking water or a drainage system; not having sufficient food or an adequate diet; not having access to health services; not going to school, or else receiving a poor quality education. Often, it means being out of work or underemployed; and living in over crowded conditions. Moreover, for millions of people, poverty means having to work from childhood, with all the consequences this may have on physical health. It can mean living on the streets with no protection or affection, a situation that has driven many into prostitution and delinquency.
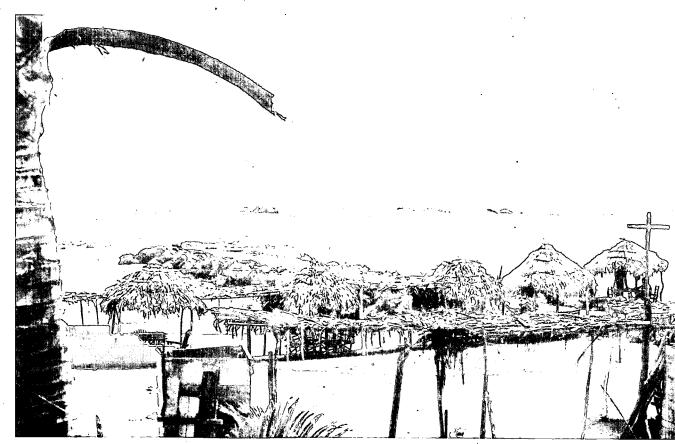
In Latin America and the Caribbean, poverty is not a problem of marginalised communities. It is the situation in which 240 million people – 50 per cent of the

5

population – are living. Although the map of poverty in the region is not homogeneous, according to UNICEF statistics, seven out of every ten children in Guatemala live in poverty; eight out of ten in Peru; five out of ten in Brazil; two out of ten in Argentina. This shows that the reality for large numbers is poverty.

Generally, technical reports disregard the qualitative dimension of poverty. This appears to be one of the factors behind the lack of clear criteria for the development and implementation of effective social programmes and policies.

For many years, different types of proposals have been put forth, especially by governments themselves, to improve people's quality of life. Most of these programmes have had a mixed track record, leading to a general feeling of scepticism towards their intention and impact. Critics point to governments' electoral interests behind the programmes, to their purely assistance-based nature, arguing that they reinforce paternalism and dependence. In fact, the majority of these programmes are developed and even implemented by governments without any real knowledge of the needs of the beneficiaries.

Faced with this situation, partnerships have started to emerge between the State and civil society. In Colombia, the State plays a less centralist role, allowing policies and action to spring from the communities themselves. One such action is organised by the *Universidad del Norte* (University of the North) in Barranquilla which, in association with the Bernard van Leer Foundation, introduced care programmes for children in poor areas as part of a effort to bring about a global change in the living conditions of many communities on Colombia's Atlantic coast.

Thanks to experience acquired from field work and research, our intention at the University of improving children's living conditions has become a reality. The Quality of Life Project was the necessary starting point for involving other sectors of the community in order to achieve a process of truly sustainable change. We have enabled and added to this process through implementing programmes, developing theoretical frameworks and especially, carrying out activities aimed at underlining the importance of not only looking at the scale of poverty, but also understanding its dimensions.

This involved carrying out studies that show how people themselves perceive their living conditions. On a sample of 830 adults, we found that the constant variable is scarcity. This is defined as a sense of limitation in being able to meet basic needs. As one participant said, 'How would you feel if the day came when your children asked for food and there was none?'

Or, 'Poverty is waking up in the morning and not knowing what you're going to eat that day'. For the majority of people, poverty was associated with the lack of money, work or economic resources: 'there's no money', 'there's no money to go shopping', 'there's no work'. It was also associated with food and diet: 'there's no food', or 'the most important thing in life is being able to eat'. These replies suggest that the less one has to consume, the poorer one feels.

Other less important categories used to define poverty were health, education, clothing and housing. Housing refers less to the lack of physical space as to the need for a space where parents feel they can protect their children, and offer them love, care and affection. We also found elements of frustration and despair in the definitions given. Some of those interviewed said that 'being poor is being unhappy' or 'poverty is something hopeless that shouldn't exist'.

With regards to children, poverty is not solely about lacking basic material goods. The deteriorating quality of life in these areas is evident not only in aspects related to subsistence indicators but also in those that determine other levels of well-being. For instance, we carried out a study on how children between the ages of three and seven perceive goodness and beauty. It is well known that these concepts are linked to factors that appear early on in infancy, such as feelings that generate a sense of security and protection. The natural sense of the aesthetic is closely linked to the satisfaction of basic needs, such as food and affection. We found that a significant number of children in our study (25 per cent) do not enjoy beauty for beauty's sake but rather in terms of giving and receiving, especially food. The large majority (90 per cent) define goodness as the solution to their subsistence problems, both in terms of food and affection.

Many people in Latin America associate poverty and its solution to religious beliefs. In our study of adults, a number of replies made reference to God: 'God always offers us some food and gives us some money to pay for where we live', 'as God wills it, that is the way we are', 'I'm not poor because thanks to God, I'm alive', 'I find myself poor but rich in the eyes of God.'

However, among children from poor areas, God's presence does not come out strongly in their replies. As few as 5 per cent considered God as a figure of authority, putting Him

after such figures as the mother – who has the potential to satisfy their basic needs, or the shopkeeper, who possesses 'economic power', however limited. In their answers, children rarely attributed their need to work or their sorrows to a supernatural power. This seems easily justified in that their day-to-day situation gives them no reason to believe in a higher being, and in the end, it constitutes one of the few rays of hope for these children, insofar as they are aware that their future depends on themselves and not on some predetermined destiny. This attitude stands in contrast to that of many adults, who passively accept their destiny.

Without doubt, poverty has a dramatic impact on children. Those of us who have worked with them have gained a deeper understanding of their needs and of the drama of their everyday lives. Constant ill health, premature death and a feeling of powerlessness on the part of parents to satisfy their children's basic needs have led us to the firm belief that a change in the quality of child care is needed. Aid models centred on deprivation – which seem like alms to those who have nothing – must be replaced by programmes rooted in the recognition of children's rights as stated at the World Summit on Children, held in New York in 1990.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out rights that are deemed to be essential aspects of a child's integral development, namely: the right to survival, development, protection and participation. These categories emphasise children's right to possess, to receive or have access to services that will guarantee their harmonious and full physical, intellectual and emotional development. They are also entitled to protection from any acts or practices that might violate their full development as human beings; the right to think, act, and have a voice in matters affecting their own lives and that of their community; and to freedom of expression.

8

Besides the political will that is required for more than lip service to be paid to this Convention, we must strengthen our good intentions with rational knowledge. This will allow us to be sure that initiatives taken to overcome poverty and help children have a more dignified life and fulfil their aim.

In this document, we aim to make a contribution to those people and institutions searching for alternatives in the field of holistic child care. In the first part, we would like to summarise our ideas regarding the concept of 'quality of life'.

Quality of life

Many writers argue that the concept of quality is ambiguous, abstract, inaccurate and too general, to the point that it can refer to virtually anything. However, it has nearly always referred to the level to which goals have been achieved, and is evaluated according to a system's internal and external efficiency. If we look back at evaluation research in the field of childhood care and development in the 1970s and 1980s, we clearly see that it dealt almost exclusively with the measurement of results. Studies of internal efficiency for instance measure the relationship between cost and cover while those on external efficiency rely on cost-benefit analysis. A large number of evaluation studies simply show that with less money, we can look after the same number of children, or that with the same amount, the care can be extended. Many cost-benefit analysis studies are limited to measuring the impact of certain programmes on children's intellectual and emotional development, and their relationships to the family and community.

Although this type of evaluation produces important data, it does not really show whether the quality of life of children and their families has substantially improved. Perhaps a philosophy of everyday life would help to perceive the child and family as a process that is essential and characteristic of human development. As such, the use of cost-efficiency and cost-benefit analysis to measure the quality of these programmes only looks at the control aspect while ignoring the analysis of the process. It means that when one talks about quality of life, one is only looking at a natural disposition or state of being.

This perspective of the quality of life requires defining the reason for being of a child care programme within the country's social and cultural context. We need to know which children will be covered and what we expect in terms of a programme's social function. It also presumes taking into account spatial and temporal variables: historical and geographical conditions can influence the shape of child care and family programmes.

To think about the quality of life implies understanding the relationship between the meaning and the process of human development. Taking quality of life into account means starting from the parameters that define it, and the social model being sought. There is no human development project that is not related to an envisioned social model. Moreover, projects will always refer to a certain conception of society and development. Every stage of human development occurs within a culture whose symbols, values and experiences will give it meaning. From these, one can determine the problem, objectives, policies, mission and actions that different groups will deal with.

From this standpoint, we understand the concept of quality of life as an open, unfinished project that is continually moving towards its realization. Quality refers to a number of qualities that are in constant construction. It cannot be defined as an entity with a complete, absolute nature identical unto itself. Nor can it be reduced to its most visible means and products. Above all, it must be true to itself and to the specific social context in which it is set, while at the same time maintaining a universal perspective of human development as a mandatory reference.

From this perspective, improving the quality of life is based on people's capacity for action, their deeds and ideals for themselves and their community. It means that groups recognise and take their situation in their own hands to transform and enrich it. This defines quality of life as a social and historically determined concept that starts with the needs and interests of the community. The goal is the realization of an authentic life project rooted in a country's specific situation. It relies on the participation of all social actors. At the centre is the child, who acts like a catalyst for releasing the energy needed in order to seek a qualitative change in living conditions. It is evident that to obtain a quality of life focus, a great deals remains to be explored.

Child Development

The process of child development is also very complex. Though psychology is undoubtedly one of the disciplines that can contribute most to understanding the child, it is also highly probable that some of the most violent cultural acts committed against our children has been done in the name of psychology.

Without seeking to undermine the body of knowledge related to the scientific understanding of children and the technological developments stemming from it, the references used are clearly ill-suited to the situation of poor children in our countries. After visiting many communities and sharing experiences with children from them, we are afraid to say that we have never come across examples of Skinner's reactive child, nor Piaget's intelligent child nor indeed Freud's erotic child.

10

Our children are undernourished, seemingly indifferent and lacking in motivation. In many cases, this is aggravated by a sense of powerlessness on the part of their parents. Feeling unable to improve their living conditions, parents are not motivated to stimulate their children's intellectual and socio-emotional development, producing a vicious circle of multiple hardships.

In order to work with children, one needs to start with the reality of each child, because the imaginary child that they tell us about in books – a product of statistical data on nutrition, education, and health – does not exist. Every child is a unique example of humankind, and those who dream up plans of action for children from their desks are probably completely removed from reality.

For this reason, we believe in shaping a different vision of child psychology in which we start out by accepting that knowledge is social: it is created by society's activities. This gives rise to a dialectical interaction between the individual's activities and society. The result of this interaction is individual knowledge, which in turn, can change our understanding of society. It is important to underline that the child does not have a one-way relationship with his/her environment. It is not only children who are affected by their environment; but children also affect and modify their surroundings. According to Wallon, as far as human beings in general are concerned, 'There is no failsafe and definitive appropriation between human beings and their environment. Their relationship is the result of mutual transformation.'[1]

1. Wallon, M. (1980) Psicologia del niño, Editor S.A., Madrid.

Consequently, one would require a world view of child development that studies the formation and transformation of the psyche while at the same time, discovering its biological origins. This approach might also explore individual variations linked to diverse forms of interaction with one's environment and between different environments.
It is very likely that a good deal of psycho-biological knowledge has only relative universal validity since socio-cultural contexts are too diverse to develop a theoretical model that could be applied to all humankind. Although we feel that the different psychological schools have greatly contributed to the study of the mind, the reality of millions of children, families and communities living in absolute poverty call for a different understanding that not only explains children's development, but also how they view their own worlds.

In putting forward a scientific model that aims to explain the thought processes of human beings, one should start by describing the basic pre-scientific structures, that is the situation human beings live in and are aware of when in their natural state. This situation is the world of day-to-day life, understood as 'the area of reality in which man can intervene and which he can modify as a living organism,'[2] thus achieving 'a phenomenological analysis of daily life, or rather, a subjective experience of daily life.'[3] Stated otherwise, we believe that for our purposes, a psychological model should start with the systematic description of shared views of social reality. This involves carrying out a detailed analysis of the activities observed by the mind, especially with reference to the stratification of the spatial, temporal or social world.

2. Schutz, A. and Luckmann, T. (1978) La estructura del mundo de la vida, Amorrortu Editores, Buenos Aires.

3. Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1990) The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Anchor Books, Arlington TX.

This vision of psychological development does not constitute a closed and logically articulated system, with a focus like psycho-dynamic or psycho-genetic learning. Instead, it has more to do with understanding emotional and psychological life, not through detailed study of the brain or strictly controlled experiments, but by tracing the socio-

11

historic patterns of existence, and the external conditions of life. We are not proposing a new psychological system but rather, a new way of thinking, working and resolving problems that are more applicable to reality.

Although this approach does not deny the value of biological factors in governing individual development, it recognises that our biological heritage is not shaped by our actions and experiences. Instead, it imposes limitations whose effects can be modified. Cultures and social conditions have a specificity because they create support systems that allow us to transcend 'raw' biological limitations. Therefore, it is culture and not biology that shapes human minds and lives. Proof of this is the millions of children who are born in conditions of poverty in which their biological development largely depends on their social conditions. On the other hand, the environment in which children live and dream form the mould that stamps their personality with a characteristic 'hallmark'[4]. But this 'hallmark' is not gained passively as the possibility of becoming a protagonist in the construction of one's environment remains.

When one tries to understand or study child development from the perspective of children's daily reality, it is vital to enter into their world, into the specific cultural settings that have helped to shape their personal and social development. 'The stages or characteristics of development must always refer to this particular setting under a dialectical dimension, where the child's personality results from the dynamics of the cultural processes framing it on the one hand and their bio-psychological conditions on the other'[5].

This approach makes child development theory much more relative. Whether it be psycho-dynamic predeterminism, the organisational trend or models based on the laws of learning, none can deny the bias of the cultural context in which they were developed. It is

4. Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of meaning*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

5. Amar, Angarita, Cabrera, Iriarte. *Infancia y vida cotidiana*. Universidad del Norte. Barranquilla, Colombia, 1989.

more than likely that they are valid within these contexts and that they advance universal knowledge of human development. But when they are transferred as a closed system to other cultural settings, it is very probable that they will lack validity.

Children's development is built around the ways in which they internalise their situation. This comes across in their social relationships and their behaviour towards their surroundings. Only from this perspective can we be understood by others. It is only in the context of everyday life that an individual's most basic and profound reality can be understood. This is the one and only point of departure for everything achieved by experience. 'But this reality is not only created from material objects and events that the child encounters in his environment. Although these are a component of his surroundings, his reality also comprises those layers of feelings that turn material things into cultural objects, human bodies into human beings, the movements of these human beings into actions, gestures and communication'[6] because 'the reality of daily life, in fact, is presented as an inter-subjective world, a world that can be shared with others'[7].

This allows us to conceive child development as a system of relationships between children's social influences and their inherent possibilities. The functional specificity of this psychology must use children's daily life as its starting point. From now on, we will consider the study of child development as only possible from the perspective of their surroundings.

6. Schutz, A. and Luckmann, T. (1978) La estructura del mundo de la vida, Amorrortu Editores, Buenos Aires.

7. Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1990) The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Anchor Books, Arlington TX.

8. Wallon, M. (1980) Psicología del niño, Editor S.A., Madrid.

This way of thinking has two requirements: an overall understanding of the phenomenon, and rational explanations. It also implies reacting to reductionist metaphysics in order to gain a dialectical perspective. To continue with Wallon's thinking: 'The aim of the psychologist is to make known man's identity under its different aspects. Not a uniform or a universal unity, but on the contrary, the infinitely variable effects of the laws which regulate the conditions of existence. The organic possibilities of his species, in constant interaction with his environment (a social and cultural world, a world of objects and people), form a concrete human being to be studied, one who is at the same time the agent and producer of this interaction'[8]. If human beings are not seen as products but as actors of their existence, it is possible to accept that the general methodological attitude allows for the application of a great variety of methods, especially observation, comparative approximations, experimentation, the clinical method of genetic psychology, ethnology and the narration described by Bruner.

Finally, we wish to stress that the study of child development in disadvantaged environments should be a relationship of mutual transformation between children and their surroundings because it is impossible to see the two in isolation. Children and their environment form a whole which is as much determined by the biological structure as by the socio-economic environment and the opportunities afforded by the political system.

One of the main tasks of our research has been to understand the world of the children we work with, starting with the fact that through their social life, children acquire points of reference with which to interpret their experiences and give meaning to things, within the context of their culture.

13

So how do our children build reality?

By focusing our research on better understanding children's lives we can develop more accurate theories about them. We have to begin by understanding their daily lives, and how children organise their situations around the 'here' of their bodies and the 'now' of the present. Our research has consequently focused on identifying the different levels of proximity and spatial and temporal remoteness that children experience in their daily lives[9].

We have described, analyzed and interpreted children's daily lives in which their dynamic relationships take place. In their world of activity children's awareness is determined by what they are doing, what they have done, and what they are planning to do. In this sense, it is a world that first and foremost belongs to the child. However, our research also looked at areas that are less accessible or of less interest to children [10].

Inter-subjectivity is another aspect of children's daily life that has to be taken into account. It aims to establish an understanding between how children and those around them perceive and share a common understanding of their every day reality[11].

By adopting this stance, we are possibly close to what Bruner calls 'popular psychology', or perhaps what he prefers to define as 'popular or intuitive social sciences' or even simply 'common sense'[12]. In our research, we are developing a 'psychology' of our culture which consists of descriptions that allow us to understand how human beings, in this case children, live. Some lives can be understood through the children's everyday routine, while others are more difficult[13]. Children living in poverty have routine difficulties day in and day out. We have tried to identify children's coping skills in order to deal with these problems at their root. We also wish to identify those skills that allow children to deal with new problems and incorporate them into their daily routine.

With this knowledge, we are trying to develop alternative methods that will help to ensure children's full development and allow them to achieve their full potential in order to attain a better life.

The project and child development

In passing from the abstract to the concrete, I would like to cite some aspects of our research. The Quality of Life Project aims to improve the quality of life of children from disadvantaged communities. Child development is the driving force behind the programme, and we have created a dynamic and dialectical relationship between the quality of life and child development. In order to motivate communities to improve their surroundings, we start with the needs of the child. No matter what their social background may be, parents are generally interested in ensuring their children's best possible development, both materially and psychologically. With this as a base, parents and communities are motivated to try to offer them better surroundings. Improved material conditions will not only have a positive impact on the children's lives, it will also make the community members feel more valued and worthwhile as people and social actors.

9. Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1990) The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Anchor Books, Arlington TX.

10. Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1990) The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Anchor Books, Arlington TX.

11. Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1990) The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Anchor Books, Arlington TX.

12. Bruner, J. (1990) Acts of meaning, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

13. Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1990) The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Anchor Books, Arlington TX.

We have concluded that if children are to become creative individuals capable of dealing with the problems and challenges that society puts before them, they need to grow up in an atmosphere of love and care, and in which parents can offer them the warmth and security they deserve while improving their physical surroundings as far as possible. These considerations have guided our research and have led us to shed light on what happens to children as individuals and in relation to their surroundings. We have looked at their inner world, their ability to transform weaknesses into strengths, and to survive in poverty-stricken environments, and we have looked at improving their living conditions.

From the universal child to the real child

We have carried out several studies in order to try to answer the question regarding how a child constructs and perceives reality.

One study described the perception that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have of the world in which they live. We questioned children on twelve fundamental concepts: beauty, goodness, money, authority, death, work, friendship, family, school, health, the times they live in, and race. Although these are not exhaustive, they are vital reference points that allowed us to structure our project and understand the world through these children's eyes.

15

We worked with a sample of 1,005 children between the ages of four and seven who came from homogeneous cultures and geographical areas. We used direct observation and a questionnaire exploring the above concepts to gather data. The results were put into a table and were classified according to the frequency and percentage of replies. References made by the children, different types of replies and the comparisons between different areas, ages and concepts formed the basis of this essentially qualitative analysis.

In general, these children come from large families with clearly defined parameters. The mother is the centre of authority and is seen as the main source for satisfying needs and as the principal emotional bond. The needs that the children cited are very basic, suggesting that they perceive their environment as hostile and deprived in terms of the lack of food and inadequate physical surroundings. On analyzing the spoken experiences of these children and comparing them with their environment, it can be seen that their answers are logical and refer to their context. As these statements are made on other occasions, it can be assumed that this is how the children perceive their environment. These replies confirmed the close relationship that exists between the children and their everyday lives. The type of child that emerged from this research was one endowed with social intellect, developed through continuous interactions with others and the need to supplement unfulfilled basic requirements.

As regards the different concepts outlined above, it was found that almost across the board, 'beauty' was related to 41 objects that had the potential to satisfy basic needs: food and affection – in other words, to an item's degree of usefulness. This is probably

the result of the values in these communities revolving around survival, security and protection. People are seen as being 'good' because 'they play with me', or 'they hug me, bathe me and look after me'. Similarly, others are 'bad' because 'they hit me', or 'they don't love me'.

The value these children attach to affection when asked what is good can reflect a need in the face of feelings of abandonment, lack of protection and insecurity. The reference points used by the children underline how unfavourable conditions in life can, paradoxically, develop certain social skills in them such as collaboration, solidarity and reciprocity. These and other values such as social interaction and communication are converted into principles that children internalise and which guide their relationships to their friends and family.

These children associate friendship with what is concrete and close by (family, neighbours), pointing to how important space and proximity are for them. But space is not the only factor guiding these children's friendships. Interests, obligations and customs also play a part: 'I'm his friend because he likes to play the same things I do or because he gives me gifts or food'. This raises the age-old argument as to whether all relationships are solely guided by self-interest.

The concept of death is often associated by children from underprivileged neighbourhoods with immobility: someone is dead because 'they're not moving', or 'not talking', or because 'they're stiff and lying down'. This suggests that children have had some direct contact with death. Children rarely made references to God or to heaven when talking about death. It is likely that in this environment, it is difficult for adults to explain the concepts of God and heaven: they perhaps give the child an explanation based on personal experience. Along with the previous cited answers, others, such as 'he does not come by any more', and 'he's not coming back' further underline how children interpret death.

Children's replies not only allow us to infer things about their world and disadvantaged living conditions, but also to pinpoint other values that have the potential to advance social development. These values would allow children to play an active role, namely by being able to continuously receive influences and transform these to their advantage and that of their community.

Our results shed light on the acute awareness that these children, despite their young age, have of their situation. If we tap this awareness, we can assume that there is a high potential there that would be well worth directing towards social change. If the premise for starting real social development is a clear awareness of one's own being and situation, then children from these areas are at an advantage in terms of this study. Aware of both their limitations and potential to develop, they should be in a position to shape their own life plan. This gives us a glimpse of new possibilities for a better future in these areas. But to make development happen self-awareness, though important, is not enough. It is important to realise that in this subtle revolution, of considering the child as a social being, we have emphasised the importance of interactions with others as a reference point that gives children the chance to understand their experiences within the context of their group. We found that children from poor neighbourhoods have an advantage over those from other sectors with regard to the appropriation of social values like solidarity, a sense of belonging and networks of social exchange. These were very often mentioned in replies

to questions on friendship, death, happiness and family. Moreover, their replies allowed us to deduce the two-fold meaning attributed to the word 'us'.

In a narrow sense, 'us' evokes a factor of protection that is barely visible in a hostile world ('only us': thus clearly setting the limits of the family, group or friends). In a more positive sense, it is used as an expression that includes others, which again underlines the importance of solidarity (me, you, all of 'us').

Whatever the case, the expressions and conversations of children in our sample group testify to their interest in the human experience, both their own and that of others. Moreover, their approach towards other people and the inclusion of others in their world not only points to a process of individuation (of distinguishing themselves from others), but also to a certain level of understanding on the child's part towards the ideas, feelings and language of other people.

The cognitive process of putting oneself in the place of the other and inferring what they are going through is what Mead and Light call 'perspective taking'. This was our next subject of study.

Working at both the level of cognition and communication, it became important to understand what elements shape the process of the child taking a conceptual perspective. Such processes are understood as the child's ability to draw conclusions about what another person knows or doesn't know, and who they should listen to.

With regards to evaluation methods, we carried out an exhaustive bibliographical review of the literature in this field. We carefully analyzed the different methods and compiled a list of elements that could serve as a base for developing a final evaluation method. This was a laborious process that required a great deal of effort on the part of the research team. However, it was a worthwhile investment since we were able to obtain scientific data that allowed us to understand up to what point children were or were not capable of carrying out the cognitive process of 'putting themselves in someone's else's place and making observations about what that person might think or feel, or on their inner state of knowledge'[14].

The results show that children from disadvantaged areas do not have the ability to adopt a cognitive perspective, but they are able to adopt a communicative one. These results led us to believe that each of these two perspectives could be independently measured and defined. In particular, the ability to adopt a communicative perspective would appear to be tied to the continuous social interaction of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, which are often formed to compensate for unmet basic needs. This interaction forces children from an early age to establish relationships based on communication, one of the prerequisites for developing the ability to adopt a perspective. Studies have shown the positive and significant relationship that exists between the measurement of perspective taking and that of leadership, sociability, friendship and cooperation among children of pre-school age.

Our studies also show that because of their situation, the children in our sample focus their interest on satisfying their basic needs, especially the need for affection. This led us to looking at their capacity to understand the emotions of others, which would obviously

14. Mossler, Marvin and Greenber (1976) 'Conceptual Perspective Taking 2 to 6 year-old children', in *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 1, American Psychology Association, Washington DC.

15. Mussen, Paul and
Eisemberg-Berg, Nancy (1977)
*Roots of caring, sharing and
helping: the development of
pro-social behaviour in children,*
Freeman, San Francisco.

have important implications for the development of pro-social behaviour. The latter is defined as actions that aim to help or benefit others without expecting anything in return[15]. We consider this important for the survival of people living in low-income neighbourhoods.

Through our work with the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, we were able to select other children aged between four and seven for another study exploring the process of understanding emotions. A board of professional experts in the field of clinical psychology was consulted on developing instruments for data collection. Using its recommendations as guidelines, 20 flash cards accompanied by stories were designed showing real situations from the children's lives. The idea was to create a scientifically reliable environment to facilitate an understanding of the child's ability to understand emotions. In general, the flash cards depicted a conflict between two people. Children were told that each one was experiencing a different emotion, and were encouraged to take an emotional perspective. The aim of the study was to determine up to what point children were capable of adopting the other person's emotional viewpoint, and to find out whether they could put themselves in the place of the person they identified with while understanding the emotional position of the other person.

Two other flash cards featured facial expressions of four emotions: happiness, sadness, anger and fear. The children were asked to choose the emotion which matched the story. This allowed them to put a name to the emotions with which they identified.

The results from this exercise showed that children between the ages of four and six develop positive emotional perspectives, without any significant difference between the sexes. This information allowed us to conclude that in order to even develop this skill, children must already show certain mature cognitive elements. The sum of opportunities offered by their environment is another essential influence.

In the low-income areas of our study, the economic, political and educational circumstances do not allow children's full development. They stand in the way of healthy physical growth, of the forming of superior cognitive processes and the reaching of goals corresponding to a higher set of motivations. Instead, children concentrate on reaching more concrete objectives such as survival. On the other hand, the environment puts a significant number of problematic situations before children that require an urgent solution. These children are constantly faced with challenges that stimulate their practical intelligence. To cope with socio-emotional conflicts and deal with their difficult environment, children develop skills and strengths such as independence, self-affirmation and the awareness that the group they belong to can offer them help in solving their problems.

The children in our study recognise a person's well-being or lack of it when presented with a certain situation. This is the first and simplest step in developing empathy.

As a factor of protection and adaption to this environment, social interaction is characterised by its tolerance of aggression and conversely, by an intolerance of sadness. The capacity to understand emotions advances children's cognitive development and encourages the forming of a social intelligence. The latter helps children to adapt and fulfil their needs, thus contributing to the well-being of the whole family.

19

Our research on pro-social behaviour showed that as children get older, their empathy skills develop at the same time as behavioural patterns such as solidarity and helping others. We tried to explore the extent to which solidarity and collaboration are the product of an affective and emotional understanding. Are actions that are aimed at helping others based on an understanding of the others' feelings? This question is important because in the context of disadvantaged communities, helping others is a factor in the survival of the community, and hence of the children.

We concluded that children partly acquire their behaviour patterns from examples set by their parents and adults in the community. They also develop processes as a result of their frequent exposure to conflicts that they have had to resolve in order to survive. Such processes include the development of cognitive skills to recognise emotions; an ability to deduce what others are feeling; and the social intelligence that facilitates the search for a solution in the face of adversity.

16. Vygotsky, L.S. (1962) Thought and language, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Cambridge MA, USA.

One significant contribution of research on children in underprivileged areas is how their continuous social interactions contribute to advancing their cognitive development. Vygotsky's [16] (1962) states that 'What a child can do today with the help of another, tomorrow he will be able to do on his own' illustrates this. Children are able to take on increasingly more complex interactions with both other children and adults. This allows them to further progress up the spiral of social development. Face to face interaction is one of the most important experiences for children, since they not only take in the information which another gives, but enter into affective understanding and emotion. The youngsters who live in the situation of poverty continually experience social interaction.

The results of the study on cognitive spheres show an inversion of the predominant hypothesis about the evolving relationship between cognitive skills development and social interaction. They demonstrate how the ability to put things into perspective is an implicit skill in social conduct, becoming increasingly more explicit through reflective thought. In other words, the increasing ability of children to put things into perspective shows a growing consciousness of themselves. Later on comes the acquisition of the skills of flexibility, objectivity, and reversibility of thought.

20

Another important study we carried out that facilitated our understanding of this group of children was to look at the perceptions that they have of themselves. This included the task of showing the dynamic interaction between self-perception and the understanding of others, and the consequences of this relationship on the development of pro-social behaviour patterns. For this study, our sample was made up of children of the same age as those in the previous study, all from underprivileged areas. For data collection, we used 34 items, both flash cards and stories.

After reviewing the bibliography on the topic, we defined self-perception along nine parameters: autonomy, security, competitive worth, family, school life, self-worth, physical appearance and feelings of possession.

Generally, we found that the children in our study had a fairly positive self-image, regardless of their age or sex. This indicates that they possess realistic beliefs and expectations for themselves as well as the ability to appropriate their life experiences without ignoring or distorting their perception. The children have a sense of autonomy and a fairly strong sense of independence. They desire the feeling of personal worth and strive towards individuality, given that their daily life consists of running errands, going to the shop, passing on messages, coming and going from children's homes and so on. Their socio-cultural environment, whether it be in the family or at school, encouraged the development of independence and individuality by putting before them situations that required them to be autonomous.

The security felt by these children came across very strongly in our study. This suggests that they know and trust their natural environment and do not see it as a threatening or dangerous setting – it has even enriched their daily lives. It is important to stress this since it is somewhat related to the element of autonomy. Without falling into the trap of drawing a causal relationship between the two, the theory could be advanced that because children trust their surroundings and perceive them positively, they are able to develop a greater sense of autonomy. Equally, we can conclude that children seem able to confidently manage in an environment that outsiders perceive as characterised by limitations and risks.

This same environment encourages the development of physical skills in children, which in turn help them perceive themselves as capable of dealing positively with competitive situations. They always want to win or come first, which possibly reflects their own fantasies and ideals of what they would like to be and are not. Whether they are winners or not, they seem to perceive themselves as such, which suggests their implicit need to want to see themselves in this way. However, a significant proportion of children hold a more realistic position in this respect. These children usually do a lot of activities outside

their homes, like playing with friends in the neighbourhood, which not only contribute to finding their place in the social world but also positively influences their emotional make-up. These children have a sense of well-being and confidence, and are usually lively if their everyday life has given them enough experiences to develop a favourable emotional make-up with the ability to perceive feelings of happiness and sadness within themselves.

It appears that the people surrounding the children in this age group have created situations in which the youngsters are able to feel appreciated and develop a positive self-image. Children are aware of material possessions and recognise that within their environment they do have some pretty things. But they also recognise that they do not have a lot.

When one compares our study on self-perception of children between the ages of four and seven with another one carried out on children in the 10-12 age group, we find completely opposite results. Children in the school system have a very negative self-image, especially with regard to their security and self-worth, their confidence in what they are able to do and their feelings of possession.

Schools in underprivileged areas of Colombia, just as in most of the country, are very poor quality and ignore the reality of the surroundings. Curricula tend to be centralised and teachers are generally demotivated by low salaries. From this, we can infer that what children learn in their first seven years through interaction with their families and communities – in spite of adverse conditions – creates an environment in which many skills are acquired, even if they are mostly for survival, which contribute to a positive self-perception. In contrast, school education seems to contribute to deteriorating the child's concept of self. This is aggravated by cultural violence from the media and the schools, where the rich represent everything positive and the poor the opposite.

Turning weaknesses into strengths: the family and the community

Statistics can never give a real picture of the physical and moral pain and suffering that poverty causes. The millions of children who die every year are a veritable holocaust. Behind the death of every child is a family that suffers. The pain is all the worse when the families know that access to a health centre, or adequate food and sanitation might have saved the child. This is what it means to be poor.

However, despite poverty, families and communities find the strength to overcome their weaknesses and create support systems within the family itself or in the dynamic of community life to give their children a dignified life.

18

Our research into this area has sought to raise our awareness level and obtain relevant information that could help us in one of the main objectives of our daily work: involving families in their children's education.

One of these studies was designed to identify ways of protection for children of poor families in Barranquilla. This work produced very interesting information. The three most significant ways of protection for these children were: security, kinship and affection, of which the first two are the most important.

The poor from the Atlantic Coast region find a certain comfort within their families, through daily activities and relationships, with the main focus being on children. These enable them to mutually support, encourage and defend one another. A feeling of security bonds them closer together and gives them a sense of belonging or affiliation to a group in which they feel they are 'someone' and are important in life. These feelings of security and belonging are manifested in expressions of affection, particularly towards their children, and make them feel stronger for possessing something in life.

Giving children security and protection

The protection that the families in our study give to their children is rooted in the poverty itself. They try to protect their children from material poverty. In our research into this area, we felt that it was important to explore the daily measure of protection amongst specific groups of the population. We carried out a study that would identify these factors in a group of children from zero to three years old. This study focused on routine, spontaneous and almost unconscious measures that have been used by families to protect their children. We took an everyday approach, just as we had in all our previous research. For data collection, we relied on direct observation and interviews. The analysis of the data led to the following results.

'Natural' measures occupy first place or prevail over 'social' ones since they are directly related to survival while the latter are more closely tied to interaction with others in society. The natural measures are related to worries about nutrition and eating habits, sleep patterns, toilet training, personal hygiene and physical well-being.

The social measures of protection refer to how families care for children, the steps they take to face difficulties, how they avoid risks. It also encompasses the strong sense of kinship and belonging to the family, the strong ties of affection, the division of tasks in child minding, and the social and moral values that are promoted.

Some factors can make it difficult to protect children. These include risks in the area, the family's expectations for their children's futures, the inadequate teaching of rules, a parent's poor parenting skills, and the father's lack of participation in child care. Affection is one of the best ways of giving children security. It is conveyed through verbal and physical contact, that give a warm human touch to relationships. Apart from reflecting the importance of children to their parents, affection can also be seen as compensation for material shortcomings and as a source of strength to put up with day-to-day difficulties.

23

Though the majority of families have no difficulty in protecting their young children, problems can start to appear as the children grow older. It is therefore important that families themselves are active in the daily struggle of protecting the children. There are strong bonds between different family members and children. The importance of these ties is expressed in the following: 'It is the most important thing, it means everything, it produces happiness and pride in the home'. Parents do not believe that they would care for their children any differently if they were to live in another context.

The parents' age can be a factor of protection for children, at least when the parents are young. However, their schooling level does not contribute to the child's development since in most cases, it is limited and at times non-existent.

What families do to enable their children to grow up healthy varies according to the children's ages. They rely on 'assurances', general care and the use of preventive medicine. When the child is one year old, attention is given to general care and protection from danger. When the child is two, basic health care, protection from danger and home remedies prevail. This same holds for when the child is three.

Another line of study undertaken by the Atlantic Coast project was to look into 'social networks' or social interchange. These refer to mechanisms adopted by poor families to maintain their physical and psychological integrity through self-help, whether it be to do with money, information, company or voluntary work in the community to help its members cope with day-to-day difficulties.

One of the most interesting findings is that a better cohesion is formed when these networks encompass the three following elements: physical proximity, blood ties and confidence between its members. In the last few years, we have been able to identify about 54 kinds of linkages between different members of the community. Likewise, we have been able to identify the mother as the person whose emotional support and symbolic transfers have had the greatest impact on the children's lives – often right into their married lives.

The second most important influence is that of neighbours, especially if there is a sense of community among them. This happens when basic community processes take place within a village neighbourhood, such as group actions to promote change for the common good; organisation and participation in decision making processes and the relationship with the state; social action and integration. By taking the children's needs and surroundings as a starting point, communities can begin to develop survival strategies in making life choices and linking themselves through political projects to the wider national scale.

Our studies have clearly proved that the family and the community are the strongest influences on the lives of children. This makes all the more precious the lines of a Turkish poet who wrote that 'the only thing a human being never forgets is his mother's face and the place where he was born'.

24

Final concerns

To conclude, I would like to raise a few doubts and concerns stemming from our long year of study.

The first is the importance of a thorough and veritable understanding of children in their development process. In the different child care centres located on the Atlantic coast, we have not only designed content but also, more importantly, educational programmes with adults and children based on the latter's real characteristics. For example, we have recognised their great artistic potential, and their extraordinary sensitivity to music. Since we value creativity and wish to encourage play, our child care centres are filled with music. But it is highly likely that what we do is of no use to children in other countries, nor even to children from other regions of Colombia whose culture calls for a different kind of development. We do not see the development of intelligence as most important. We are not working towards the future, we are acting on the here and now. We are not concerned whether these children become geniuses in physics or maths. What concerns us is to see them today and to see them happy, healthy, well-fed, capable of sharing with other children. We want them to feel protected, secure and loved by the adults around them. What they will be when they grow up does not only depend on the political system; they will also be a product of what they can do every day to further their self-development. It is up to us as adults, the family, the school, the community and the state to assure them the basic right to a dignified life.

In spite of all the studies carried out on child development, we still have a great deal to learn, which goes to show the inexhaustible depth of human beings and, probably, the impossibility of reducing them to scientific laws. Our aim in this study was not to reveal truths but to sow concern amongst people. We would like others to reflect and analyze our practical experience and to evaluate day after day, the meaning of our work with children. Although we know that the living conditions of the majority of children in the world will continue to be marked by difficulty, studies such as this one are a ray of hope showing that it is within our reach to give these children and their families a quality of life.

Working Papers in Early Childhood Development

5 Building on people's strengths: the case for contextual child development, Gerry Salole — July 1992

6 Child survival and child development in Africa, Dr Ibinado S. Agiobu-Kemmer — July 1992

7 The role of refugee women and children of Afghanistan today, Nancy H. Dupree — July 1992

8 Parent run day care centres: the growth of a French community initiative, Josette Combes — December 1992

9 From store cupboard to family room: how parents pushed open the doors of a Scottish nursery school, Elly Alexander — December 1992

10 The process of change: altering the practice of care in a children's home in the Middle East, Birgitta Gälldin Åberg — December 1992

11 Multicultural approaches in education: a German experience, Carmen Treppte — April 1993

12 Educational development of students following participation in a pre-school programme in a disadvantaged area in Ireland, Dr. Thomas Kellaghan and Betty Jane Greaney — April 1993

13 Selecting and training community promoters in Latin America, Jani Brouwer and Sergio Martinic — February 1994

14 *Planteamientos multiculturales en la educación: una experiencia alemana,* Carmen Treppte — July 1994

15 Developmentally appropriate outdoor play environments, Jimi Jolley — August 1995

16 The rationale for experiential/participatory learning, Kate Torkington — February 1996

17 *Calidad de vida y desarrollo infantil,* José Juan Amar Amar — March 1996

18 *Guía de promoción de la resiliencia en los niños para fortalecer el espíritu humano,* Dra. Edith Grotberg — July 1996

19 Empowering parents to change the future: an analysis of changes in parental attitudes in East Jerusalem, Nabil Shibly with Riad Tibi — July 1996

20 Quality of life and child development, José Juan Amar Amar — November 1996

About the Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a private institution based in The Netherlands that concentrates its resources on support for early childhood development. The Foundation takes its name from Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist who died in 1958. The Foundation's income is derived from the Van Leer Group Foundation, the majority shareholder of Royal Packaging Industries Van Leer.

The Foundation's central objective is to improve opportunities for young children who live in disadvantaged circumstances. It does this by supporting the development of innovative field-based approaches in early childhood development, and by sharing experiences with as wide an audience as possible in order to influence policy and practice.

For further information about the Bernard van Leer Foundation, or for a complete list of its publications, please write to the address below.

Printed on recycled paper

Information on the series

Working Papers in Early Childhood Development form a series of background documents drawn from field experience to present relevant findings and reflections on 'work in progress'. The series therefore acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas.

Some of the papers arise directly out of field work, evaluations and training experiences from the worldwide programme supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. Others are contributions which have a particular relevance to that programme. All are aimed at addressing issues relating to the field of early childhood care and development.

The findings, interpretations, conclusions, and views expressed in this series are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Copyright is held jointly by the authors and the Foundation. Unless otherwise stated, however, papers may be quoted and photocopied for non-commercial purposes without prior permission. Citations should be given in full, giving the Foundation as source.

Contributions

Contributions to this series are welcomed. They should be drawn from field experience and be a maximum of 15,000 words. Contributions can be addressed to Joanna Bouma, Department of Programme Documentation and Communication at the address given below.

Bernard van Leer Foundation,
P.O. Box 82334,
2508 EH The Hague,
The Netherlands
Tel : +31.70.351 20 40
Fax: +31.70.350 23 73