

Bernard van Leer Foundation

Bernard van Leer (1883-1958) was a Dutch Jewish industrialist and philanthropist, who in 1919, started a packaging company in the Netherlands that developed into a world leader in the packaging industry. His success in business gave him the resources to pursue his philanthropic ideals - to use his wealth for the benefit of others. He set up the BvLF in 1949 with a wide range of philanthropic activities.

It was his son, Oscar after his father's death who re-focused the Foundation on the education of young children. He believed that giving all children a good start in life was not only the fair thing to do, but also an effective pathway to building more peaceful, prosperous and creative societies

Key features of the BvLF include:

- An international geographic focus.
- A grant-making program aimed at developing culturally and contextually appropriate approaches to early childhood development (targeting children 0-8 years in socially and economically disadvantage circumstances).
- Sharing knowledge and expertise with the aim of informing and influencing policy and practice.
- Requiring recipient organisations to develop partner capabilities to ensure long term impact of the programs. BvLF works with partner non-government organization to build their capacity, improve performance and promote innovation.

Over the years the BvLF operated in over 50 countries. Around the year 2000 BvLF reduced the number of eligible countries from 55 to only 10. This move meant that Australia was no longer eligible to receive BvLF Grants.

BvLF in Australia

From the early 1970s the Bernard van Leer Foundation provided sometimes decade long financial and technical support to academic and community based organisations in Australia to implement research, pilot and dissemination projects.

These included:

- Aboriginal preschool children's language and development opportunities in Cherbourg and Palm Island Queensland
- Arrente Early Childhood Education, Alice Spring and Saint Theresa Community using elders to tell traditional childhood stories. The project developed appropriate resources in local language.

- Aboriginal Preschool Teacher Training based at Bachelor College, Northern Territory whilst students were working with children in their own communities.
- Children in the Goldmine areas.
- Children in The Outback mobile Service coordinated by CONTACT Children's Mobile, which provided educating early childhood educational services to remote and geographically isolated families in outback areas.

Children in Caravan Parks- the Hunter Caravan Park Project based at the University of Newcastle- set out to investigate the educational, social and emotional needs for children and their families, living permanently in caravan parks which were designed for short term holiday makers.

The Family Action Centre and the BvLF

BvLF supported the FAC for 19 years, and were funders who promoted innovation, and effective dissemination.

BvLF recognized the imperative to work as a partner with the recipient organisation, assisting in capacity building of the organisation, providing opportunities for networking and learning from other projects on an international scale.

BvLF also provided project guidance and supervision by annual visits from the Hague based Desk Officers who were responsible for the administrative and mentoring of the project implementation. This relationship encouraged honest discussions around strategy and challenges, and accepted changes in future plans. The projects were focused on outcomes and this led to innovation when determining the pathway to success.

The nature of this relationship was one of respect for cultural nuances and the complexity of local issues. It is said that the BvLF allowed projects to “Ride on the back of Principle”, when reflecting on changes in strategy.

BvLF supported a dissemination phase of the Hunter Caravan Project as building on their already significant investment, and as a way to effect change on a national level for these disenfranchised families. This philanthropic funding provided the FAC with the ability to build their advocacy activities with all levels of government in order to effect positive change.

BvLF was seen internationally as a leading foundation in its model and its Executive Director chaired the International Consortium for Innovative Cooperation, whose members were European foundations.

Accountability was strict in terms of Annual and Final Reports and also financial accountability. These reports became useful documents to review progress and to influence future strategies.