

Keys to successful transitions in Guatemala

Bilingual education and community participation

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The Asociación de Promotores de Educación Inicial Bilingüe (APEDIBIMI) has developed its programme in the Ixil area of El Quiché Department in northwest Guatemala, where indigenous people account for 90 percent of the population. This is the home of the Ixiles, one of the 22 ethnic Mayan groups that make up 60 percent of the total national population. Their mother tongue, Ixil, is a factor in the area's social cohesion as well as a means of transmitting and disseminating the group's traditional culture and teachings.

The indigenous rural people of Guatemala are poor and vulnerable. Many were severely affected by the civil war that devastated the country for more than four decades, from 1954 to 1996. One of the most important changes made possible by the signing of a peace agreement between the government and the insurgents was the start-up of development activities undertaken by international humanitarian organisations. This led to the organisation of committees, associations and cooperatives to foster rural development.

Yet poverty persists, in both urban and rural areas. The results of a survey conducted in 2000 by the national office of statistics showed that 6 out of 10 of Guatemala's people are poor and 2 out of 10 are very poor. Some 56 percent of indigenous people live in poverty and are excluded from the country's political, social and economic life.

Most of the children of indigenous people became indirect victims of the war. This population group has one of the highest illiteracy rates in Guatemala: in 2002, only 39 percent of children aged 3 to 6 were registered participants in the country's education system.

It was against this background that Enfants Réfugiés du Monde, a French non-governmental organisation (NGO), launched its 'Jardines Infantiles' programme. Jardines Infantiles are kindergartens, and the programme aimed to cater for the educational needs of 3- to 6-year-old children and to train local people as teachers who would consolidate and sustain the programme after the NGO had withdrawn.

The APEDIBIMI initiative grew out of this programme. APEDIBIMI is a comprehensive effort to respond to the educational needs of the whole community, and particularly the early childhood group, using bilingualism to combat social exclusion. The association's members originate from the same communities in which they offer their services and are elected by those communities. Their mother tongue is the same as the children's, but they also have Spanish. As well as living in the community where they teach, they have a knowledge of the community's history and culture and maintain regular contact with its leaders.

APEDIBIMI's mission is to 'promote the development of quality primary and pre-primary education for Ixil children up to 6 years old; with the active participation of the children's families. In its work with the children the association focuses on the following activities and subjects:

1. playing: in order to develop the children's social and physical abilities;
2. world view or outlook: this incorporates aspects such as language, cultural values, attitudes and spirituality, within everyday practices;
3. the environment: in order to promote respect for nature and the proper use of natural resources;
4. an intercultural character: this promotes the broader exchange of personal and social values;

5. a gender perspective: fostering equal rights and opportunities for girls and promoting their direct participation in activities, as well as awareness among fathers and mothers, community leaders and teachers;
6. health: through the promotion of personal hygiene and preventive health practices.

This programme is delivered to the children through two principal projects: the Educación Inicial (pre-primary education) project, for children aged up to 3 and pregnant mothers; and the Jardines Infantiles project, for children aged 4 to 6. Both projects aim to ease children's transition to primary education, strengthening their abilities through play and teaching them about their culture. Children are attended by bilingual pre-primary male and female teachers.

In addition, several activities are carried out in the broader community: fathers are trained, so that they understand and can contribute to their children's education; school committees are established, so as to sustain and support education at the community level; community documentation centres are built to house libraries and provide a meeting point for planning activities; often these also serve as training centres, where meetings and workshops are held.

Direct beneficiaries and participants include some 2000 boys and girls, 25 volunteer teaching assistants, 110 pre-primary teachers, 60 students, 800 families, 98 school committee members and, on a monthly basis, 300 pre-primary, primary, secondary, or university students.

The Jardines Infantiles project

To date the Jardines Infantiles project has launched 20 kindergartens in 15 Ixil communities living in the Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal municipalities. These kindergartens have been recognised by Guatemala's Ministry of Education (MINEDUC).

Each Jardines Infantiles is attended by two teachers who plan and implement all activities, either in groups or individually, according to age or learning ability. The teachers also establish relationships with fathers and/or mothers and with community leaders. They must also write and produce their own

teaching materials, using resources available locally as far as possible, since funds for buying materials are very limited.

These teachers are assessed by the project's technical team, which periodically delivers training courses and monitors the teacher's work on a monthly basis (continuous training).

The classroom is organised to provide learning corners for each of the programme's curriculum areas. In line with MINEDUC guidelines for the early childhood level, these areas are language and communication, logical thinking and artistic expression.

The teaching methods used are designed to compensate for the lack of contact that children have with a written language. Instead, children are taught written 'codes'. Writing exercises are continued as homework after kindergarten hours, so as to encourage exchanges between the home and school environments.

The curriculum is based on the principles of developmental psychology, which describes how children adapt to the world as a whole as well as their learning processes. This encourages the children to respond well to the school environment.

The children's own culture and identity are valued and respected. This in turn teaches them to respect the culture of other groups with whom they share the rural environment.

Bilingual learning

The whole basis of the project is that the children's language is part of their identity, so it must be used as a resource for their development and learning. By embracing bilingualism, the project encourages the children to acquire a new set of abilities using their second language, without forgetting what they have learned using their mother tongue.

The children are encouraged to use their mother tongue whenever they experience difficulties or need to express their feelings, including their fears. By learning Spanish, they are encouraged to leave these difficulties behind them as they move into primary education.

Bilingual education has two main phases:

1. The children's communication abilities in their mother tongue are strengthened. Most of the time the children communicate in Ixil, and Spanish is introduced only gradually, for use in specific situations in which the children are easily able to understand it and can grasp the opportunity to extend their knowledge. These situations are selected for their familiarity to the children, who thus do not need to resort to translation. Although the children continue to use mainly their mother tongues, they start using Spanish more and more for such purposes as naming the objects they use in the classroom, parts of the body, numbers, colours, sizes, and so on.
2. The children practise different registers of their mother tongue, graduating from everyday language to other, more formal words. This increases their self-confidence, preparing them for new situations in their lives (communicating with strangers, speaking in class at primary school, and so on). At the same time they are offered more opportunities to practise their Spanish. These include invitations to speak out loud about their drawings, some event in their lives, different classroom or natural objects, and so on. Within the same conversation, the level of difficulty will be different for older and younger children. These activities are thus expressive as well as inclusive of a broader range of situations. They assume that virtually all children are familiar with Spanish to some extent.

This second phase continues until the children enter primary school, by which time they should be well and truly accustomed to a bilingual way of learning.

Community participation

The active participation of community members promotes the children's school attendance and encourages their social development and integration. One way to promote this is by organising practical workshops where the parents are encouraged to recreate the play and learning situations of the classroom.

Mothers and fathers also work on the health, nutrition and early stimulation and childhood development aspects of the project, as well as in the development of appropriate materials for classroom work. They may, in addition, contribute cultural elements that promote respect for the culture and identity of all communities.

With community leaders, the following issues are emphasised: their commitment to early childhood matters, the need for local funding, the compiling of teaching materials, the collection of toys and the need to obtain and maintain classroom equipment.

An assessment of the programme

A cohort survey carried out at the beginning of 2004 provides a basis for assessing the Jardines Infantiles programme. The survey results are shown in Table 1.

The table shows that children who have attended kindergarten tend to do better in the first and second grades at primary school than those coming from the traditional system (formal pre-primary education system). However, when they reach the third grade, they tend to face more difficulties and to have to repeat classes. With regard to the dropout rate, the Jardines Infantiles results are once again superior.

Table 1. Class graduation and repeat rates in primary school, following kindergarten (JI) attendance or traditional (T) pre-schooling.

Grade	Graduation rate		Gross repeat rate		Net repeat rate		Dropout rate	
	JI	T	JI	T	JI	T	JI	T
First	86.3	77.1	12.5	16.2	0	0	1.1	6.5
Second	83.3	75.0	16.6	21.6	0	0	0	3.3
Third	50.0	78.2	50.0	13.0	0	0	0	8.6
Average	73.2	76.8	26.3	16.9	0	0	0.3	6.2



Indigenous children and teacher in Nebaj, Guatemala, preparing a play based on a traditional story

The programme's final assessment, carried out in late 2004 by Del Valle University, showed that the two aspects that most affected attendance levels at both kindergarten and primary school were the bilingual character of the education and the fact that it was provided by local teachers (who were nonetheless recognised by MINEDUC).

Other key determinants of the programme's success were the community's active participation, the use of play activities to stimulate reading and writing abilities and the development of logical thinking, the use of appropriate local teaching materials and the follow-up provided to classroom activities by the technical team. Last but by no means least came teachers' commitment to their classrooms and to their communities.

Efforts continue

APEDIBIMI will continue contributing to children's education in the above ways until the programme

achieves its goal of full recognition of this type of activity as a priority in MINEDUC's policy framework. While bilingual education will continue to be a central component of the programme, APEDIBIMI will also pay attention to the promotion of children's rights and duties, and to the encouragement of community participation. Our experience has shown that the APEDIBIMI approach is the way to ensure an easy transition from early childhood to primary school.