



MOTHERS AT SCHOOL

A program developed in poor areas of Santiago, Chile, integrating mothers into kindergarten classes as education facilitators, has proved to be an efficient alternative in preparing children to meet the demands of formal schooling.

In Chile, as elsewhere in the Third World, failure at school is common among the poorest sectors of society and becomes a vicious circle that traps children in poverty and illiteracy.

Trying to remedy this situation, the Centro de Estudios y Atención del Nio y la Mujer (CEANIM), a Chilean nongovernmental organization (NGO), launched a project in 1981 enabling children from poor areas of Santiago to adapt to formal education with some chance of success. This experiment has now been operating for 10 years and involves a preschool education system that encourages mothers to be participants in their children's education.

The process is derived from alternative theories to preschool education developed in the 1960s and was begun by CEANIM during the darkest days of the military government that ruled Chile in the 1970s and 1980s — a time when the impact of repression and the economic crisis on the poorest classes was particularly severe.

CEANIM is an NGO founded in 1979. Its mission is to provide an impetus to preschool education using low-cost methods and drawing on the community's own financial and human resources. Community preschool care centres, known as Centros Comunitarios de Atención Preescolar (CCAP), were created with facilities provided by the Catholic Church and funding from international organizations.

The centres are based on the theory developed by the founders, CEANIM's team of specialists led by psychologist Dr María Angélica Kotliarenco, that each educational centre's success is directly dependent on the work of the mothers involved in its management, operation, and administration. "The educational results of the preschool centres are impressive," Dr Kotliarenco says. "It is an urgent task to try and bridge the gulf between formal and nonformal schooling. I believe that this is one way in which we can lower the failure and dropout rates in elementary schools."

The centres' methodology involves volunteer work by the mothers in their children's educational process. They train for this by attending personal development workshops where they learn about socialization, health, hygiene, and diet.



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The system also requires that the mothers themselves operate their centres. During a centre's first year of operation it is run by CEANIM experts; in its second year, responsibility is shared by the mothers and the experts; and, for the third and subsequent years, it is headed by mother-educators who have distinguished themselves by their work, judgment, and leadership. Ten years into the project, there are now 15 centres in operation under the direction of mothers designated as "education facilitators." CEANIM's team of experts is responsible only for training and ongoing supervision.

Dr Kotliarenco says the preschool education process for children from extremely poor backgrounds achieves more favourable results when mothers are involved in the classroom. Studies carried out with IDRC funding show that these children are able to enter formal education under conditions that are more favourable to the teaching-learning and adjustment processes so fundamental to success at school.

Better Results

"Our research has demonstrated that children whose mothers play a role in the kindergarten achieve markedly better results," Dr Kotliarenco says. "Measurements comparing a group of children from traditional kindergartens with a group from one of our preschool centres, using children with similar potential for intellectual development, show that our children scored much higher in terms of preparation for the school system."

Mothers in the preschool centres also seemed to find many advantages in this alternative to the traditional education system.

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Many said they had difficulty in obtaining access to institutional kindergartens in Santiago, for which demand exceeds supply. The fact that the CEANIM centres are located within their communities and in the immediate vicinity of their homes makes them all the more convenient and accessible.

They also pointed out the low cost factor: in addition to their obligatory period of duty once a week in the kindergarten, each mother had to bring cleaning supplies only once a month.

Other advantages they mentioned included the opportunity to participate in the care of their children. Mothers found this infinitely preferable to the formal system where, they said in effect, "you don't know what they teach or how they treat your child."

"In addition to being here with the children, we also learn to educate ourselves along with them," says Lorena Pacheco Caceres, a young mother in the Cardenal Caro CCAP, located in one of metropolitan Santiago's poorest and most deprived slums.

Most mothers said that this type of system provides them with a great sense of personal fulfillment and development. They acquired new knowledge about children and have sustained higher levels of communication with their children at home.

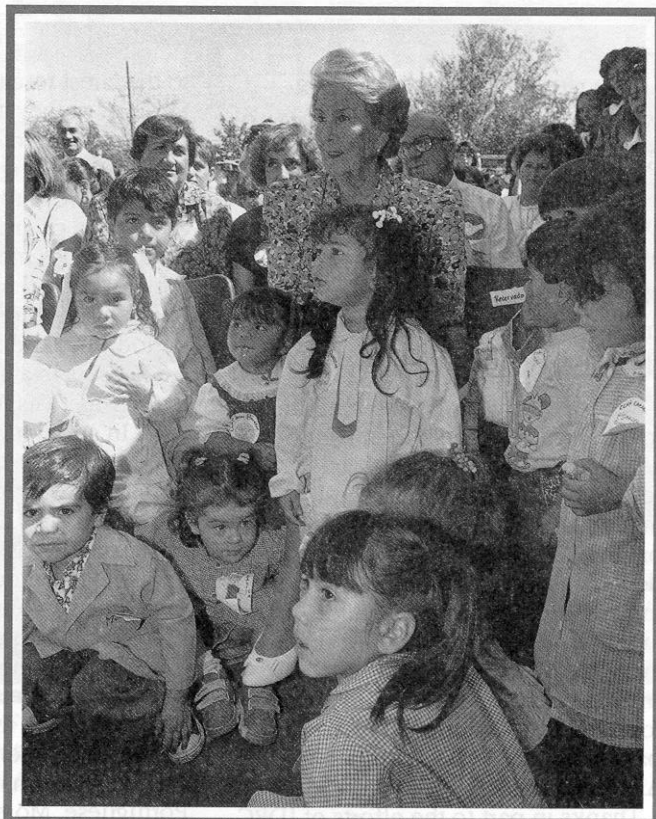
"We learn in another way and grow along with them," adds Mrs Caceres. "We discover many things that we were not aware of before, in terms of caring for and educating our children. We also learn about health, education, and proper diet as well as how to get along with the other mothers and we develop greater self-confidence."

Despite the success of the various preschool centres in Santiago, Dr Kotliarenco says there is still much work to be done. "The biggest challenge for us, and indeed for all of Latin America, is how to ensure that the kindergarten, the home, and the formal education system converge," she says. "Up to now each has operated independently, with disastrous results for poor children."

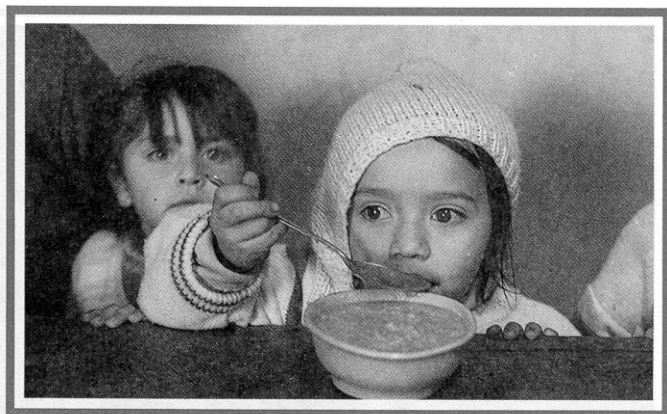
Since the change of government in Chile, educational authorities are for the first time becoming receptive to these "unconventional methods." CEANIM, for its part, has branched out in other directions, introducing the CCAP experiment to other sectors of society with varying degrees of success.

"This project does not produce results in all sectors of society: you have to be very careful in choosing the sector and type of mother with whom you are going to work, and what incentives you are going to provide them," says Dr Kotliarenco. "The mothers have to be from the lower classes and they have to feel part of their social group. Apart from all this, the basic requirement needed if this project is to produce results is that the mothers have boundless confidence in their potential to truly educate their children."

Richard Vera in Chile.



Top: Leonor Oyarzun, the wife of the President of the Republic, Patricio Aylwin, gives public recognition to the CEANIM centres in a visit to one of the community preschools. Bottom: The mothers also learn about health, education, and proper diet for their children at the centres.



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