

Background paper prepared for the  
Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005  
*The Quality Imperative*

## **Good practice and quality education: three NGOs initiatives in Latin America**

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2004

This paper was commissioned by the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* as background information to assist in drafting the 2005 report. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: “Paper commissioned for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, The Quality Imperative*”. For further information, please contact [efareport@unesco.org](mailto:efareport@unesco.org)

## Good practice and quality education: Three NGOs initiatives in Latin America

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### *Abstract*

*Despite that access to education has increased in Latin America, state institutions have been unable to reach poor communities. In this regard NGOs have played an important role supplying quality education. The following three cases illustrate this. First, AGES, a NGO in charge of piloting and implementing USAID's Basic Education Strengthening/Girls Education Programme (BEST/GEP) in order to improve the quality, efficiency, and equity of primary education services in Guatemala. Second, Fe y Alegría (FYA) is a not-for-profit institution offering education in Latin America with the principle of equity, quality and lower cost. An thirdly, on the basis of a bilingual methodology simultaneously promoting literacy in Quechua and Spanish, a coalition of national NGOs in the Andean region of Peru has the objective to take steps towards increased literacy, schooling, and an overall improved quality of education.*

## AGES and USAID working together for Improving Girls Education in Guatemala<sup>1</sup>

In Guatemala, formal schooling coverage is low and the educational system reflects the country's socio-economic inequalities. Private schools catering to wealthier social classes in urban areas are of high quality, in contrast with public schools, especially those in rural areas that tend to be ill equipped, with high dropout and repetition rates. Additionally, poorly paid and inadequately trained teachers and a high personnel turnover contribute to poor learning environments that tend to be insensitive to the students' ethnicity and gender.

From 1987 to 1997, an NGO called the Guatemalan Association for Sexual Education (AGES) took on board the responsibility to implement several USAID programmes<sup>2</sup> designed to improve the quality of education in the country. The Basic Education Strengthening/Girls Education Programme (BEST/GEP)<sup>3</sup> had the goal to "improve the quality, efficiency, and equity of primary education services in Guatemala" (Stromquist, 1999). For attaining this, it was necessary to have a mix of activities that sought to "balance broad systemic improvements with specific classroom support, and institutionalisation of project activities into existing organizational units". Two initiatives implemented by AGES, *Eduque a la Niña* (in English, Educate the Girl) and *Nueva Escuela Unitaria* (in English, New Unitary School) were particularly successful.

### *Eduque a la Niña*

Guatemala has one of the least educated populations in Latin America, at the end of the 1990s sixty-five percent of the population lived in impoverished rural areas, where domestic work, traditional gender roles, agricultural labour, and poverty are major reasons for weak demand by families for girls' education.<sup>4</sup> *Eduque a la Niña* had three core interventions in order to diminish these inequalities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Extracted from Stromquist (1999).

<sup>2</sup> The partnership between AGES and USAID started since collaboration with the host government and other donors was difficult. On the other hand, collaboration with the national government was not possible since it hadn't meet some key counterpart staffing commitments, and it failed to meet a target of 3 percent of gross national product for education investment (Stromquist, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> BEST was implemented as a pilot project in July 1989 with the intention to establish it at a national scale. For this further implementation, USAID allocated \$30 million in development assistance grant funds over a period of six years. The Guatemalan government agreed to provide support equivalent to \$31 million in counterpart funds for project activities. BEST also counted on coordinating its activities with the World Bank's Second Education project, however this was cancelled when the government fell into arrears on its payments to the International Monetary Fund, and the Bank (Stromquist, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Conservative estimates indicate that 43 percent of all women over 15 are illiterate, compared with 28 percent of all men. In rural areas, girls constitute 46 percent of first-grade enrolments and 41 percent of sixth-grade enrolments. In urban areas 78 percent of girls enrol in primary school; in rural areas, this percentage falls to 59 percent (Stromquist, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Each set of interventions being implemented in 12 schools. The 36 target schools and 12 matched controls were spread over six departments (provinces) that had large rural Mayan populations.

- The provision of a \$4.30-per-month scholarship to girls supported by social promoters to sensitise parents as to the importance of girls' education.
- Meetings between parents and promoters<sup>6</sup> to discuss the girls progress in school.
- A package of teachers' guides and gender-sensitive educational materials to motivate girls.

Eduque a la Niña greatest impact was on girls in grades 1 and 2. Follow-up data showed that 2 percent of girls with scholarships did not return to second grade in 1996, compared with 11 percent for girls without scholarships.

### *Nueva Escuela Unitaria (NEU)*

The NEU was based on the Colombian's Escuela Nueva model. It used flexible individual and group study and active participation to increase the quality of education. It moved teachers away from traditional pedagogical methods and introduced the use of small groups in the classroom. This innovation permitted girls to participate more actively in the classroom and have their experiences and knowledge recognised.

Evaluations confirmed that NEU's uses of participatory learning methods in the classroom accompanied by motivational materials in favour of girls' education increased girls' classroom participation and their persistence in higher primary grades.

### Evaluation and Cost of the Programme

An impact evaluation made at both programmes found that scholarships and materials are an unlikely long-term strategy to achieve universal basic education unless they become system-wide. Scholarships raised per student costs by 90 percent and channelled scarce resources away from investments to benefit all students to investments that benefit a few. But scholarships do effectively reach out-of-school girls, are highly visible, and are attractive to governments as political gestures. By contrast, the NEU program was less targeted and potentially sustainable. Costs per NEU student per year were 58 percent higher than costs per student in standard government schools, the improved quality of NEU schooling, better student performance, and reduced repetition and dropout rates result in a 15 percent drop in total per student costs to complete the primary cycle.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Each promoter was in charge of six schools spread over a whole department. Promoters were also assigned the task of collecting statistics on student attendance and promotion needed to evaluate the pilot project (Stromquist, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> NEU is reported to cost less -about 15 percent per graduate- than traditional schools. The cost per graduate of scholarship programs is still higher than comparison schools by about 35 percent (Stromquist, 1999).

The relatively high costs of NEU and the Eduque package were foreseen. However, high costs, of course, do not necessarily mean unreasonable costs.<sup>8</sup> The small percentage of the budget directed to primary schooling in Guatemala makes cost increases of 60 percent or more to be reasonable. Educational efficiency and equity was seen as another way to increase resources for basic education. As a result, improvements in promotion and dropout rates attributable to NEU and to Eduque make them look better on the basis of cost per primary school graduate.

### Influence on National Policies

Influenced by AGES' Eduque a la Niña programme, the Ministry of Education initiated its own scholarship programme for rural girls in 1994. The goal of the ministry pilot project was to reach 6,000 girls a year, but serious implementation problems led to only 600 girls being reached. However, the programme continued with the objective of reaching 36,000 girls for three years (grades 1 to 3), to raise 'a generation of educated girls'. The ministry contracted with the coffee growers' private foundation (Funrural) to administer and implement the program. By 1998 some 27,000 indigenous girls had received scholarships.

AGES' target towards the Nueva Escuela Unitaria was to expand the coverage from 100 schools to 619, sharing the costs of this expansion with the Ministry of Education and serving as a model to institute the strategy in other regions of the country. However, the expansion of NEU to 200 schools was done without ministry's cost-sharing. Despite this, the NEU innovation continued through the interest and investment of several groups, mainly private educational institutions, rather than at national scale.

### Conclusion

The education system in Guatemala faced great challenges during the 1990s. The number of schools was inadequate, especially in rural indigenous areas, and the investment in the public education sector was low. Additionally, estimation thought that a quarter of the education budget was spent on inefficiencies linked to high repetition and dropout rates (Stromquist, 1999). AGES, working closely with USAID, implemented Eduque a la Niña y NEU. Both programmes were successful in giving national visibility to the pressing issue of basic education for girls and the need for girls to attain complete primary education. They also created interest within the Ministry of Education to the programme innovations, encouraging the government to offer scholarship

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<sup>8</sup> In the early 1990s, the investment in the public education sector was 1.6 percent of gross national product. Education as a percent of national budget was close to 11 percent; primary education as a percent of the education budget was 31.8 percent; and rural education as a percent of the education budget was 15.9 percent (Stromquist, 1999).

programmes for girls and better pedagogical methods. Despite these successes, both programmes could not have a sustainable system-wide change in the Ministry of education regarding quality of education and gender. Although the financial and political obstacles both programmes faced, they showed that programmes directed toward the most disadvantaged children can make a contribution to improving the quality of education and the gender gap in primary education in short periods of time.

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## Fe y Alegría Schools<sup>9</sup>

Fe y Alegría (in English Faith and Joy, FYA) is an international network of schools founded by a Jesuit Father in Venezuela in 1955<sup>10</sup>. It now reaches over 1 million children across Latin America, operating in 14 countries (Wolff and Castro, 2001). It is an example of new forms of public-private partnership (PPP) where the government enters into a contract with not-for-profit private schools. FYA schools are run by church affiliated organisations, and concentrate their efforts to educate the hardest to reach, poor areas; the schools are located in either urban slums or in isolated rural areas, frequently serving indigenous communities. The state pays teacher salaries with the rest of the costs being covered from a variety of sources - community funds, international charitable, and development donations. Communities bear the responsibility for giving land for construction and the construction and upkeep of the school building (Swope and Latorre 2000).

Each one of the education centres of FYA comprises the following actions:

- A network of basic and professional schools in suburban, rural and indigenous zones; communitarian educational centres that foster the organisation and development of the community; recreational and formation camps; projects for youth and semi-professional capacity building for adolescents and youth that have been excluded from the formal education system.
- Educational programmes for radio dissemination with cultural, religious and recreational topics.
- Teacher training programmes that include activities oriented to the creation of community centres' leaders.
- Publications developed by teachers and directed to teachers. Creation of teaching materials and learning community's materials, in addition to school books publication.

The advantages of this arrangement is that the state can terminate support if schools fail to deliver quality education, creating the necessary principal-agent relation that fits into public choice theory arguments (Wolff and Castro 2003, Whitty et al., 1998). Furthermore, it mobilises private (non-state) resources for basic recurrent costs (except teachers salaries, the major cost of schooling), freeing up more state money to be spent elsewhere. FYA schools operate with a high degree of autonomy, generally enabling the National Office (of the particular country) to choose

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<sup>9</sup> Extracted from Irvine (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Despite the catholic origin, many community leaders and promoters of FYA are secular (Virtuoso, 1998). This has helped to define FYA's actions as a movement of integral popular education.

their own directors and team of teachers without interference from either the state or teachers' unions; this has the added advantage of reducing teacher turnover and maintaining continuity.<sup>11</sup>

FYA has been seen as "an example of a private institution serving public policies directed toward equity, quality and lower cost" (Wolff and Castro, 2001). Recent evaluations suggest that FYA schools cost less and have better results than public schools located in similar neighbourhoods (Swope and Latorre, 1998 cited in McMeekin, 2003). The average real repetition rate in a nine-country survey with schools integrated into FYA is 14% less than that of public schools, with the average definitive dropout rate 3% lower.<sup>12</sup> Both sides of the contract benefit from the PPP arrangement. Governments across the region have encouraged the partnership as costs (direct and administrative) for setting up schools in such areas is frequently prohibitive, given serious budget constraints and limited resources after structural adjustment. Moreover, the effort required to recruit children to such schools, where levels of child labour and non-participation are recorded to be high, is beyond the scope of normal government education provision (Swope and Latorre, 2000). In this case, FYA schools are cheap alternatives to establishing large programmes to eradicate child labour and providing access to school (a new imperative given Education For All commitments). This, McMeekin (2003) suggests, is possible with FYA due to their close alliance with the community within which they are located. However, it should be noted that the functioning of economic incentives schemes that supply school meals, payment of transport costs, free school books and uniforms funded by FYA is significant (Swope and Latorre, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

FYA benefit as they are able to extend their scope and range of activities, with the majority of costs being met by the state. However, the antecedents deserve to be interrogated. Community mobilisation through church support stems from the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence of liberation theology in Latin America (led by the Jesuits) that saw revolutions as a route to social, economic and political emancipation (Hobsbawm, 1994). This left-wing 'social movement' found outlet in popular education, most notably in Brazil with Freire. However, it remained nascent in Latin American society characterised by increasing inequalities. FYA can be seen as a child of such revolutionary movements, yet reconfigured to fit the neo-liberal framing of PPP. The commitment to serving the unmet needs of poor as a not-for-profit NGO fits within the third framing of education provision. In so doing, the ends of the political spectrum come together in a pragmatic alliance that sees NGOs filling the gap as service providers.

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<sup>11</sup> The WDR 2004 suggests teacher satisfaction was higher in FYA schools in Bolivia than in the state sector due to autonomy and non-financial motivation, with the underlying suggestion that PPPs function better (WDR, 2004:124).

<sup>12</sup> See [www.2.ifc.org/edinvest/DSFeval.htm](http://www.2.ifc.org/edinvest/DSFeval.htm).



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## Literacy and Civic Education Program for Indigenous and Peasant Women in Peru

While Peru has a national policy of equal access to education, and primary education is mandated for all, this is far from being achieved (Arancibia, 1995). The formal education system offers education in Spanish despite that Peru is a multilingual nation with a high percentage of monolingual Quechua speakers, especially in the high Andean regions (Godenzzi, 1997).

With the mandate to increase the quality of education for Quechua girls and adolescents, since 1992 a coalition of Peruvian NGOs –PeruMujer<sup>13</sup>, CADEP<sup>14</sup> and APED<sup>15</sup>- implemented a literacy program in 42 monolingual communities in the departments of Cuzco, Cajamarca and Apurimac. Its main goal is to take steps towards increased literacy, schooling, and overall improve the quality of education for Quechua children and adolescents. For that, students are taught civic education and to read and write in Quechua and then Spanish.<sup>16</sup>

The programme requires active involvement of participants to keep it running. Instructors in the programme are chosen from the communities themselves, in order for them to be familiar with the environment in which they will be teaching. Also, instructors undergo a special three-semester training program in how to teach literacy. Women's groups within these communities are encouraged to participate as literacy leaders and as managers of the literacy programme in their communities.

### *Bilingual Teachers Training*

One of the novelties of the program is the teacher training process in Quechua. Classes were originally scheduled in the evenings or only during the agricultural "off-season" when women's duties are lighter and they might reasonably be expected to come to a class for a couple of hours a day every day or two to three times a week. However, it was added a two-weeks intensive training in a place located outside of the community. This proved to be highly successful since it

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<sup>13</sup> PeruMujer is an NGO dedicated to issues for the betterment of the lives of Peruvian women.

<sup>14</sup> The Andean Centre for Education and Promotion (in Spanish, Centro Andino de Educación y Promoción, CADEP) is a non-governmental organisation whose main focus is primary education and literacy of the Quechua populations in and around the departments of Cuzco and Apurimac, especially in the provinces of Anta, Chumbivilcas and Cotabambas. It conducts educational programs geared towards both elementary age children and female adults.

<sup>15</sup> The Association for Ecology and Development (in Spanish, Asociación para la Ecología y el Desarrollo, APED) is an NGO whose primary function is to contribute to the development and betterment of the populations of the Andean region.

<sup>16</sup> A key obstacle to quality of education of indigenous population rests on language. If the child does not understand the language of instruction, no learning can happen. The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides further guidance on the importance of mother tongue during the first stages of education, reinforcing the thrust of international human rights law whereby "the individual, guaranteed substantive equality of treatment has the right to learn his or her own language in addition to the official language" (Wilson, 2003).

gave the women the possibility to only focus in the training. Another innovative aspect has been the analysis of choice the civic education class themes -such as gender (self-esteem), health, nutrition, housing, etc.- to the women trained. This enhanced their self-esteem and self-confidence for becoming teachers.

#### *Classroom Activities and Materials*

Classroom activities generally involve the reading-writing method in which participants see a picture or code that portrays a familiar situation followed by presentation of the written word. The word is divided into syllabic families which make it easier for the women to break it down and recombine with other learned pieces to make their own words and express their own reality in written form. Classroom themes involve topics such as personal hygiene, health maintenance, gender, sexual rights and promoting income-generating activities. Through time, the project has produced bilingual and mother tongue language materials in Quechua and Spanish based on the pedagogic resources, audio-visual material, songs and games.

#### National Policies

In Peru, bilingual education still is a controversial topic for the ministry of Education. The debate reflects the contest between indigenous and non-indigenous people for the cultural definition of the country. The lack clear policies have contributed to maintain 65 percent of the indigenous female population illiterate, as opposed to 26 percent of the non-indigenous female population. In addition to this, the quality of Peruvian schools decreased at the beginning of the 1990s as a result of bad governance, severe structural adjustment policies and hyperinflation, shrinking the budget allocations to public education.<sup>17</sup> However, the Peruvian General Education Law<sup>18</sup> made an important advance towards the legislative and administrative law of education reform in the country. Thanks to this the emphasis has been taken away from schooling -stating that what mattered was the content and not the provider- and became an entry point to bilingual efforts like the ones done by PeruMujer, CADEP and APED.

#### Costs

Increase in expenditures to provide bilingual education is not clear. This is in part because of the strong community involvement for the programmes implementation, which takes most of the costs out from the analysis. To this fact it must be added the low level of implementation and the

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<sup>17</sup> Additionally, consecutive national reforms increased the weakness of the education sector, generating discontinuities in key policies and frequent changes in the leadership of the sector, which finalised in a lack of a coherent national education policy (Rivero, 1999:253).

<sup>18</sup> This law was passed in the 1970s.

fragmentation of the supply by NGOs. However, a study done by USAID to a similar programme predicted that the bilingual education programmes increase per pupil spending by 56 per cent (Stromquist, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

In Peru, indigenous groups make up a far larger proportion of the population compared to other Latin American countries. Indigenous groups have been historically marginalized from social services and formal recognition to their cultural diversity. The bilingual model of education implemented by the coalition of Peruvian NGOs has been highly successful not only because their tapping into a service that has been neglected by the formal education system, but because it has put the community in the heart of the programme. The coalition of NGOs has given Quechua women a role as bilingual trainers and co-ordinators, changing in this way previous notions of gender rights.<sup>19</sup> However the gains, there is still the need for the Peruvian government to take a leading role, learn from civil society experiences and provide bilingual schools.

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to remember that Quechuas communities have endured the psychological effects of the violence suffered during armed confrontations and isolation create, with marked regularity, identity conflicts, dejection, depression and a strong deterioration of self-esteem (Godenzzi, 1997).