

Building bridges

Quality in successful transition between families and schools in the central rainforest of Peru

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Transitions, understood as the step from one situation to another, are bound to involve change in terms of contexts, circumstances or status. Throughout the process, children experience the dualism of loss and gain, when they stop being one thing and become something different. In education, some transitions trigger experiences that are difficult to deal with (such as leaving home for a different environment), since they involve new challenges and demands.

The 'Niños de la Amazonía' (Amazon Children) project, run by the Faculty of Education at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, has been working in native communities in Peru's central rainforest. The project aims to improve the learning achievements of young children in native Amazonian communities by supporting satisfactory transition processes.

The project set out with an optimistic view of the changes that children undergo, which involves understanding that change generates conflict, but can also offer opportunities for enrichment (Sacristán 1997, OECD 2006), stimulation, and cultural capital that enables growth. Such changes will be absorbed in a positive way when conditions are favourable and transitions are allowed to happen properly. The project focused on two contexts that affect children from the native communities: family-community and school.

The importance of linking the family-community to school and vice versa

Transitions are linked closely to the concept of 'educability' put forward by López and Tedesco (2003). Although it may sound somewhat

unattractive, this term does not necessarily refer to the ability to learn (since this is assumed to be a natural human condition), but rather to the ability to take part in the formal education process and thus access a basic level of education (López 2005).

However, in order for children to take part in the education process, 'conditions of educability', such as provision of resources and opportunities, must be offered both in the family and the school environment. A set of expectations is thus established on both sides.

Although families may encounter a series of problems in following their children's education process (such as illiteracy and the lack of resources to ensure child welfare), they still have opinions on what their children's education should be and what it should do for them. Moromizato (2007) states: "With the school, parents are hopeful that there will be a greater chance for training young Ashaninkas who are able to defend their cultural identity as leaders or rulers... For the family, 'not knowing anything' means not knowing how to read or write fluently, as well as not being able to account for money obtained from the sale of their products".

Teachers expect children to start school in optimum physical and mental health. This means that families have to be able to provide children with affection, healthcare, nutrition and educational support (e.g., helping with homework, encouraging a sense of security and values at home).

Both sides have their own concept of what is expected from them and the other party. Unfortunately, a lack of understanding of the other's problems often makes imaginary distances between

them seem greater. So how can strong bridges be built to connect families and schools? This project can provide information on the processes being carried out and the anticipated results.

Listening is an important beginning and the views of the children involved formed a major factor in the project-building process. What they like most about school is playing with their friends, listening to the teacher, drawing, doing homework and finishing it at school, learning to read and write, going out into the countryside or to the river, and visiting people doing some sort of practical work (e.g., fishing, hunting, collecting seeds).

What they like least about school is the mistreatment of children by some teachers, who punish them with sticks or whips, pull their ears or hit them with belts when they fail to do their homework or come to school late. The children do not like dirty rooms and unpainted walls, books without drawings, having to sweep the classroom, wash the floors and tables and clean the bathrooms. They also dislike other children making fun of fellow pupils' physical disabilities and they are unhappy about the lack of respect and affection shown by some of the teachers.

This information was presented in summary form and was useful in giving families and teachers food for thought in terms of what school means to the children. Raising awareness among families and teachers enabled a dialogue to be set up about the educational difficulties facing children in the communities. To achieve this, the early stages of the project gave priority to collecting information about families' expectations in relation to the school, the aspects they thought were missing from the school that would allow their children to get a better education, and the ways in which families could get actively involved with the school.

The information given by the teachers was of paramount importance as they were the key to developing new educational proposals. They contributed ideas about natural resources and resources that can be incorporated into educational activities, together with the limitations found in rural situations and native communities in the region.

The project team concluded that families and teachers shared the same concern: that children should have the best development and learning experiences, since these are the tools of future progress. However, the two groups had different ideas about the ways in which they are to be delivered and the content to be transmitted.

Since they shared the same objectives, it was not difficult to work on the differences and the idea arose to look at two main issues: a) supporting the teachers by strengthening their teaching competencies and accompanying them in building culturally relevant pedagogical processes; and b) promoting parents' participation in the educational environment, providing them with information on their children's development and learning.

Creating a new management model based on shared responsibility

The team set up a local network to give expression to community expectations about what kind of education their children will receive. The project partners (which included parents and teachers) signed a series of cooperation agreements, in which each expressed its commitment:

- The municipality is responsible for providing the resources for improving physical conditions in the schools and supporting the implementation of 'out of school' learning spaces.
- Native community leaders are to support the awareness-raising process; they contribute labour for improving school facilities and put into place community watch schemes so that no child is left out of school.
- The teachers (from the intercultural bilingual teachers' association) contribute to building a pedagogical framework that includes good teaching practices and incorporates socially and culturally relevant innovations.
- The Asociación Amazónica Andina (AAMA) supports actions for local communication and impact, with the purpose of keeping the educational problems of native community children on local government agendas.
- The Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú is helping to drive the project processes, offer technical assistance (teacher training, evaluating and monitoring results, compiling technical advice for following up innovation proposals, etc.)



According to the Amazon children project, there is no specific time or place for learning, so it is essential that children have facilities and opportunities that enrich their learning

for implementing actions in native communities and developing communication and impact actions at central government level in conjunction with AAMA.

The vital function of intercultural bilingual teachers

The reason for the emphasis on bilingual teachers in Ashaninka schools is that a community's language is more than just the set of symbols and sounds that make meaning; language is a matter of identity. Through language we construct history and build the strong emotional ties needed for us to feel accepted by our group. Therefore, for optimum learning processes to take place, this factor is absolutely vital.

The part played by bilingual teachers in the communities should be valued, as they are the leaders and agents of change. It is because of this that these teachers must have the facilities they need

to stay in the communities, they should receive greater incentives and more teaching support at grassroots level, and they should have the chance to access training programmes that enable them to update their teaching skills.

The challenge lies in finding new ways to support teachers in their educational role and developing creative and effective ways to contribute to continuous capacity building. For this reason, project staff agree with the teachers' view that the project should include a line of action that addresses 'teaching innovation.'

Teaching innovation does not mean starting from a clean slate. On the contrary, it implies having the capacity for critique and self-critique in order to evaluate what is being done, to safeguard good practice, to continue to implement activities that are working well and to change what is not working.

In this respect, the project focuses on supporting the development of the following actions:

1. Curricular diversity that is relevant, sequential and continuous

It is important to value children's learning and development in its own context, and this means in-depth study of the learning acquisition processes that happen naturally in Ashaninka children. This would identify potentially useful local elements that could be incorporated into the curricular design. Such elements would guide methods and strategies in the classroom without ignoring the educational policy guidelines already in place in the country.

2. Designing tools to evaluate learning achievements

Having information on children's learning achievements is hugely important since it provides feedback on educational processes and ensures improvements are made. These tools should not only measure aspects that we expect children to achieve at any particular level in the education system, but they should also be sensitive enough to reveal the things they already know, their 'previous learning'.

3. Improving living conditions in the schools

The challenge is to think of a school that guarantees safety, health and comfort for sound childhood development and learning, without breaking with cultural tradition. Such a school becomes a driver for a healthy way of life within the community.

4. Developing learning spaces inside and outside school

There is no specific time or place for learning, so it is essential that children have facilities and opportunities that enrich their learning. The spirit of freedom enjoyed by the children in their communities, the games they play and the experiences they have in their natural surroundings, must be used by the school to produce meaningful learning outcomes. Supplying the classrooms with educational material is absolutely vital. Although there are natural resources that become methodological resources, this is not enough when we want to achieve more complex learning outcomes with the children.

The project still has many challenges and the team are aware that they cannot address them alone.

The task is to include people and institutions (directly or indirectly) who can help to overcome the obstacles presented by state bureaucracy, to optimise training processes for bilingual early childhood education teachers, and devise methodological tools that will promote meaningful education for the children in native communities.

Finally, the problems of Amazonian children should not be the concern only of native communities but also of the whole of civil society and relevant government departments. For this to happen, the solutions proposed by the communities for promoting children's welfare and development should be given a higher profile in both the public and the private sphere, with the aim of raising awareness and influencing decision-makers at local, regional and national level.

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