

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project

**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN:
FROM EVALUATION TO ACTION**

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in collaboration with

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I. Introduction

This paper presents a summary of an evaluation of an ECE program being developed in the Ixil speaking region of Guatemala since 1987 by the French NGO Enfants Refugies du Monde (ERM), and a brief description of how the local team has used the results to improve the program.

The program works in the Ixil speaking region, some 250 kilometers northwest to Guatemala city, in the department of Quiché. The region was one of the hardest hit by the civil war. Also, the region is one of the poorest in Guatemala, with a Human Development Index of 0.53, which qualifies the region as one of low human development.

ERM first started working in the region in 1987, with three programs: a health and food provision program, a community organization program, the ECE program object of the evaluation and a program for adolescents.

The ECE program was developed using the following main components:

- a. Community participation: from the start the community has played a key role in the development of the program. Parents built the center, selected teachers, constructed educational materials with local resources, and helped with managing the center.
- b. Local teachers, selected by parents. Most of these teachers had only between four to six year of primary education. In a decade long effort, the program facilitated that this teachers completed their education until they became certified teachers last year.
- c. A curriculum with linguistic and cultural pertinence was developed, with the participation of teachers, the pedagogical team, and some parents, and with the technical guidance of ECE specialist brought in by the NGO

Locally, the program has a regional coordinator, a small staff (a secretary and a driver), and a pedagogical team. The pedagogical team is formed by teachers that now provided guidance and assistance to their colleagues. Each member of the team (4) attends some 5 centers, so each one oversees ten teachers. In each center work two teachers, with some 50 to 60 children, ages 3 to 6. Classes are organized in two groups, one of 3 to 4, the other of 5 to 6. However, parts of the activities are developed with all children.

Currently the program manages 21 centers in 14 communities, with 40 teachers attending some 1200 children.

Upon learning from the program, the Guatemalan IEQ team considered the program to a good example of a national educational program from which much could be learned. Also, as rural population of the country has no access to ECE programs, the EFM experience could contribute to designing ECE programs for rural populations.

First, a summary of the study is presented. Second, a brief description of the actions taken by ERM is given, to illustrate how evaluation findings have been used.

II. Methodology

A. SAMPLE

The sample included children, their parents, their teachers, members of the board of directors, and residents of the respective communities where the centers were located. The exhibit below provides a summary of the number of participants in the study. Overall, thirteen of 18 NRM centers were used for the study. As part of the study, pre-primary classroom from the national education bilingual program working in the region and preschool classroom located in the urban center of the region were also included

Exhibit A. Evaluation Sample

Components	Preschool Centers		
	NRM Preschools	DIGEBI Preschools	MOE Preschools
	13	9	3
Children observed	62	39	12
Teachers	11	9	3
Parents	52	34	12
Board Members	30	18	6
Community residents	30	18	6

The centers were different in terms of the types of children they served. NRM centers served children ages 3 to six and who had been in the center for different lengths of time since 1997. MOE centers solely served urban children ages 5 to six who had enrolled in the center since 1999. DIGEBI preschools served children 6 to seven. Additionally, MOE centers had an equal number of boys and girls while NRM and DIGEBI preschools served slightly more girls than boys.

Exhibit B. Children in the Evaluation Sample

Length of Time in Preschool	Preschool Centers		
	NRM Preschools	DIGEBI Preschools	MOE Preschools
1997	8%	3%	0%
1998	24%	0%	0%
1999	44%	31%	100%
2000	24%	66%	0%
TOTAL	100%	100%	(100%)
	(62)	(39)	(12)

Exhibit C. Gender of Children in the Evaluation Sample

Gender	Preschool Centers		
	NRM Preschools	DIGEBI Preschools	MOE Preschools
Females	52%	54%	50%
Males	48%	46%	50%
TOTAL	100%	100%	(100%)
	(62)	(39)	(12)

B. INSTRUMENTS

Four instruments were used for data collection purposes during the implementation of this component of the study. The evaluation incorporated multiple strategies for collecting data on the educational processes that take place in the centers. Among the instruments developed for the study were a materials/inventory checklist, interview protocols, and an observation checklist. All instruments were designed to collect information to respond to the needs and purposes of this evaluation.

OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

An observation checklist was developed to examine classroom processes in the preschools. Based on child interactions, observers recorded child behaviors at 15 minutes intervals throughout the preschool day. A maximum of 12 observations per child were programmed. The checklist recorded the number of interactions initiated by a child, the context in which the interaction occurred, whether it involved use of language, the type of language used and the nature of the interaction. Observations were conducted in three different days

MATERIALS INVENTORY CHECKLIST

An inventory checklist served to permit the observer to record materials contained in each of the preschool classrooms where the observations occurred. The inventory permits counting objects and the conditions of the material found in the classroom.

INTERVIEWS

Four distinct interview protocols were developed for use in the evaluation: for teachers, parents, board of directors members and community member with not children attending the centers. A teacher interview was used to record information from the teachers regarding background factors, preschool day activities, their training, teaching and learning strategies, their use of the local culture, and their attitudes and strategies regarding parental involvement.

All interviews for members of the community allowed collection of background information, parents participation, knowledge of preschool, their satisfaction with selected aspects of their programs and their perceptions of the benefits of the centers to their communities. The parent's interview protocol also allowed to examine their impressions of the benefits of the preschool experience for their child. The interview for community residents purpose was to assess the extent to which the center was known outside the immediate school community.

III. Main Findings

A. ATTENDANCE AND DROPOUTS

- Attendance at the NRM preschools was high usually fluctuating close to 90 percent for all age groups. Retention was also high with close to 9 out of 10 children attending the NRM centers. Boys tended to drop out at earlier ages than girls.

B. CLASSROOM PROCESSES

- Interaction In Preschool Contexts: The programs were noted to have similar contexts during the preschool day: free play; large groups; and small groups. While some contexts did appear across all programs, the manner in which these were organized differed. Also, MOE programs were found to have no Individual Work contexts. NRM preschools were seen to include a greater variety of contexts in their preschool day. While most interactions were found to occur during Large Group 1, more interactions for children in the NRM programs were noted during free play than for either of the other two programs. NRM preschool children, though, were found to initiate more interactions during those contexts

that foster practice with language and other skills (Free Play and Individual Work) as well as in settings outside of the classroom.

- Target of Interaction: Children tend to initiate most of their interactions with the teacher, regardless of the program. More children in DIGEBI and NRM classrooms, though, tend to initiate interactions with individuals other than the teacher.
- Use of Language: Both NRM and DIGEBI preschools made frequent use of Mayan languages. Most of the interactions initiated by children in these two programs were in a Mayan language. When considering interactions that included both languages, nearly three in four interactions included a Mayan language element.
- Task Involvement: Children in all programs were generally involved in some task when they were observed initiating an interaction. Additionally, children were observed usually following instructions during an interaction.

C. TEACHER FINDINGS

- Background: The teachers in all programs shared similar backgrounds. Most were bilingual teachers who lived close to the preschool centers where they worked. There were some notable differences. As expected, teachers in NRM preschools were found to have been working in their centers much less time than their MOE and DIGEBI counterparts. Additionally, they had experienced less either pre-service training than MOE and DIGEBI teachers, given that the latter tended to be certified preschool teachers.
- Preschool Day Activities: Teachers in NRM centers reported structuring more activities related to practice (trial and error) while DIGEBI and MOE teachers reported using more activities of a school-readiness type focused on language development and reading/writing events. From the school observation form, it was found that children were following hygienic procedures with washing hands, brushing teeth and combing their hair. Fewer events related to the brushing of teeth and combing of hair were found for NRM preschools than for the other programs.
- Organization and Materials: Planning is a key aspect in organizing the preschool-day activities for all teachers. Also, teachers reported using materials in carrying out their daily activities. Their parent organizations appear to be an important source of materials although DIGEBI and MOE teachers use a greater variety of traditional classroom materials than NRM teachers. NRM teachers, though, have a greater variety of sources for

their materials and make greater use of the local resources easily found around their environment.

- Teachers were seen to usually follow the posted schedules starting and ending the preschool day at the appointed times.

NRM programs were extended their preschool day schedule by an average of 30 minutes daily while teachers in the other programs had preschool days slightly less than the scheduled time.

- **Training:** All teachers reported that they had received some type of training prior to becoming teachers, and that they have applied the information in their classrooms. NRM teachers have received training in a greater variety of issues than have their DIGEBI and MOE counterparts.
- **Teaching and Learning Strategies:** All teachers mentioned a variety of teaching strategies although use of games and use of examples appeared to be used by more of the teachers regardless of the program. There was little difference in the importance given to the various teaching strategies except for the involvement of parents and the community in the classroom. NRM teachers gave more value to the use of parents and the community in the center than did their counterparts. NRM teachers perceived the physical needs of children and factors that influence their intellectual and social development as more important in child development. MOE and DIGEBI teachers gave greater emphasis to the need for children to socialize and to parental involvement. However, there was little socialization noted in MOE and DIGEBI classrooms noted in the interactions while more child-teacher and child-child interactions were reported in NRM preschools.
- **Concerns:** All teachers were concerned principally about the children's difficulties in acquiring and using the Spanish language. Another important concern was assuring that children knew how to use a pencil. It seems then that the focus of the educational effort across all programs is on 'school readiness' factors.
- **Parental Participation:** Teachers value parental participation in the center and tend to use personal approaches (visits; invitations) as a means of getting them involved with the center. NRM teachers appeared to embrace the concept more than those in the other programs. Parents in NRM programs reported participating more frequently and in a greater variety of activities than those in the other programs.
- **Use of Culture:** Teachers give importance to the use of the local culture in the center and the classroom. They noted that use of the local culture demonstrates the value they give it.

Also, use of the local culture contributes to its maintenance. They seem to incorporate deeper elements of the culture (language, customs and dress) in the center as well as the classroom rather than just symbolic elements (e.g., pictures, celebration of holidays).

D. PARENT FINDINGS

- Background: Parents in NRM and DIGEBI schools were similar in terms of occupation, ethnicity and educational levels. MOE respondents tended to be different as more of them identified themselves as non-indigenous and reported having higher levels of education.
- Parent Participation: Parents in all programs reported having participated in some activity, usually a meeting, in an NRM center while more parents in the other programs reported never having participated in a preschool event. NRM parents did note that their major difficulty in participating in the center activities was due to work. More parents were observed in NRM and MOE than DIGEBI locations on the days the evaluators visited the preschools. Additionally, more parents were seen working in the centers than meeting with teachers on the days of the school visits. Also, more mothers than fathers were observed either working in the preschools or meeting with the teachers.
- Benefits of Preschool: Parents in all programs saw their child having benefited from their preschool experience. Many saw them as having developed their intellectual capacity as well as their social skills and thus having prepared the child for entering the primary grades. There appears to be little value given to the socio-emotional aspect of child development.
- Satisfaction with Preschools: Parents rated the various aspects of their programs highly. NRM parents generally rated all aspects of their program higher than did parents from the other two programs. Also, they gave fewer negatives ratings than did the parents from DIGEBI and MOE centers.

E. BOARD OF DIRECTORS

- Background: Board members were overwhelmingly men. NRM members tended to have lower levels of education and less of them reported reading and writing capabilities. Board members in NRM and DIGEBI centers had children attending the centers.
- Participation in Classroom: Board members had participated in the preschool activities. They reported attending parent meetings and visiting the center to monitor children's progress or at the request of teachers. NRM and DIGEBI members also indicated that they had attended workshops in center management, health and nutrition.

- Satisfaction with Program: Board members in all programs appear to be pleased with the teacher's attendance, punctuality and dedication. However, they do not appear to be as satisfied with their capabilities, although NRM members appear to be less critical than those of the other programs.
- Benefits: Board members in all programs held that the centers had prepared their children for the primary level by teaching them to read or write, by helping them to lose their fears (socio-emotionally) or by just getting them ready for school. Like parents, board members seem to see the preschools as a means to get their child prepared for the primary levels and want to see the child gain the skills needed to succeed in the later schooling.

F. COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- Awareness of Preschools: Community members with not children at the centers (either in year 2000 or before) in NRM and DIGEBI communities were aware of the centers in their locations. They generally saw that the centers were beneficial to their communities noting that the preschools prepared children for their educational careers by serving as places where children are taught to acquire reading and writing skills at an early age. NRM and MOE community members more than DIGEBI ones were supportive of the idea that children should attend preschool prior to their entering a formal school setting. Generally, respondents across all programs note that the preschools provide the school- readiness skills necessary for preparing the child for primary level work (lose fears, study skills, use of materials; serve as the base for 1st grade). For NRM and DIGEBI parents, though, the preschools also served as a place to acquire Spanish-language capabilities.

G. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

- NRM centers were characterized by the use of a greater variety of contexts and by more child-initiated interactions. Although NRM children interacted mainly with the teacher, there were more interactions with other children in NRM classrooms than in those of the other programs. Additionally, use of the home language appears to help in creating an environment that fosters interaction. Thus, it appears that NRM children may be experiencing more of the types of learning opportunities that may allow them to practice their language and other social skills. Also, while this may mean that there is still a reliance on a traditional classroom management style with the teacher as the focus of the learning environment, it appears that there is more of a child-centered atmosphere in NRM classrooms than in those of the other preschools programs. NRM staff may want to consider providing further training that will help teachers learn other strategies for making the classroom a more active-learning environment.

- NRM teachers appear to be more receptive to parental participation in the preschools. Their attitudes reflect a more positive attitude toward the concept, and more parents from NRM preschools reported participating in these centers. Also, parents in NRM centers appear to participate more frequently and in a greater variety of activities than do those of the other programs. It appears that NRM preschools have embraced the parental participation concept wholeheartedly and are implementing better than their counterparts. Unfortunately, parental participation seems to be focused on assistance with maintenance of the facilities and food preparations rather than on decision-making activities for the preschool as a whole. This is true for all programs.

- There appeared to be high levels of satisfaction with the NRM teachers among parents, Board members and community residents. This was especially the case with issues related to teacher's attendance, punctuality and dedication to the child. Lower levels of satisfaction were voiced with regard to the physical installations and the food in all programs.

IV. From Findings to Action

Results were delivered, first to the pedagogical team, and then to all teachers. After receiving the results from the evaluation, the ERM team went about how to better use the findings to improve or modify the program. The evaluation results confirmed many aspects the team had already identified that required improvement and shed new light on others that also required treatment.

After careful analysis of results, it became apparent that these results could be used at two different level: on the one hand, the results had direct relation with curriculum implementation in the classroom and teaching practices; on the other hand, they were useful to strength current efforts to systematize the intervention, to better participate in the national curricula reform work, and to help the goal to deliver a model for early childhood education to the Ministry of Education.

A. CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Several decisions were taken upon learning the evaluation results. These results lead to: 1) reorganization of the learning areas; 2) revision of main themes; 3) reorganization of the classroom and the work in it; 4) strengthening the work strategy for the pedagogical team and of the monthly planning; and, 5) the work with parents and community members

1. Reorganization of learning areas: Previous to the evaluation the program used to work eight learning areas. As the results of the evaluation showed that some of areas were implemented in a fragmentary way (for instance, oral expression in a day, writing readiness other day, etc.), with activities not entirely meaningful for children, it was decided to integrate the eight areas

into four. These learning areas are considered to be fundamental for the children education, and correspond closely with developmental areas. The four new areas are:

- a. Music and psychomotor
- b. Symbolic representation, including artistic expression, corporal expression and dramatic expression
- c. Language and communication, including oral expression, writing and reading readiness
- d. Logic Thought, including pre math, serialization, classification, sense of numbers, observation and experimentation, measurement, cause-effects relationship, etc.

With this revision, daily planning must includes activities for each of one of these areas

2. Revision of main themes: children's learning is organized around main themes, in such a way as to provide a meaningful context for their learning. Main themes has been redefined, and are now the following:
 - a. Myself and my family, that includes children's rights and gender equity
 - b. My health
 - c. My community and the work in the community
 - d. Intercultural education
 - e. Values development, and
 - f. Environmental education
3. Physical and conceptual reorganization of the classroom: classroom is organized in learning corners and a common learning area. Before the evaluation, all areas classroom areas, but the common learning areas were designed as learning corners. After analyzing the results, it was decided to distinguish between learning corners and specific places where specific resources and materials were available. Now the distinction is being made between Learning Corner, a physical space with learning material and resources in which the child can play and learn, and Places, a physical space that allow to storage specific resources and materials, but that not are

designed for carrying out specific activities. Upon reorganization, classroom will be organized with the following learning corners:

- a. Dramatization corner, for symbolic representation and affect development, including role playing. In the center may be available a small house appropriate to children's height ,or a small stage, that allows playing with puppets
- b. Construction corner, also for symbolic representation, where the child can build models, ensemble parts, and develop logic processes
- c. Artistic expression corner, where the child can paint, make drawings, play with his/her hands and fingers, etc. This allow for development of symbolic representation, affect development and manual dexterity development
- d. Classroom library and quiet playing; that allows for language and communication development

Previous corners are now designed as Places. These are:

- a. A place for children's "morrales" (a traditional backpack) and children's cups (to drink milk or some other nutrition supplement)
- b. A place for musical instruments
- c. A place for materials used in psychomotor development activities
- d. A place for materials used in activities to develop logical thinking

All corners and places are labeled, both in the mother tongue (Ixil or K'iche') and in Spanish.

4. Strengthening the pedagogical team and the planning sessions: as the pedagogical teams plays a key role given direct assistance to teachers, new activities are being developed to improve their pedagogical and education management skills. This includes additional training given by the pedagogical advisor, experimentation with new integrated activities that can later be included in the monthly planning sessions with teachers, and evaluation of the program, by evaluating children's progress.
5. Work with parents and community members: activities with parents have been modified, so that more importance is given to parent's participation in their children's learning. This include improving parent's involvement in the construction of learning materials and

resources, parent's more direct participation in children's learning, both in the classroom and at home, and working with them for better development of habits formation, including being punctual and appropriately assuming responsibilities. Initial parent's response has been positive.

B. SUPPORTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MOE AND WITH THE NATIONAL EFFORT FOR CURRICULA DEVELOPMENT

The results also proved useful for the effort the ERM team was already involved in to establish a better working relationship with the ministry of education, and for a better participation on the curricula reform the Guatemalan education community is currently advancing, as part of the educational reform presently underway. This includes the following aspects:

- a. Develop proper articulation between the ECE program and the first grade of the primary education, an issue being discussed for over 20 years, to facilitate children's transition to the primary school
- b. Review, revision and systematization of the model, as a proposal for an ECE bilingual program
- c. Inclusion of the ERM ECE curriculum in the national curricula development currently underway
- d. Participation in the development of the regional curricula (mezzo curriculum) being conducted in the Ixil speaking area

C. SOME FINAL COMMENTS

The cooperative agreement between the Guatemalan IEQ project and the NGO ERM has proved mutually beneficial. On the one hand, the IEQ team has learned from the educational model developed by ERM, and, in doing so, has advanced the fulfillment of the project's objectives and goals, particularly serving as a vehicle for dissemination of findings and helping to strengthen the local educational community. On the other hand, ERM and the Guatemalan team has used the results to improve the program, improve their ability to use evaluation for decision making, and, at local level, specially with the pedagogical team and with the teachers, establish a link between work and evaluation of the work.