Community classrooms for the all-round protection of Petare’s boys and girls

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In an area of Caracas where street violence has become a normal part of everyday life, and where children grow up admiring and wanting to emulate the leaders of local gangs, a group of women set out to build a community programme of care for children who were not in school. Their motivating belief is that education can save children from growing up into a life of violence. In this article Gloria Perdomo discusses how the Luz y Vida Foundation coordinated these efforts, what difficulties the community women faced, and what has been achieved.

Petare is an urban parish located in the municipality of Sucre in Miranda State, in the metropolitan area of Caracas. Conservative estimates place its urban population at 750,000 residents, making up over 800 communities. A great many of them live in conditions of poverty, evidenced in unemployment, sporadic and unstable family income, overcrowding, inadequate and hazardous housing, absent or irregular basic services such as drinking water, sewage disposal, access roads, transport and so on.

Social exclusion is rife under these circumstances. Thousands of boys and girls grow up here without enough suitable food for their age, leading to malnutrition and a shorter than average stature. Thousands of children and adolescents have no identification documents and grow up on the margins of all types of formalities, which means they are not registered for basic schooling. Many of them begin work from a very young age to help support their families, often in jobs that are unsuitable for their young bodies, such as loading building materials, carrying rubbish, etc. They are not provided with sufficient and appropriate educational, recreational and cultural services to ensure their protection and overall development.

For thousands of boys and girls in this area, their basic care and education is no longer a priority for their families, often because their fathers are absent, leaving their mothers to face the daily battle for economic survival alone. The children do not receive the protection they need and are vulnerable to difficult situations. However, what Petare is most notorious for is violent delinquency, which has become the overriding feature of this urban environment; the growing number of crimes committed here have turned it into an extremely dangerous place.

In this context, violence takes many guises, including serious aggression towards children on a continuous basis and from a very early age.

The daily occurrence of street violence has become the norm, an everyday matter that no longer surprises anyone: it is part of life and is starting to be regarded with indifference. A case that amazed us, for example, was that one morning, the
teachers at a pre-school centre in one of the neighbourhoods came across the body of a young man who had been murdered, lying in the corridor leading to the school entrance. Faced with this situation, the children’s parents protested at the teachers’ refusal to hold classes that day for small children aged between 3 and 6 years old and seemed unconcerned about the risk of further gunshots or of a possible ‘tribute’ to the dead man (almost always involving gunfire). Nor were they worried about allowing their children to witness such a macabre scene. In fact, one of the mothers quite calmly lifted her daughter over the body and handed her over to one of the teachers, while her neighbours verbally attacked this same teacher for “cancelling classes just because of a dead body”.

In such a violence-based social context, the prevailing culture is one of violence and death, in which the weak and vulnerable seem to have no chance of survival. Children in this urban environment grow up admiring the people they see as leaders in their community, the gang leaders, and trying to imitate them. We have heard more than one child say: “when I grow up I want to be a gangster so people will respect me”. This kind of view is the product of impunity, of the absence of community protection and safety, of resentment and defenceness.

This generalising or ‘naturalising’ of violence is invading all aspects of life, including customs and traditions. It has even reached sacred places, like chapels and wakes, and community public spaces, like football pitches, schools, hospitals, etc. It hinders study or work because residents reject or fail to make full use of opportunities open to them, owing to the virtual curfew under which these communities live. As a result, many of the options that might be suitable for bringing violence to an end, such as sport, recreational activities or social services, either do not work or take place sporadically, precisely because of all these safety-related issues.

A response from the community

Against this background of poverty, violence and the huge impact of these on basic human values, a group of women, mothers and girls living in these communities decided to embark on a battle, or rather to pursue a dream, driven by the hope of being able to offer children growing up in this disturbed social climate the chance to enjoy a different way of life. They began their work feeling a real trust in the ability of human beings’ to overcome adversity and all kinds of problems. They had seen many children born only to die very young and their experience of life convinced them that many could have been saved, actually with very little effort. If they had gone to school, if their parents had not beaten them so harshly, if they had not been roaming the streets for so many years, etc. Without being sociologists or great specialists, they had the ability to predict who, out of the sweet and innocent children in their neighbourhood, would, in only a few years, turn into the most feared and antisocial youths in their area. And sadly, they were not wrong; they could pinpoint which children and youths were growing up without proper protection.

They came out of their homes, took action and with effort and initiative built up a community programme of care for children who were not in school. They started by going round the streets in their neighbourhood and visiting homes with children who had not been able to attend school, asking parents and the children themselves if they would like to go and study at a school. After only two weeks of making these visits, they identified 980 boys and girls between 5 and 17 years old, who had never had access to school, either because of a lack of places in

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schools in Petare or because of the extreme poverty in which their families lived. They were all invited to join the community classrooms, which were simply community spaces set up by the women's neighbours and relatives.

This was a real social movement that involved talking to residents, sharing experiences – even with the gaggles of youths drinking liquor on street corners – and calling on the area's families and inviting them to collaborate so that no child in their neighbourhood was deprived of the chance to study. For several weeks, after compiling lists of children not at school, letters were written and sent, formal procedures were carried out and meetings were attended to show the education authorities the clear need for schools to be set up and more classrooms provided, as well as special programmes developed for supporting the most poverty-stricken families.

But there was no firm response from the State, and having been let down by the authorities in charge, these women from the communities decided to become teachers, and started giving daily lessons to all the children whom they had told that studying was both important and necessary.

A total of 24 community classrooms were set up in eight different communities within the municipality and each year since 2001 they've admitted an average of four hundred boys and girls who have been excluded from formal education.

This work grouped the resident-teachers together in the Luz y Vida Foundation, a community organisation that the majority of them already belonged to and whose priority at that time was to promote social and family participation in protecting the right to education. This mission was rooted in the conviction that being integrated into the education system and the type of protection offered by schools could save the majority of these children from a fate that was not necessarily inevitable and against which action had to be taken.

**Achievements gained from the experience**

To summarise, the most outstanding achievements gained from this experience are the following:

1. In less than two weeks, the women, community groups, residents, parents and representatives set up eight community spaces that became classrooms for schooling and literacy. The basic necessities for working with the children on a daily basis (chairs, desks, tables, blackboards, etc) were donated by people at a community cayapa, or joint effort. Motivating and recruiting community teachers was the responsibility of community members, and each neighbourhood identified people who were willing to do educational activities with the children.

2. Every year, visits are carried out to the children's homes and observation days are held in each of the neighbourhoods, enabling pressing needs to be assessed and ways of solving problems to be found. This meant that a social diagnosis of the state of children's rights in the municipality could be made and updated on a yearly basis. The assessment showed the chronic absence of spaces for play; the notorious drug trafficking and drug-taking (including by children) in the majority of neighbourhoods; the deterioration or complete lack of basic services such as drinking water, entrance steps and communication services; the absence of institutional programmes and resources for repairs to community infrastructures; and difficulties obtaining access to justice. Since in Petare there is no Protection Prosecution Service, or law courts, the Protection Council works in a constant state of collapse because of the huge demand. There are only two defence lawyers for promoting and defending children's rights, which are constantly being violated.

3. The absence of educational opportunities and exclusion from school was shown, according to these experiences, to the following causes:
   - Lack of places in schools, because no new school buildings have been built in Petare for more than thirty years.
   - The abject poverty in which families are living (which forces
children out to work or stops them from getting tickets, school equipment, uniforms or packed lunches).

- Parents’ negligence or neglect.
- The disabilities that some boys and girls are supposedly suffering from (to justify their exclusion).
- The ignorance or laziness of school managers who fail to register people who have no identification documents or who are not in possession of some kind of formal qualification.
- The situation of violence and insecurity endured by communities, leading to lack of access to school or to learning; this also affects very young children.
- The situation of girls, who from a very young age shoulder the responsibility for looking after their younger siblings at home and are therefore not registered for school.

4. The women of the community who came up with this initiative discovered their teaching vocation when they discovered that children, even older children, learned with them. This brought out their sensitivity, commitment and talent

According to Luz y Vida Foundation, community classrooms help children to learn that school too, is a place where they can have experiences that change their lives.

Photo: Courtesy Fundacion Luz y Vida
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as community teachers. Recognising this opportunity, the Luz y Vida Foundation forged an alliance with the Simón Rodríguez Experimental University, to develop a university-level professional teaching course. Its on-the-job training strategies and research projects, inclusive nature and cooperative learning system led to 16 of these community teachers gaining a university teaching qualification after six years of training. They graduated with a degree in Overall Education, setting an example and motivating their families, communities and especially the pupils in the community classrooms.

5. Although community classrooms adhere to the requirements and demands of official basic education programmes, their top priority is to safeguard the full protection of boys and girls not registered for school. Working in the classrooms means getting to know the circumstances in which pupils live, and this involves finding out, for example, that they have no official papers, that they do not live with their parents, that they have never been to a health centre, etc. In all these cases, the teacher and the volunteers who support the teacher mobilise institutions and services, visit homes and work alongside families, ensuring that safeguarding townspeople’s basic human rights is their number one priority.

6. Perhaps an alternative educational model is emerging from these classrooms, one that involves using non-conventional strategies and requires knowing and respecting the educational needs and expectations of children taking part, adapting teaching content to cater to their interests, experience and real-life situations. A need has been demonstrated for educational projects that allow mothers to express affection for their children, to call them by their names or celebrate their birthdays. This work helps children to learn that school too, is a place where they can have experiences that change their lives and make them happy. One of the main strategies or principles of this kind of teaching is that children feel recognised, valued and loved by their teachers. This is made possible not only through teachers’ conscious intentions, but also through their capacity for love and for being supportive, one of the greatest and most wonderful qualities of these community teachers.

7. Contrary to what is generally assumed, the non-school population proved that they wanted to study
and welcomed their ‘pupil’ status. The majority have not left the school, in fact they get annoyed when a fair is held because it stops them attending class. They enjoy and appreciate their school time.

8. This programme is delivered in a flexible and open way, winning it many allies, such as the food company that provided a daily nutritional supplement. The educational community in the French College and the British School contributed resources for repairing buildings and donated educational material. Unilever Andina assisted with teacher training scholarships and some university teaching staff donated their consultancy time to the project. We could make an extensive list of people whose generosity has enabled this community work to continue for several years.

But the greatest and most fundamental achievement has been the educational inclusion of four thousand hitherto unschooled boys and girls, allowing them to escape from the violence and exclusion that marked their lives. As the residents themselves can see, in the past they were seen as ‘street kids’, a term that was used even for the smallest children. Today they are pupils, they attend class or they have completed their schooling. In recent years, an institutional agreement has been set up with the Fe y Alegría Association, under which these children can be awarded certificates and given academic recognition for their studies in these community classrooms. Projects currently being developed include setting up a community pre-school section for the next school year, funded from municipal sources and with teaching staff trained for this purpose. This means job opportunities, with social security and stability, for seven of the teachers who set up this venture.

**Final thoughts**

Organised communities should not replace the State, providing answers in the face of the absence or blatant negligence of the people responsible for policy and educational programmes. The strategic role of social organisations is to demand rights, denounce the lack of proper protection and promote the development of basic social policy in favour of overall childhood development. But ten years of working on this experience have shown that there are circumstances and situations that by their nature and complexity require hands-on intervention. Learning comes from committed action, in which those affected work alongside those striving for cultural harmony; people who are able to get close and understand those who live on the margins and are unable to access institutions and schools. In these cases, it is essential to generate non-conventional strategies alongside suitable teaching provisions, that both guarantee the effectiveness of educational objectives, and are rooted in and available to the community as a whole. They will give rise to new models, approaches and projects that will promote equality and enable people to overcome the huge social gaps that exact a significant toll on society.