

ICDP IN PARAGUAY, 2019 - 2020

Elisabeth Gavilan is an ICDP trainers and the director of the Vida Plena Foundation that runs an educational Support Centre for children and adolescents (from 3 to 18 yrs. old) in the Municipal Market area of Abastos of the capital Asunción. The project started in 2008. All educators, as well as volunteers, receive training in the ICDP programme on an ongoing basis. Elisabeth's intention is to register ICDP as a Mental Health Program in the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare.

"Approximately every two months I hold ICDP workshops to strengthen and deepen the practice of the eight ICDP guidelines and above all, of empathy and emotional attunement in the daily work of educators and volunteers with children. They are aware that they are important people in the lives of these children and adolescents. There are usually between 40 and 60 children who attend our Centre's activities daily.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, registrations have diminished but the work of educators has not. All educators had to learn how to use the technological resources of their mobile phones to serve their groups of students virtually. Our educators were the link between school teachers and their students. Families without the right technological resource had to be attended with photocopies of the school tasks. The tasks had to be completed, either virtually or on paper and then our educators presented these to schools. As a result of this process, the relationship in the teaching triangle, namely the school – the family – and our educators, was extremely important.

In addition, educators established a WhatsApp group with the students who attend our Support Centre. As a result, we achieved a more extensive and deeper communication among all those involved in our service. We distributed food kits to those most in need, and second-hand clothing. Thanks to the help of private donors, we were able to serve nutritious dishes that are abundant enough to meet the health needs of our students. Our community's response was of appreciation and expression of satisfaction.

Our social worker Daily Dominguez established a routine of home-to-home visits, which is allowed in Paraguay because social work is considered a health service. That is how we stayed informed about each family's situation. From March 2020 onwards, the incomes plummeted for many families, so we decided to organize and prepare "food pots" for our community, 3 times a week, from May to July 2020. From August to October, we maintained a rhythm of providing one food pot per week, because the external economic situation began to recover slowly.

Our successes: Children and adolescents point out that they feel at ease at the Support Centre, unlike the schools they are obliged to attend. During the lockdown they longed to return to school to be with their peers, but many said that they longed more to return to our Support Center. Among the students some are already mothers/parents and they send us their children, or recommend to their relatives to send us their nephews.

In July 2020, I took advantage of a slight reduction in strict health measures, which allowed face-to-face workshops and I started to train our educators (who had all been trained at ICDP caregiver level) to become ICDP facilitators, so that they can start implementing ICDP with the parents.

Some of our difficulties lie in the fact that our organization with a different educational practice (non-formal education) has a low profile in society at large and the surrounding community in particular. Few adults understand our goal of providing affective shelter, to help children "take off" in their own life project. At all social levels it is considered normal to use some violent or humiliating method to educate children and even adolescents. A constant challenge is the low understanding of adults about the authentic affective needs of infants and children of any age.“
– Elisabeth Gavilan.