

The Family in Latin America

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The XXth Century saw a total change of world culture, as we know.

Not only there were tremendous technological and transportational changes, but the 2 World Wars effected enormous world changes as well.

One of the least mentioned, and most radical changes of the XXth century, however, was the massive migration from rural life to urban life and the changes in family structure that this produced. This effect was most dramatic in Latin America. The loss of the obligations of farm life, which kept in place a perhaps cruel discipline for mere survival, but which did in fact contribute to a rather stable system where rural honesty and strong couples working the land together gave children stability and a sense of continuity and shared values, albeit in a frame of subsistence and survival.

These values did not translate easily to the urban setting where shanty towns with all their chaos sprang up around every main city and created other methods of survival.

Sadly, few governments paid enough attention to the long term implications of this phenomenon and in most countries of Latin America, services and security in these impressively populated zones are very insufficient.

In these deficient surroundings, family structure is weak and the men tend to move on, looking for better working conditions while the women and children are frequently left to survive alone.

This characteristic Latin American situation has produced strong women and a large segment of families lacking responsible father figures. The result has been a growing cohort of boys and young men joining gangs. There is a corresponding and growing phenomenon of girls becoming pregnant younger and younger, as the family structure weakens in a vicious-cycle effect. They know no other way of life!

The Latin American culture of love and care of children has mitigated some of the effects of this grave weakness and we find Latin American youth quite strong emotionally. Children are still given enormous affection, particularly when small. This generously

demonstrated love by mothers and grandmothers gives the individuals a strong start. However at adolescence the effect is put into reverse as boys look for the manly leadership of the absent father among the strong male leaders within their slum. These are frequently gang leaders and drug dealers, happy to enroll new members in their gang.

At adolescence, the girls also are looking for strong male affection and become pregnant as teenagers. Sometimes even younger than that.

Traditionally, since the exodus from the country to the city, mothers go out to work and grandmothers raise the children. That is changing, as girls have babies earlier and earlier. The grandmothers are now still young working mothers and so there is no one to watch the babies.

Day care is not the best in Latin American slums, and in many cases has the effect of negating the great advantage of Latin America which is the strong bonding that was available when grandmothers watched over the babies and small children.

And of course, all too many children are completely on their own, either in and after school, or just in the street.

A new element is now appearing quite fast in these difficult circumstances, as everywhere else in the world, and that is the appearance and proliferation of smart-phones, which provide entertainment, which of course includes pornography and other unhealthy elements such as bomb-making, suicide methods and so on. But young people are also finding the social networks which consume their time, detracting from time spent with other kids, and the age-old street-games such as marbles, hopscotch, yo-yo and so many other games of skill which used to teach coordination and precision. As is now becoming known, life with virtual friends from the networks are producing a terrible solitude among young people who lack the personal interchange of real friends and playmates.

The results of solitude and full-time, hard-working mothers and absent fathers...off to another family... are pretty grim:

With more and more boys tending to join gangs for the closeness, interdependence, adventure and the interest of a masculine leader, and increasing numbers of girls who look for love, a male figure, and get pregnant, the future could be looking very dim for the Latin American family, but particularly for the girls and boys of this fabulously rich continent.

The above is all quite well-known social science. So now I would like to talk more about the individuals that make up the statistics.

These kids are innocent babies and children. Their intelligence is honed by the enormous challenges they overcome simply in order to survive. They walk tremendous distances, often on steep hills and must often negotiate the threats and difficulties presented by the gangs, and they must help around the home from a very young age. These are very cute children. Cute and clever. And as they reach adolescence, like all adolescents, they start looking to become their own person, have significance, and to "be someone." Sadly, many

have few good role models. And so they become tough guys and womanizers, going on to impress and promise one woman after another, and leaving a child with each one. The girls want to be sexy, beautiful women and have their own baby. Then they must look for another man when the father of that one leaves her.

This vicious social cycle of ignorance and irresponsibility is well known, and threatens to become the dominating culture of the Latin American Continent. It is sapping the riches of these beautiful lands and feeding a system of corrupt governments. We ask ourselves...how can it end? What can put this terrible progression into reverse? And we have not even mentioned the increasing power of the mafias controlling the narco-traffic.

Well, there is a lot of good news out there, as well as the very bad. New ideas are appearing.

Our work in these slums these past 37 years has shown us the tremendous potential for change, as well as the hard realities. An interesting discovery, at least for me, has been that all children, and almost all adolescents, do want to be outstanding people. It is also true that they recognize what is good and what is bad. Even the young criminals among them try to hide their crimes and to justify them if caught.

That seems obvious, but it is actually quite indicative.

These children and adolescents, if given an effective guide to right behavior and the logic behind it, are, generally speaking, delighted to discover the way to do things right. This may sound extravagant, but in fact we have been experiencing this truth now for 17 years. It has been a revelation. Their greatest wish is for a stable family and reliable love, but have no experience or knowledge of how to attain these.

With an interdisciplinary and inter-american team, we formulated a curriculum of values with characteristics to fit the Latin American situation of children and adolescents. The characteristics of this curriculum for Primary and Secondary schools are the following:

It should:

Be anthropologically based, taking into consideration the natural phases of all human growth, including brain development, hormonal changes and the phases of interest in play, games and sports and the reflection of these on social behavior;

Be free of religious, ideological or political influence in order to fit all children and adolescents;

Be rendered as a continuous story about a varied bunch of girls and boys in order to hold the attention of the readers and to avoid stereotyping;

Be completely neutral socio-economically, so all children could identify with the human situations of the story and the characters.

And so was born *Aprendiendo a Querer*, or *Alive to the World*. Understanding the need for a positive and effective sex education, our first action was to define it. After much discussion, the definition was “Sex education is all that an individual must learn, from birth, that enables him or her to live happily and permanently as a couple”. This evidently means to learn teamwork, patience, justice, generosity, loyalty, veracity, solidarity, perseverance, and so on, and a number of skills, such as listening, knowing what one wants and how to express it, negotiation and decision taking,

There are ages at which these are most easily learned. These objectives are delivered through the story as it progresses as a text for each grade level, from Kindergarten to last year of high school. It is designed for one hour per week. So there are 13 volumes for the pupils and a Teacher Guide for each level.

The teacher guide in fact assures that the teachers themselves are learning the logic of the values as well as knowing how to transmit them. The objective of each chapter (week) is rendered in 3 ways through the story: for Knowledge, for Motivation and for Skills, as required by UNESCO for the XXIst century educational goals. This is also the method promoted by Dr. Thomas Likona, well known for his pioneering and expertise in character education. He calls it educating the Head, Heart and Hand.

Harnessing and harmonizing these three levels of the student: the spiritual level (or the intelligence and the will); the emotional level, where sentiments and impulses arise; and the corporal level, of action through everyday experiences, delivers a pedagogy we have come to call the Pedagogy of the Integration of the Human Person.

We now have 17 years of experience with this project, *Aprendiendo a Querer*, and it is now in use in 14 countries of the continent, as well as in Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic. It is being used in a variety of schools: public, private, Municipal, Bolivarian and church-run.

The effects have amazed all of us. Without really counting on it, we discovered that the power of imagination of children is incredibly potent. It can overcome the worst realities with a capacity to understand and dream which is a dynamism of its own. Through the continuous story of the group of friends, the child or adolescent can observe the logic of different behaviors, judge for him or herself and decide what is best. There is no preaching or telling what is best, apart from some explanations. The teacher guide provides suggestions for class activities and discussion. There are no exams, no grades and no ‘right’ answers. What is required is sound logic within the basic rule of “do to others as you would have them do to you.” The scaffolding undergirding the story mirrors the normal development of interest in all children and adolescents as they develop, which makes the plot and interplay of characters most attractive for the pupils, and as with Harry Potter, they have demonstrated that kids will read if the material interests them.

Schools in the most difficult areas have been reporting right along that school violence and bullying stops within a few months of initiating the program. After a couple of years, they report, there are no more pregnancies. These are schools have regularly reported 4 or 5 or

more per year. Dropping out is reduced. And the students report that this period is their favorite in the entire week, because it is about *them*. Students regularly tell us that the story is ‘the story of my life’, and the smaller children often ask how they can meet Alicia, the main character, in order to thank her for teaching them so much.

An Instrument to Measure Impact has been developed by the Sociology department of the Andres Bello University of Venezuela and used for 3 years to measure the impact of this program in the most dangerous slum of Caracas. The results are startling. Even the ‘special cases’.... teenagers moonlighting as gang members, changed substantially and remarked with pride the change in their personalities as they adopted more positive attitudes.

Latin America is full of talent and energy. That talent and energy must be directed to positive ends, because ‘nature abhors a vacuum’ and the alternative is chaos. Children are easy to form, and adolescents want to do things differently from their forbears.

Adolescents are the great untapped resource for renewal. We are still in time to ride the wave of dissatisfaction felt by great numbers of young people, giving them new ambitions. Latin America is still a continent which is renewing itself demographically and therefore the young are still an important force for the future. As we reach adolescents and inspire them with positive ambition, we can know that in 4 or 5 years they will be voting. There are millions of children and adolescents in Latin America. These are all hoping for happy families and only need to know how to build them.

At the present rate of social disintegration, because of the lack of positive direction for the children and adolescents coming up at a rapid rate in this young continent, an alarming future can be projected, with the likelihood of more governments like that of Chavez, appealing to those ignorant of realistic economic truths and prone to believing populist promises. And more migration due to poverty.

The alternative possibility is that leaders understand the imperative need to give Latin America’s youth positive ambitions, based on anthropological reality and the needs and dreams of the real young men and women who will be the citizens of the future.

There is no time to lose!