

The Montessori Model in Puebla, Mexico: How One Nonprofit Is Helping Children

By Harger, Jeni

As a sea of cars maneuvered through congested streets outside the Hidalgo Market in Puebla, Mexico, and buses transporting passengers spewed diesel fumes into the morning air, hundreds of people milled about under tarps, preparing for another busy day. Jose Rodriguez Rosales and his family were among those hundreds. Along with his three older siblings, ages 5, 7, and 9, 3-year-old Jose followed his mother to a stand where he would help sell makeup and undergarments. His father headed to a stand where he would spend up to 12 hours selling elotes (corn) to passersby. After toiling daily under the hot tarps, Jose's family would earn as little as 10 dollars a week to support a family of six. The Hidalgo Market epitomizes how Mexico's economic growth has left tens of millions of people behind to seek a living in these and similar conditions. The market is located at a crossroads-from the city of Puebla, one can access large highways heading toward Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Mexico City-and as such is a place of constant movement and bustle. It is an ideal place for someone peddling goods to the masses, but also a breeding ground for drugs, violence, and prostitution.

The city of Puebla, which is located in south-central Mexico, north of Oaxaca, is considered a World Heritage Site according to UNESCO (1987), but it is housed within the fourth largest, and one of the poorest, federal districts in Mexico. The state of Puebla is home to approximately 5.3 million residents, many of whom find life a desperate road of endless labor (INEGI, 2006). Nearly 1.6 million people live in the city of Puebla (INEGI, 2006). These residents toil day after day to earn enough money to feed and clothe their families, often lacking the resources to send their children to school or provide needed medical care for the sick and dying. Despite its outward beauty of colonial buildings, palm trees, and cobblestone streets, the state of Puebla has more than 1.2 million children living in poverty, nearly 25 percent of whom work- sometimes as many as 35 hours a week (JUCONI, 2006). Nearly 80 percent of children younger than 14 receive no medical care (JUCONI, 2006).

Jose's parents, Juana and Gregorio, married young and immigrated to Puebla from their rural town in search of better economic opportunities. Both parents had been raised in impoverished households with high levels of alcohol abuse and violence. Neither of them finished elementary school, so their job prospects in Puebla were severely limited. As they had more children to care for, and as stress and anxiety increased, they fell back on the only family model they knew-one of physical and emotional violence and alcohol abuse.

The Rodriguez Rosales family returned home, exhausted, from Hidalgo Market every night to a one-room apartment with a cement floor. Depression drove Gregorio Rodriguez Rosales to drown his sorrows in alcohol, and the night often ended with screaming and fighting between the parents. Little Guadalupe, Antonio, Lisa, and Jose vividly remember watching one night as their father broke their mother's nose because he did not like the dinner she had prepared. The children felt powerless. They were unable to help their mother and lived in constant fear of their father. Despite their efforts to stay as invisible as possible, the children often became the brunt of their parents' anger, being called stupid and worthless, and suffering beatings from their father.

This environment of helplessness, terror, and abuse took its toll on the self-esteem and social integration of the children. Their school attendance became erratic, and the poor grades they earned only reinforced their negative self-image. With a controlling father and battered senses of self-worth, the children found it extremely difficult to initiate and maintain friendships. Outside of school, their lives revolved around their parents' market stalls. In down times, the children would explore the market and its dangerous surroundings alone. Just as Jose's family model evolved into one that condoned violence, the four socially isolated children were becoming accustomed to destructive behavior they likely were to repeat when they became parents.

Jose at the JUCONI Center

One day, though, everything changed for the Rodriguez Rosales family. A neighbor told them about a nearby center, run by a local nonprofit called the JUCONI Foundation. (JUCONI is an acronym for Junto con los Ninos, or "Together with the Children). This Mexican nongovernmental organization (NGO) has been successfully working

with distressed families and children in Puebla since 1989. For the JUCONI Foundation, success means breaking destructive cycles of poverty and abuse, and reintegrating children and parents into society, where it is possible for them to attain education and steady jobs. With a success rate greater than 80 percent, JUCONI has been recognized for its innovative work by such organizations as UNESCO, the World Bank, the European Union, the British government, and the International Youth Foundation. The JUCONI Foundation helps 350 children and 150 families a year. Juana and Gregorio Rodriguez Rosales approached the staff at the JUCONI Day Center, and together the family and JUCONI developed a plan of participation for their four children.

Montessori materials in action

The Day Center offers educational and therapeutic services to families and children (up to age 13) working in the markets and provides a Montessori model of education for children ages 18 months to 5 years. Children attend a child-friendly center where they engage in activities designed to foster their creativity, curiosity, and independence. They are presented with a variety of options, from art to math, and are given the freedom to choose the activities of greatest interest to them. Each day, they encounter stimulating materials, opportunities to develop social skills with their peers, and playtime, music time, and mealtime. After the age of 5, children enter the public school system but continue to attend the JUCONI Day Center in the afternoons, receiving intensive educational support. The Day Center's focus for older children, ages 6 to 13, remains grounded in Montessori principles and works to foster social, emotional, and cognitive maturity.

Based upon the guiding principle of fostering a love of learning in children through self- and teacher-initiated experiences, the JUCONI Day Center benefited from the teachings of an experienced guide who played a key role in the implementation of the Montessori model. Adela Mendoza Cano, a Montessori teacher for 25 years, and a teacher at Quinta del Sol, a Montessori school located in the town of Cholula, just outside Puebla, reached out to JUCONI 10 years ago because she believes all children should have access to the benefits of Montessori education, regardless of economic status. "Just because you are poor doesn't mean you can't love to learn. These are the kids that need Montessori the most." Children who come from extremely marginalized families are destined to continue their studies in the lackluster Mexican public school system, where rote learning is the preferred teaching methodology. But, according to Adela, "Montessori gives these children a global vision that they take with them into the public system. The public system puts blinders on the students and discourages creativity. But Montessori students, because of their love for learning, manage to keep that broader focus and think critically throughout their education." For the past 18 years, the JUCONI Foundation has built upon Maria Montessori's teachings, helping hundreds of children like Jose to realize a future filled with opportunities and hope. Adela herself has provided weekly training and supervision and also helps the JUCONI educators with materials.

The Montessori model and the JUCONI program were life-changing for Jose and his two older sisters and older brother. They became involved in a program that provided security, nutrition, medical help, individual and family counseling, and education. For the Rodriguez Rosales children, becoming a part of JUCONI involved attending the JUCONI Center at the Hidalgo Market daily, before or after going to school. (The JUCONI Foundation requires school-age children to attend school and not spend long hours on the streets or working in markets.) The Montessori model for the younger children prepares them for the challenges of public education. It is an integrated program designed to help the children realize their emotional, cognitive, social, and physical potential, so they can benefit more from the services available to them.

As a victim of violence, who had been physically and emotionally abused by his parents, Jose entered the JUCONI Day Center with some challenges to overcome. His educators recall a little boy with a very limited attention span, someone who frequently threw temper tantrums to get attention, and who acted up on a regular basis, disrupting his fellow students. JUCONI educator Guadalupe Hernandez, known affectionately as Lupita, has vivid memories of helping Jose and his siblings. "I remember the Rodriguez Rosales children very well, especially Jose," she said. "When he first started coming here, he was so unhappy and withdrawn. It seemed like every day there was another temper tantrum, or he would start throwing things at fellow students. It required a lot of time and energy from the staff to help Jose, but we stuck with it." And with time, Jose started to change. "It seemed like it was almost overnight. One day, I saw him helping a little girl with an art project. I couldn't believe my eyes. Was this the same Jose who threw things and sat in a corner screaming and yelling? I just felt so happy when I saw this. That day was when I knew we were really helping him." Hidalgo Market: chickens for sale

Under the framework of order the Montessori teachers provided Jose, he was able to develop a love of learning. Slowly but surely, he learned to concentrate on tasks, to get along with other children, and to develop the patience to learn new skills. The Montessori approach helped Jose acquire the tools and language skills to begin to develop himself as a student and a member of a community. He understood limits and boundaries, developed logical reasoning skills, and eventually became a responsible student who always showed up on time with his homework completed.

Montessori education is an important part of the various services that JUCONI provides in their goal of achieving lasting and positive social integration for children and families. The JUCONI methodology features a component for parents, designed to break the negative cycles of family violence by providing a family mission to protect itself and all of its members. This unification of the family is achieved by working through the family's traumatic history, offering empathy, and modeling effective behaviors. The JUCONI staff reinforces strengths, helps to raise each family member's self-esteem, and works with parents to help them better understand their children, so they can respond more appropriately to their needs. For families like Jose's who are most in need of therapeutic help, the staff makes weekly home visits, aimed at eliminating violence and helping the family create a stable environment that promotes the development of each person.

JUCONI worked intensively with Juana and Gregorio Rodriguez Rosales to help them improve their communication skills and to learn how to positively discipline their children, using a strengths-based approach, rather than physical and emotional violence and name-calling. A strengths-based approach encourages parents to assume a leadership role, treat their children with respect, and model the behavior they wish to see in their children. Discipline becomes a trade-off between chosen actions and appropriate consequences, and violence is eliminated. This is hard work, as years of repeated behaviors and deeply ingrained attitudes lead families into negative patterns that are difficult to break. As such, the patterns of violence are often passed from generation to generation; so it is particularly important for JUCONI to intervene early with children to change these patterns.

Guadalupe, Antonio, Lisa, and Jose attended JUCONI every day, becoming actively involved in the Montessori school at the center, until they turned 14. They participated in student-initiated art and social activities, and learning became fun. Additionally, JUCONI's Montessori program provided them with a safe place to interact with other children. Every day was an opportunity to play with others, whether it was participating in art projects, learning about colors, shapes, numbers, and letters, or singing songs. The center provided the children with nutritious lunches and care until one of their parents could pick them up in the evening. Occasionally, the children would go on group outings to see local attractions, broadening their educational experiences. For Juana Rodriguez Rosales, the changes she perceived in her children were truly encouraging. "I'm so grateful for JUCONI and the Day Center. It was such a blessing to have my children come home from school excited about what they were doing and the friends they were making. They would talk my ear off while I cooked dinner about the things they were discovering in school. They even taught me the songs they sang at the Day Center."

The JUCONI Center

In Mexico, children are not required to attend kindergarten, but the market-working children who attend the JUCONI Center at the Hidalgo Market participate in Montessori programs from as young as 18 months. Public schools welcome children from the JUCONI Montessori Day Center with open arms because they have earned a reputation for being reliable students who behave in class, interact positively with peers, complete their homework, and excel academically. In contrast, for many children who work in markets and often miss out on important basic education, the picture is quite different. Most market-working children are not welcomed in schools, and because of their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral problems, they often end up ridiculed and isolated by teachers. Too frequently, the family blames the school, and the school blames the family. The children get lost in the middle. The best interests of the child are obscured by conflict, and dropping out is often the unfortunate and crippling result. Most of these children never finish primary school, let alone continue to high school or college.

In many parts of Mexico, including Puebla, Montessori schools are almost exclusively for children of the well-to-do; children living in poverty often do not benefit from the cognitive and behavioral advances fostered by the Montessori model of education. The JUCONI Day Center at Hidalgo Market is unique in its capacity to offer Montessori education to children in need, making the child's welfare a genuine team effort. Parents provide food for the Day Center's meals, taking shifts to cook and clean. To ensure JUCONI is helping those most in need, the foundation sets an income limit for families who enter the program. Families may not earn more than three minimum-wage incomes (approximately \$4 a day) to enter the program. Additionally, the families must be willing to accept JUCONI family counseling and assume responsibility for making positive changes and progress in their personal growth. This structure allows the organization to choose families based on their motivation to make positive changes, rather than on their ability to pay for services. As a consequence, the Montessori methods are used without the Day Center being officially registered as a Montessori school in Mexico. The Center wishes to keep costs low to pass along benefits to the poorest and most in need of Montessori help. The process of registering as an official Montessori school would raise costs to a point where it would become necessary to charge the families a fee for their children to attend, and JUCONI doesn't wish to eliminate the possibility of attendance for anyone. If registration and tuition had been charged, Jose's family could not have entered the program.

After spending 11 years in the JUCONI program, Jose and his family have graduated into JUCONTs followup program, which only occurs when the children and parents accomplish certain positive life changes, reaching goals the family and JUCONI staff set when the family entered the program. Life for Jose and his siblings has changed significantly. Gregorio Rodriguez Rosales is no longer drinking excessively and lashing out at his family. With the help of JUCONTs services for parents, Juana Rodriguez Rosales learned to read and write and eventually obtained her high school diploma. She was then able to obtain full-time work outside of the Hidalgo Market, and the family now benefits from the insurance and vacation time she earns at work. Gregorio Rodriguez Rosales was able to find a job in a construction company and today is manager of the company. The family no longer lives in poverty and despair. They have been able to move out of the one-room apartment and now own their own home, complete with two bedrooms and a separate kitchen.

JUCONI embraces a philosophy that fits hand-to-glove with the Montessori philosophy, making the educational model offered at the Day Center complementary to the therapeutic services offered to children and families during weekly visits. Like the Montessori model, JUCONI teaches children not to accept the status quo but to be agents of their own change and to think creatively. For this reason, the Montessori model of education is a perfect fit for the children and families taking part in the organization.

The results of intensive therapy coupled with Montessori education have been profound for the Rodriguez Rosales children. Guadalupe, the oldest daughter (now 20), is the first member of her family to go to college. She is studying psychology and maintains high grades. Antonio, 18, has been accepted into a vocational auto-mechanic program. When he graduates in 2 years, he is guaranteed a position within the company sponsoring the program-one that will allow him to travel internationally as part of his job. Lisa, 15, is in her second year of high school and plans to attend college like her older sister, Guadalupe. Lisa wants to study information science. Finally, Jose, now 14 years old, is beginning high school and earning high marks. His teachers say he is a responsible student who always attends school. They are impressed with his passion for learning, observing that he is often seen with his nose in a book. Jose is eager to help his teachers and fellow students at every opportunity. He is clear about his present and future goals, and he knows working hard in school will help him achieve those goals. Jose has even begun to plan his future career; he would like to be an auto mechanic like his older brother.

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The JUCONI Day Center at Hidalgo Market is unique in its capacity to offer Montessori education to children in need.

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JENI HARGER is director of Together with the Children (TWC), a nonprofit group, based in Denver, CO, working to help marginalized and street-involved children in Mexico (www.TogetherwiththeChildren.org). TWC spreads awareness and raises support for the JUCONI Foundation (www.JUCONI.org.mx/english/index.html) in Puebla, Mexico. JUCONI assists more than 350 children and 150 families living in poverty each year. Jeni can be reached at info@togetherwiththechildren.org.

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