CHILD AID
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THE PROBLEM & **CHILD AID'S RESPONSE**

Child Aid focuses on literacy and education as pathways for change. Our work aims to have a measurable impact on primary school education in Guatemala, strengthening schools and communities. We focus on rural villages where illiteracy disproportionately affects indigenous people, and in the early grades where education can have the biggest impact on overall life chances.

Guatemala has one of the highest rates of illiteracy in Latin America, with one of the lowest percentages of GDP spent on education. On average, Guatemalans over the age of fifteen have only 5.6 years of schooling. The average for indigenous women is only 3.4 years.; the majority of children in sixth grade can't pass a sixth-grade reading test.

Key factors contributing to this situation are inadequate teacher training and woefully under-resourced classrooms. Child Aid addresses these problems through a structured, multi-year curriculum based on international best practices and aligned with the Guatemalan National Curriculum. Our intervention comprises all-school workshops, and individual, in-classroom coaching. We deliver high-quality, grade appropriate, Spanish language fiction and non-fiction books and help create school libraries and lending programs. We work with teachers on techniques to incorporate these books into all classroom content areas. We also utilize bilingual "bridging techniques" to address the serious problem of Spanish-language learning for the many students who come to first grade speaking a Mayan language and little Spanish. We have evidence that our program produces results. We have a robust student testing protocol using a quasi-experimental design. The instrument used is a reading comprehension test developed by USAID and the Guatemalan Ministry of Education. Analysis by statisticians in the U.S. show a statistically significant effect of our program with a robust effect size.

Child Aid focuses on primary school based on evidence of its foundational importance. But research shows a steep, linear relationship between increasing levels of schooling and multiple markers of well-being, including earnings; likelihood of formal sector employment; life satisfaction; optimism about the future, etc. Yet statistics from the Ministry of Education show an astonishing drop-off in enrollment from *primaria* to *básico,* with only 35% of public primary school students enrolling in *básico.* For girls, the sequelae are particularly stark. Ending their education after sixth grade - or before - almost ensures severely foreshortened life choices and a likely repetition of the early marriage and pregnancy, gender inequality, risk of domestic abuse, lower lifetime earnings, and compromised health that have constrained their mothers' lives.

Independent of these statistics demonstrating poor outcomes for rural, indigenous girls, Child Aid's staff observed that even in Child Aid-trained schools, girls were less likely to participate in class, even if they were strong students; more of them would leave school before graduation; and they were less likely to go on to post-primary schooling even if they did graduate. The Guatemalan women on our staff felt called to try to find a way to help ameliorate this situation. This was deeply personal, as many of them had faced similar pressures and limitations growing up.

Our staff realized that this problem, seen starkly in classrooms, could not be addressed in those same classrooms. We would need to work with girls separately and in a setting freed from academic pressures and gender performance. The ends we wanted to achieve were increased confidence and social-emotional strength for girls; enhanced life goals and confidence in their ability to attain those; increased likelihood of entering into the *básico* level of schooling; an identification of barriers, perceived and pragmatic, that kept girls from continuing education; and making parents, especially fathers, allies for these girls' new and developing goals. Thinking about content and context, we decided that we could address these goals by using the approach and techniques Child Aid already had. We would center our program around an after school, book club format.

GOALS OF THE CLUB DE NIÑAS: THE VALUE OF THEIR VOICES:

- To create a safe space for girls in the 4th, 5th and 6th grades, who are beginning to face expectations, and choices, about their futures.
- To provide social emotional support to increase girls' confidence and decision-making and planning skills.
- To encourage and help girls enhance their participation in their classrooms.
- To improve their abilities to read, write and think critically and independently.
- To present girls with role models of successful and confident women and with mentors from our own staff.
- To present girls with models an mentors from girls graduated from Child Aid schools who have gone on to básico and diversificado.
- To delineate, explore and help expand girls' hopes and plans for their futures.
- To help girls explicitly identify barriers to continuing education and support them in addressing these barriers, when possible, in order to move on to the básico level of education.
- To work with parents, especially fathers, to encourage their daughters to continue their education
- To develop approaches to help overcome the practical barriers to continuing education that emerge in discussions with girls and with their parents.

We utilize a "book club" format as the backbone of our Clubs. Books are specifically chosen to focus discussion on issues related to our Club's goals. Topics include stories of women who overcame obstacles to achieve; issues in reproductive health and decision making; leadership skills and challenges; goal setting; finding one's own voice; and the high value of continuing education. Employing a book club format accomplishes three goals: It uses the existing competencies of our Literacy Training staff; it focuses discussion through books, rather than free-form conversation; it introduces rigor by enabling enhanced pedagogical goals (e.g. critical thinking).

It will enable us to clearly differentiate hopes and decisions about attending *básico* based on broad social-emotional and cultural factors, from those based on parental attitudes, from those based on pragmatic barriers (e.g. financial costs; lack of availability; safety concerns). We can then address these concerns in different ways.

There is great demand for Girls Club programs in the schools and communities where we work. Beginning in 2026, we are introducing an innovation to this program: We will be holding the Clubs in community centers. They will include the 4th-6th grade girls in the school, but be open to girls who have left school but are of the appropriate age and have the basic level of reading proficiency to participate in the Clubs.

Ultimately, our goal is to have a Girls Club associated with each of the schools where we work in the Departments of Sololá, Totonicapán and Chimaltenango.

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