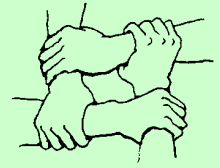




Newsletter from the Sierra Madre #58

April, 2007



PROJIMO Community Based Rehabilitation Program

run by and for disabled villagers in western Mexico (Coyotitan)

HEALTHWRIGHTS

Workgroup for People's Health and Rights

PROJIMO Skills Training and Work Program

run by disabled youth in rural Mexico (Duranguito)

In this issue we look at an effort by the state of Michoacan, Mexico, and the Teachers Union to achieve educational reform, which has triggered a heated debate about whether or not to include disabled children in regular schools. Meanwhile, a Community Based Rehabilitation program near Patzcuaro is quietly integrating children into village schools. Next we visit a remarkable "Museo de la Basura" (Museum of Garbage) in Morelia, where an innovative school teacher makes educational toys and ingenious teaching aids by recycling refuse. We also get our first glimpse of Jason Weston's forthcoming book, Choosing our Future.

The Paradoxes of Educational Reform in Michoacan

From December 6 to 8, 2006, a potentially groundbreaking event took place in Michoacan, Mexico. An international seminar—called the "*Congreso Estatal Popular de Educación y Cultura*" (Popular Statewide Congress on Education and Culture)—was held in the huge state-run Convention Center in the state capital of Morelia. Convened jointly by the state Department of Education and the most progressive branch of the CNTE, Michoacan's powerful, independent Teachers' Union, the aim of the *Congreso* was to try to reach an agreement for "educational reform" between the government and the union. Those organizing the Congress realized that this would not be easy, and might even end up in violent altercations—as has frequently been the case.

Michoacan—one of Mexico's poorest and most socially stratified states—has long been the national epicenter of socialist politics, and is the homeland of the openly socialist Revolutionary Democratic Party, or PRD. The recent *Congreso* on Education and Culture was officially opened by the current governor of the state, Lazaro Cardenas Batel, son of former presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cardenas, who founded the PRD and would almost certainly have won the 1988 presidential election, had votes been fairly counted. Cuauhtémoc, in turn, is son of the

first Lazaro Cardenas, the country's renowned "presidente popular" of the 1930s, who nationalized the nation's oil production, expanded the school system and health services into rural areas, and championed the rights and welfare of Mexico's long-exploited underclass.

Mexico's labor unions: more noise than power.

In Mexico as a whole, most of the

labor unions are largely controlled, under the table, by the government and the ruling class. By the same token, the heavy-handed union bosses often put their own personal interests—and those of others in positions of privilege and power—above those of the workers they supposedly represent. As a result, historically, the unions have had little influence on defending workers rights, achieving fair wages, or reining in the constantly widening gap between rich and poor.

In contrast to most of Mexico, however, where labor unions are a part of the national structure for controlling and exploiting the poor, in Michoacan and the other strongly socialist states, avidly socialistic labor unions pride themselves in being fiercely independent of government. In fact, these unions play a key role in deciding who gets elected to public office at the state level.

However one of the paradoxes of the left-wing politics in Michoacan—as so often elsewhere—has been the concentration of power in the hands of a small privileged avant guard. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the labor unions. For all their talk of equal rights and opportunities for all, too often these unions have ended up with a harshly-enforced pecking order that over-inflates those at the top and permits little dissent from those at the bottom.



Poster for the Michoacan state-wide People's Congress on Educational Reform

Two different teachers' unions

In Mexico as a whole, most teachers in public belong to the numerically powerful but politically conservative teachers' union called the SNTE or *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* (National Union of Education Workers). As with most unions, the SNTE has traditionally aligned itself with the ruling political party, which for seven continuous decades was the oligarchic PRI (Institutionalized Revolutionary Party) and more recently has been the even more right-wing PAN (National Action Party). The fact that in the 2006 presidential election the high-powered boss of the SNTE, Elba Esther Gordillo, ordered all the nation's teachers to back the right-wing PAN candidate goes a long way to explain why Felipe Calderon won.

However, in Michoacan and other left-leaning states of southern Mexico, most teachers belong not to the SNTE but to the rival, supposedly more progressive teachers union called the CNTE or *Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* (National Coordinator of Education Workers). The CNTE is aligned with the PRD (Democratic Revolution Party). The CNTE makes strong, well-organized, and sometimes militant demands for the wages, rights and improved working conditions of teachers.

Paradoxically, however, the CNTE has shown far less interest when it comes to the rights of students, or quality of their education. Despite all the progressive egalitarian rhetoric in the education system and the labor unions, even in the leftist states like Michoacan, schooling tends to be authoritarian, doctrinaire, and heavy-handed. Emphasis still is placed on rote learning rather than critical thinking. Truancy and dropout rates are high.

Michoacan schools rank lowest. In terms of its scholastic rating (what pupils end up learning) Michoacan ranks lowest in the nation. One reason, no doubt, is the dictatorial, uninspiring manner of teaching. But another reason appears to be the high frequency of strikes called by the *Sindicato*. Teachers spend so much time striking that in some years schools are closed for half the scheduled days. Small wonder so many children flunk!

Ironically, the rights-based demands by teachers have tended to further polarize society. Frustrated by the dysfunction of public schools, the more affluent families now send their children to private, non-unionized schools. Such "elitist" private schools have consequently proliferated, whereas the public schools are attended only by children of poor families who can't afford better. The response of the *Sindicato* to this "pedagogical inequity" has been to pressure the state to close down the private schools.

CNTE's opposition to mainstreaming

One area where the Michoacan's teachers union (the CNTE) has been most resistant to change has been in the effort to integrate disabled children in the normal schools. In Mexico, as in much of Latin America, the idea of mainstreaming is still relatively new. In recent decades the response by the state to the needs of disabled children has mainly been to set up "Special Education Centers" separate from the regular public schools. The quality and relevance of the training in these Centers varies greatly, as does the ability of the teachers and caretakers. Typically the content and pace of instruction are adjusted "downward" to the slowest, most limited children.

By far the biggest problem with these Special Education Centers, however, is that they are so few and far between. Disabled children living in rural areas or even in the "septic fringe" of the cities, too often get left out.

One might think that the CNTE, as a left-wing institution with the ideal that everyone be included, would champion the inclusion

of disabled children. But to the contrary, the union's most vocal leaders have adamantly resisted it. The main reasons they give is that "mainstreaming" of disabled children into normal schools is part of the elitist, "neoliberal" agenda. The fact that Mexico's conservative right-wing President, Vicente Fox, has promoted it has sufficed to discredit mainstreaming completely. The union's bosses argue—not without reason—that inclusion of disabled children in the current over-crowded public school classrooms would increase the stress and workload of already overworked, underpaid teachers. Mainstreaming, they insist, is a ploy of the conservative right to reduce spending on public education (by eliminating the Special Education Centers), and reduce jobs for teachers.

The advocates of mainstreaming say this isn't true. They point out that both the Federal and State governments have promised increased funding for mainstreaming, and that because teachers cannot be laid off, those in the Special Ed Centers would be reassigned to the public schools, to assist with the learning needs of the disabled children. But because the CNTE rejected these possibilities, the money allocated for them has been spent elsewhere.

The leadership of the CNTE union not only resists mainstreaming, but is suspicious of the Disability Rights Movement in general, which it sees as a frivolous preoccupation of the privileged class. Historically, of course, there is some truth to their class analysis. This perception of the "bourgeois" origins of the Disability Rights Movement was pointed out to me by Laura Frade, the educational consultant who had invited me to speak at the

Congress. Laura reminded me that throughout Latin America and much of the world, the "Associations of Disabled People" that advocate equal rights and inclusion have typically been organized by those in the more privileged classes. For this reason, their priorities tend to be more concerned with social status than basic needs. And too often the legions of disabled persons in impoverished circumstances are excluded—or simply overlooked.



Laura Frade (on left), educational advisor to the CNTE Teachers Union, speaks on the importance of including disabled children in regular schools.

The fact that disability rights initiatives have mostly been spearheaded by the privileged class is indisputable not only in Mexico, but in many countries, rich and poor. Even programs organized by disabled persons themselves are characteristically launched and led by those in positions of affluence and social prestige.

Likewise, the public works of “reaching out to the disabled” has often been used by politicians to promote the image of government benevolence. An example in Mexico is DIF (Integrated Family Development), which caters to children with special needs. At all levels, from national to local, the directors of DIF are always the First Lady: the wife of the president or governor.

Similarly, most of the non-government organizations (NGOs)—such as those dedicated to children with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and other disabilities—have almost invariably been started and run by better-off families who happened to have children with such disabilities. By contrast, as Laura Frade pointed out, PROJIMO—the community rehabilitation program I work with in rural Sinaloa—has broken new ground in Mexico. She makes the point that “Not only is PROJIMO run and staffed by disabled persons themselves, but by disabled persons whose roots are in the poor working class.”

For this reason, Laura told me, she and her colleagues invited me (David Werner) to speak at the *Congreso de Educación y Cultura*. My challenge, she explained, was to present—from a left-wing popular perspective—the case for integrating disabled children into the normal schools.

“Are you sure that having me speak on this hotly contended issue is a good idea?” I asked Laura. It seemed to me, as a Gringo, I would automatically be suspect. After all, I’d be addressing a left-wing union in the belligerent state of Michoacan. I was a citizen of Gringolandia, the Superpower run by George W, whose violations of international law and human rights had garnered contempt worldwide.

But Laura reassured me. Many in the audience, she said, already would know me from my book *Donde No Hay Doctor (Where There Is No Doctor)*, which the Education Ministry had placed in the “community libraries” of every village with a population under 2,500.

“Your books make it clear you side with the working people,” she said. “That’s why they’ll listen to you when you speak for the inclusion of disabled children.” I hoped she was right.

Surprise! The keynote address.

What Laura didn’t tell me—because she didn’t realize it herself until the last minute—was that the *Congreso* organizers had decided to have me present the opening, keynote address. I learned this only the night before. Frantically I worked until 2:00 AM pulling together a suitable slide presentation.



David Werner with schoolgirls at the Congress

The Congress turned out to be a far larger event than I had imagined, with more than 2000 participants. In an attempt to give voice to those persons most affected by the proposed “educational reform,” the organizers had summoned representatives from each of Michoacan’s 113 municipalities, including:

- the municipal president
- a director of a representative school
- one or more primary or secondary school teachers
- a student from secondary school or upper grade of primary school
- representative parents

In addition to those from Michoacan, teachers and educators from the other left-leaning states of southern Mexico were also invited to the *Congreso*: namely from Chiapas, Oaxaca, Zacatecas, and Guerrero.

To provide an “international perspective” in the conference, key speakers were invited from the newly left-leaning governments of Latin America, notably from Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador, as well as Argentina. Cuba was represented by

the Cuban Ambassador to Mexico. A leading educator from Argentina was also invited.

With such a large and motley gathering, the logistics of the *Congreso* were a bit chaotic. Tension was increased by the presence of leaders from both the SNTE and CNTE, who had strongly conflicting views and were more accustomed to commanding than listening. The organizers of the event were worried that violence might break out.

Recent history of confrontation and violence.

In Mexico the teachers unions—especially the CNTE—have long had a reputation for taking militant stands for their rights. From August through the end of 2006, in the neighboring state of Oaxaca, the Teachers Union orchestrated a protest for higher wages and better working conditions. The police responded with violence. The resulting standoff escalated until buses were burned and a number of people—including an American journalist—were killed.

Likewise in Michoacan things also turned violent. Just two weeks before our *Congreso* in Morelia, a nationwide conference was held at the same State Conference Center to resolve grievances concerning the federal government’s *Seguro Social* program. (*Seguro Social* in Mexico is the national health insurance program which covers the economically better-off while neglecting those with the greatest needs.) In the fall of 2006 the conservative Fox government had appointed new chiefs to the national *Seguro Social* Ministry. Opposing these appointments, the Social Security Workers Union had gone on strike. A national meeting was called at the huge Morelia Conference Center to reach a common agreement. But on the second day, the CNTE (the independent leftist teachers union) had shown up in support of the *Sindicato de Seguro Social*. Truckloads of men armed with rocks and clubs poured into the conference center, breaking windows and busting up furniture. The *Policia Preventiva* intervened, and things got messy. The meeting was suspended and nothing was resolved.

Fortunately, no one had told me about this recent upheaval in the same Conference Center until after I spoke. So although I sensed an air of nervous tension, I wasn’t particularly worried.

“The role of schools and teachers in building a Society For All”

My presentation was titled “*El Papel de las Escuelas y los Maestros en una Sociedad para Todos*” (The Role of Schools and Schoolteachers in building a Society For All).

In view of the dispute about mainstreaming, I tried to address both sides. I started by agreeing with the critics, that inclusion of handicapped children in overcrowded classrooms, without adequate preparation and assistance for teachers, can be unfair to both the teachers and children.



Indian villagers look for alternatives to oppressive overcrowded schools for their disabled children.

I gave an example from India where villagers lamented the law requiring them to send their disabled children to normal schools. Most parents felt that interaction with other children was important, but they deplored the inflexible way it was approached. They insisted that the heavy-handed manner of teaching, in stifling classrooms packed with 40 to 50 children, was little short of torture, especially for the slow learners. Under such circumstances, mandatory mainstreaming was a recipe for disaster.

I gave some examples of more positive alternatives—from a left-wing perspective. The solution, I suggested, was not to exclude or marginalize disadvantaged children, but to improve the learning environment for all children. The challenge was to better equip the schools and the teachers so they could respond more constructively and humanely to the needs and possibilities of all children.

I addressed the need to transform schooling in ways in that could help transform society. An approach to learning is needed that better prepares children, as they grow, to collectively build a society where everyone has equal rights

and equal opportunities. To this end, I suggested, we must look for ways to make education more relevant to the lives and circumstances of those children in greatest need. If our goal is to build a fairer, more inclusive society, we need to use teaching methods that encourage children to become compassionate agents of change. To this end, we need to invite children to think for themselves, make their own observations, analyze their needs, and work together in ways that benefit all and exclude no one.

Drawing on Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I compared the role of conventional education, where schooling functions as obedience training and social control, to the potential of “education for liberation,” where children learn to work together to solve their common problems and improve the situation collectively.

To help prepare children to build a fairer, more inclusive culture, a good way to start, I suggested, would be by helping them explore ways to welcome and assist their disabled or otherwise disadvantaged schoolmates. The mainstreaming of disabled children, if approached creatively, could contribute to preparing children as agents of change in the construction of a healthier, kinder, more egalitarian society.

Child-to-Child

The most common objection to mainstreaming children with special needs is that it requires more time and energy of teachers who are already overburdened. Additional help is needed in the classroom—and that costs money, which in poor countries is often hard to come by.

However there are many ways to meet these needs. A little creativity can go a long way. To illustrate this, I spoke of the Child-to-Child approach, and gave examples. Through Child-to-Child, school-aged children learn ways to protect the health and enhance the development of their younger brothers and sisters, or any children who have special needs. Developed for the International Year of the Child in 1979, Child-to-Child activities are now introduced in schools and community health programs in over 80 countries.

The rationale for Child-to-Child is that in many poor families both parents have to work outside the home from dawn to dark to meet the family's basic needs. In these cases, the primary “child minders” (those who spend most time caring for the youngest children) are their older brothers and sisters. So if the somewhat older children can learn ways to protect the health of the younger ones, they can make a big difference in their well-being and even survival. Different Child-to-Child activities focus on such common problems as “Diarrhea and Dehydration,” “Getting Enough to Eat,” and “Prevention of Accidents.”

In many countries Child-to-Child has been introduced simply to impart useful knowledge and skills to children in a fun way. In Latin America, however, the methodology has been used to help make schooling more relevant to the lives and needs of children, especially those whose needs are greatest. It is a “liberating” approach to learning insofar as it tries to draw ideas out of children's minds rather than just putting them in. It uses a problem-solving process of “discovery-based learning.” Children are encouraged to make their own observations, draw their own conclusions, and then take collective action to improve their situation. I pointed out that this sort of “education for change” is compatible with a praxis of socialism or “social democracy” that promotes the inclusion, well-being, and participation of all.

With this focus on “inclusion of all,” Child-to-Child introduces activities where pupils learn to befriend and include disabled children, both at school and in the community.



In Sinaloa, Mexico, children use role plays to learn about disability. Here the girl asks Pedro to open a jar for her, saying, “Because you use crutches, you have such strong hands.” And he opens it easily.

PROJIMO, the Community Based Rehabilitation program I am involved with in Sinaloa, has been actively introducing this process into the village schools. As an example, I presented the story of Jesus, a boy with spina bifida and visual impairment. At first Jesus had been eager to attend a normal school. But soon he got discouraged. When he asked the teacher what was written on the blackboard, she scolded him for interrupting the class. All the students laughed at him. He was so miserable he wanted to drop out of school. But then a Child-to-Child activity was facilitated in his classroom. Simulation games—such as blindfolding the pupils’ eyes—helped sensitize them to Jesus’ difficulties. The pupils were encouraged to think of ways they could help Jesus learn, in spite of his trouble with vision. They came up with lots of ideas: A pupil could sit next to Jesus and whisper in his ear what was written on the blackboard. The class could organize a raffle to buy Jesus a small tape recorder. That way they could record the lessons from his book so he could study by listening.

Through such examples, I tried to communicate to the teachers in the audience that by involving their pupils imaginatively in a problem-solving process, they could discover innovative ways of including disabled children. Rather than disturbing the learning of others, the inclusion of disabled children in the classroom could expedite the learning of all in a participatory and liberating way.

Teachers’ response

With a crowd as large and mixed as that in the *Congreso*, it was hard to read how people received my suggestions. Little time had been allotted for questions. During the break, however, I was surprised how many people, especially teachers, wanted to know more about Child-to-Child and inclusive education. I began to sense that the resistance to mainstreaming came more from the *jefes* (bosses) of the teachers union than from the teachers themselves. The organizers of the *Congreso* liked my presentation sufficiently they asked me to repeat it the following day to a group of teachers from neighboring states who had been unable to attend the first day’s plenary for lack of space in the meeting hall.

During the *Congreso* I was glad to see that so many speakers, especially those from other countries, were supportive of inclusive education, and of a “liberating educational paradigm” that could help prepare students as



The speaker from Brazil spoke of efforts to introduce Paulo Freire’s awareness-raising “education for change” methods into the classroom.

thinkers and actors in the building of a new society. The speaker from Brazil expounded on the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, in which teachers and students look for answers to still unsolved questions together. The speakers from Venezuela and Bolivia told how, under the leadership of their new presidents who give priority to the needs of the poor majority, the budgets on education were doubled, from around 6% to 12% of the GNP.

By contrast, it was noted that in Mexico—although under Vicente Fox the education budget was raised from 6% to 8%—the current budget still falls far short of meeting the enormous educational need. Aggravating the situation even more, the incoming conservative President Felipe Calderon proposed to slash the education budget back to 6%. His reason is that he considers the institutions of higher education subversive, especially the UNAM (Autonomous University in Mexico City), where he said leftist professors converted students into rabble-rousers. Calderon’s proposal, however, has incurred such an outcry from progressives that it is doubtful his cutback on education will succeed.



The Cuban Ambassador challenged the other countries to invest more in education.

By far the most eloquent speaker at the Congreso was the Cuban Ambassador, Sixto Jimenez. Dr. Jimenez pointed out that Cuba—despite severe economic difficulties caused by the US Embargo—has completely free education for virtually 100% of its children and youth, including disabled children. A strong effort is made to integrate disabled children into ordinary schools, with all the necessary support, so that learning can be adjusted to each special child’s possibilities. According to the Cuban Ambassador, the reason many countries spend so little on education is not because of insufficient resources, but rather the lack of political will. Many countries spend more on their military than on education and health care combined. A small fraction of the colossal global expenditure on weapons and war could provide quality education, health care, and adequate nutrition for every child on earth. To invest in our children is to invest in the future of humanity and the planet.

Schoolchildren’s response

Potentially one of the most promising features of the *Congreso* was the attempt made by the organizers—representing both the state and the teachers union—to give a voice to all concerned parties: not just teachers but also parents and the students themselves. To spark participation, separate breakout sessions were held—one for parents, one for pupils—where each could air their concerns and suggestions for educational reform.

I decided to attend the schoolchildren’s session. My plan was to be a silent observer. But when I arrived at the conference room—which was packed with school kids from 113 municipalities—I was informed I was to give an opening presentation. No one had bothered to tell me ahead of time! So I had to ad lib—which was just as well.

The atmosphere of the lecture theater was not one to promote a sense of equality and open-ended discussion. A high wooden platform overlooked the audience, on which the moderator, another speaker, and I were seated behind a long table, armed with microphones. Below us in long straight lines of metal seats, a motley array of high school students, with a few upper primary school pupils mixed in, stared awkwardly up at us.

The Moderator, a stern, heavysset fellow, called the meeting to order. The purpose of this meeting, he stated, was to give students

a chance to voice their opinions. *How could their schooling be improved? What did they think of the proposals put forward during the Congreso?*

Barking through a microphone, the Moderator instructed the students how they were expected to perform. As he spoke, the kids slouched deeper into their chairs. Their young faces drifted into a resigned here-we-go-again look. Clearly they were well trained: the cream of the crop. The Moderator went down the list of just what was expected from the students and asked them if they agreed. Unanimously they answered, “*Sí*.” Next he enumerated the “no-nos”—things like speaking without being called on. “You’re not going to do any of these things, are you?” he prompted. And all the students chorused, “*Nooo*.”

Then the Moderator turned the floor over to me. I looked out at the sea of unexpectant faces. To catch their attention, I said, “How many of you see this meeting as dangerous?” The students looked puzzled.

“There’s always a danger,” I suggested, “when a group of young people all answer in chorus ‘*Sí*’ and ‘*No*,’ just as you’re expected to by us adults. That way the old, unfair ways of doing things will never change.”

The students—those who were listening—sat up straighter.

“We adults have screwed up,” I continued. “All over the world the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. While part of humanity dies from not getting enough to eat, another part dies from consuming too much.”

The pupils stared at me.

“It will be your job to build a fairer, more inclusive society than we old folks have managed to do,” I challenged them. “But to do so you need to think for yourselves and speak your own minds. Not just spit back the ‘right’ answers.”

I asked the students what they thought about their current schooling. Did it prepare them to help build a healthier society? How much of their book-learning was relevant to the most urgent needs of their families and communities? How could their education become more useful in terms of their biggest problems and necessities?



David Werner challenges pupils at the Congreso to become agents of change in building a fairer, more inclusive world.

By now I had their attention. But they still looked at me for the magic answers. I told them that neither I nor anyone else had the “right” answers to our biggest problems. We had to look for the solutions together. “Any suggestions?” I asked them.

At first the children just shuffled and looked nervous. Then one girl stood up to speak. But at once the Moderator told her to sit down. Time for discussion would come after all speakers had finished their presentations.

I suggested to the Moderator that we give the students a chance to respond here and now, in an open dialog. They shouted their agreement. The whole dynamic of the meeting changed. Dozens of students waved their hands to be heard. Before long a flood of frustrations, complaints, and ideas poured forth. I hand it to the Moderator that he adapted fairly gracefully to the will of the majority.

Among other concerns, the students wanted to discuss the question of including disabled children in their classrooms. They’d heard me speak at the opening plenary about Child-to-Child, and were full of questions and views, mostly positive. What could they do to help? I gave examples and they had good suggestions of their own. Many were eager to get involved in such activities. Overall, they seemed very much in favor of including disabled children in their classrooms—or at least those children who could benefit from the experience.

After a somewhat chaotic *lluvia de ideas* (rainstorm of ideas) the students broke up into a dozen small groups to discuss their observations and come up with a list of proposals. This was followed by a concluding

plenary. A spokesperson from each group read his or her group’s proposals and they were discussed. The final proposals would then be included in the definitive Congress Report, which would serve as a guideline for “educational reform” at the state level.

I enjoyed this session with the students immensely, but it left me with loads of homework! During our rather chaotic session, they were full of all kinds of queries, many about the inclusion of children who are “different,” and many about how to

make schooling more relevant to their own health and basic needs. Attempting to rein in their enthusiasm and make things more disciplined, the Moderator insisted the youngsters write down their questions. But even so, the questions kept pouring in. When time had long since run out, the Moderator proposed that I answer the remaining questions by email. Great idea! ... provided ...

“How many of you have access to email or a cybercafé?” I asked. Only a dozen hands went up. The last thing I wanted was to exclude the have-nots. So an agreement was reached. I email my responses to the Moderator. He prints them and mails them to all those students without email access. It is making for some interesting correspondence.

Invitation to Return

At the close of the *Congreso* I asked the chief organizer if he thought it was a success. With a sigh, he said “At least we survived!” He admitted the planners had worried things might turn violent. Tension between the two unions (the SNTE and the CNTE), and between them and the government, had been running high. Throughout the conference, many people were on edge. There had been occasional outbursts of hooting by different factions when certain speakers took a position counter to theirs. But for the most part things had proceeded peacefully.

The organizers were relieved. This Congress had been the first large event in which the Governor and heads of the respective teachers unions had met on the same floor—and all in all, things had gone peacefully. Perhaps not much had been resolved. But at least the different groups were beginning to talk and even to listen. Major changes don’t happen over night. It was a start.

As for the outcomes of the Congress, some interesting possibilities are in the air. There was a lot of interest by both students and teachers in the possibilities of Child-to-Child. They see this as a practical, learning-by-doing approach to make schooling more relevant to the needs of schoolchildren and their families, especially those whose needs are especially great.

The idea of enabling pupils to assist with the inclusion and skills-learning of disabled children proved especially appealing. Also there was great interest in helping schoolchildren play more of a role in the health and devel-

opment of their younger brothers and sisters. At the close of the *Congreso*, the Technical Advisor for Education in the State of Michoacan asked me if I would consider returning as a consultant, to share more ideas about Child-to-Child as part of an enabling, discovery-based learning approach within the Educational Reform Initiative of the state public school system. I tentatively agreed.

I also suggested the planning branch of the ministry invite Martín Reyes as a facilitator of Child-to-Child. Martín first became involved with Child-to-Child activities in the 1970s when he was an adolescent health

worker in the village of Ajoya, Sinaloa, where Project Piaxtla, the villager-run health program did a lot of the original research and trials of Child-to-Child. Later he won an Ashoka “social entrepreneur” fellowship to introduce the empowering concept of Child-to-Child throughout Latin America. Although Martín has little formal education, he is a gifted educator. Whenever he facilitates a Child-to-Child workshop for teachers or health workers, he insists that a group of children are central to the process. That way the adults and children learn to respect and learn from each other. And that, to Martín, is what education is all about.

Integration of Disabled Children, Bit by Bit

The *Congreso Popular* in Michoacan may have improved the prospects of mainstreaming disabled children into the public schools. But it may be a long time before this becomes a widely accepted policy.

In the meantime, however, things are unobtrusively moving forward. A number of initiatives are underway in certain neighborhoods and villages to integrate disabled children into the normal schools.

One pioneer of these initiatives is Dolores Vicencio, a physiatrist who runs a modest Community Based Rehabilitation program in the indigenous communities near Lake Patzcuaro, in the highlands of Michoacan.

Dolores became enamored with the idea of Community Based Rehab when, over 20 years ago, she first visited PROJIMO, the disabled-villager-run program in the state of Sinaloa.

Dolores has helped a variety of disabled children enter and gain acceptance in the village schools. To do this has required overcoming many obstacles, ranging from convincing the fearful parents, working out transportation needs, to making schools wheelchair accessible, to winning cooperation of principals and teachers, and raising students’ awareness so that they welcome and include the disabled child. In this latter, Dolores has made good use of Child-to-Child activities.

Magali goes to school—story and photos from Dolores Vicencio

Magali, now 10 years old, is in the 4th grade in primary school. When she was younger she very much wanted to go to school—but there were big obstacles.



With help from Dolores and Liliane Fonds in Holland, she was able to get a wheelchair—made by PROJIMO—with wide wheels adapted for rough terrain.



However, to get into the school there was a big flight of steps.

Local masons built a ramp so Magali can go up the steps. The ramp is quite steep, but there are plenty of people to help her.



Then a better answer was found. On one side of the school is a brick wall with a road outside it.



The villagers helped knock a hole in the wall and put in a doorway. So now Magali can get into the school without having to go up the steps or a steep ramp.

Magali's story, continued

At last Magali's school is wheelchair accessible. But there are still many other obstacles to overcome:



Some children don't understand Magali's difficulties and don't include her in their games. At times they tease her.



A stick tied to her leg gives this girl a pretend disability.



By playing different "simulation games" the children begin to appreciate a bit of what it's like to have a disability.



Now that they understand Magali better, they can look for ways to include the disabled girl in their games.



Another problem is the long steep rocky dirt road from Magali's home to the school.

Fortunately, now that her classmates have made friends with her, they help Magali up the steepest roughest part.

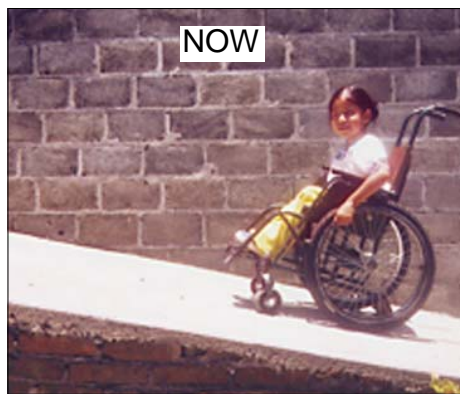


They even experimented with tying poles to her wheelchair so that more children could help transport her at the same time.



BEFORE

Still another problem was that Magali's home had steps that made it hard for her to get into and out of the house.



NOW

So with help from the family and community they built a ramp so the girl can get in and out of her home more easily.



FULL INCLUSION

Now that many of the physical and social barriers are resolved, Magali is able to go to school and take part in activities with others as an equal.

“Museo de la Basura” (Garbage Museum) in Morelia

Making educational toys and ingenious teaching aids by recycling refuse

After my presentation at the *Congreso* in Michoacan, a swarthy heavysset man pushed his way through the crowd and introduced himself to me as Maestro (teacher) Jose Herrera Marquez. Bubbling with enthusiasm, he said he was my “soul mate.” He loved my books on community health and rehabilitation, he explained, because they not only “cut through the garbage” but also put it to use—by giving people ideas about how to use local resources and waste materials to make assistive devices and other equipment. (Our book *Nothing About Us Without Us* has chapters on making assistive equipment out of old tires, old cardboard boxes, and even mud.)

Maestro Jose looks and acts more like a backwoods farmer than a schoolteacher. Yet he has a degree in Special Education and works with the Morelia Department of Education as a roving Pied Piper, visiting schools and holding workshops on the creation of educational toys and learning games out of garbage—especially old plastic containers and disposable paper plates and cups. He has a display of his innovative creations under a series of makeshift tarps in a fenced in yard he calls the “*Museo de Basura*” (Museum of Garbage). The array of colorful extravaganza—including serpentine gizmos over 2 meters tall—give the visitor a sense of an extraterrestrial Fantasia.



“GARBAGE MUSEUM: SCHOOL OF RECYCLING—WHERE TRASH STOPS BEING SO” says the sign held by Jose Herrera in his workshop. The walls of the shop are covered with crafts and decorative “plastic arts” made from such things as paper plates, plastic cups, and cardboard egg-boxes.



The museum display fills a yard walled in by colorful soft-drink crates. On this table are a variety of birds, animals, and bugs made from bits of wire, Popsicle sticks, and tin cans. Two plastic juice bottles are joined and filled with sand to form an hourglass. →



Paper plates, egg cartons, and foam plastic cups transform into elegant and bizarre sculptures, which when painted resemble fine clay pottery.

Educational toys and learning games made from throw-away items

With the help of teachers and students in the schools in which he conducts workshops, Jose Herrera has come up with a great variety of educational toys and learning games made from throw-away items, including paper plates, bowls and cups.

For children who “hate math” or are slow learners, many of these playthings turn learning into a game that provides practice in a playful way. They can play alone or in groups, and find out their scores adding up the numbers.



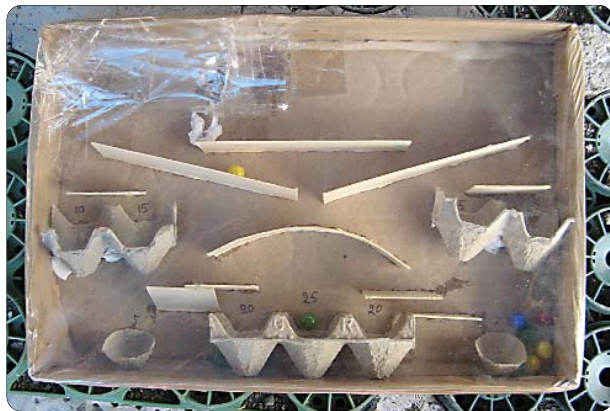
Many of the games, made by carefully cutting and gluing paper plates and bowls, work similar to a roulette wheel, using one or more marbles.



The players spin or swirl the wheel. The marbles then fall into slots with different numbers. This wheel has 3 marbles.



The games are covered with a clear plastic sheet to prevent loss of marbles.



This game challenges the child holding the board to roll the marbles into the cups at bottom. The cups with highest numbers are hardest to land in.



One of the cleverest games is a long snake made of plastic Coke bottles that funnel into one another. Marbles are dropped into the snake's mouth and bump and bounce down until they shoot out the tail end and drop into a tray with cups of different colors and numbers.

Again it makes counting and arithmetic fun!



This game helps children learn how to read Roman numerals—by rolling marbles into the numbered pits.



The best part of these toys is that they are as much fun to make as to play and learn with. Moreover, they recycle waste and cost nothing!

Choosing our Future: A Conversation

by Jason Weston

Will we survive?

The threats to our survival—including global warming, nuclear proliferation and military conflicts, poverty, and environmental decline—are well known and well documented. What is surprising is humanity's completely inadequate response to these eminent dangers. The great survival strategy of our species is a large brain that can anticipate danger and take corrective action to avoid that danger. Yet, in the face of multiple global catastrophes, we seem intent upon accelerating our pace toward the looming dangers. It is clear that the political and economic structures and practices that are currently in place are failing utterly.

Einstein said that *"The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them."* The complete failure of our current political and economic systems to ensure the very survival of our species (and countless others) is rooted in the fact that they were created at an earlier era under different circumstances. Consequently we find ourselves trying to solve our global problems at the same level of thinking that created them. Clearly if we are to avert a catastrophe this large brain with which we have been endowed must begin to generate some new ways of thinking.

The issues that confront us seem too big for an individual to change, and too depressing to fully embrace. Consequently it is tempting to simply try to put the endless wars, terrible poverty, economic perils and ecological catastrophes out of our minds. So we try to get on with our daily lives as best we can. We go about our usual activities with our work, and our families and friends, and try not to think about the world's major issues. This pattern of avoidance is a temptation to which most of us succumb to one degree or another.

The very nature of global problems, coupled with the absence of a clear path for working on them, disempowers individuals from participating in resolving them, leaving people discouraged and apathetic.

What then, are we to do?

The world's major problems all stem from the collective consciousness of human beings. Just as an individual's beliefs and values determine the course of her or his life, so our collective values and beliefs determine the course of world events. If we think overpopulation is not a problem we will fail to choose smaller families, and fail to institute policies that discourage overpopulation. If we all think war is inevitable, we will continue to participate in violence, and there will continue to be wars. What's missing is a clear methodology and framework for working together to resolve these interrelated problems, with some confidence that the work invested will really make a difference.

As the source of our difficulty is collective, so must the solution be collective. The key is conversation. No one person or group has all the knowledge or ideas that are needed, or the capacity to either design or implement the needed solutions. We must

open our minds and begin to think in entirely new ways. We must share our thoughts with each other in ways that transcend the traditional categories of "right" and "left." We must step outside our traditional patterns of thought, dialog, and refusal to engage in dialog. Only then will we have the capacity to design economic and political systems that are adequate to the contemporary challenges we face—humanized systems that will ensure that the material and health needs of all people are met, that will provide education to all children based on their needs and natural interests, that will facilitate a lasting peace, and that will enable the natural world upon which all life depends to thrive.

But whom can we trust with such a task?

I propose a conversation in which **all people** are encouraged and enabled to participate. We will be able to move beyond the hopelessness, frustration and apathy that currently paralyze so many of us and, to the degree we are able to facilitate such open-ended dialog, we will energize ourselves and each other with vitality and hope as we work collectively to create a common vision, and put forth the effort to realize that vision.

The first part of this conversation will need to focus on how we, individual human beings, are to transform our own lives and priorities to be in alignment with the requirements for the long-term survival of our species: a sort of intentional, rapid, evolution of human consciousness in which we supplant our present 'you or me' orientation for a more life-serving 'you and me' perspective. This conversation will obviously need to include collectively identifying what those requirements are.

The second part of the conversation will focus on how we can create healthful and life supporting political and economic structures. A key question in this regard will be how to design and implement such structures without creating chaos and destruction along the way. It may be that transforming existing structures is the best route, or it might be that new structures need to be created, and phased in in some way. These are questions we all need to grapple with together. What I'm interested in at this point is encouraging this kind of conversation. It is through such conversation that we will be able to choose our shared future.

I want to close by inviting you, the reader, to begin having this conversation now. Eventually the conversation may move to the media, and especially the Internet, but for now, perhaps we can begin by talking with those closest to us, and to each other. As Booker T. Washington said, when faced with a seemingly overwhelming challenge, *"Cast down your buckets where you are."*

Choosing our Future is the working title of a forthcoming book by Jason Weston.

Note: Our Politics of Health web site (www.politicsofhealth.org) has a forum where you can also share your ideas and concerns. Please check it out and get involved.

HEALTHWRIGHTS

Workgroup for People's Health and Rights

Tel: (650) 325-7500 Fax: (650) 325-1080 email: info@healthwrights.org

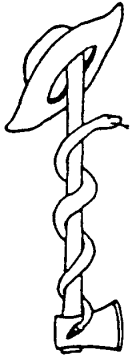
NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Palo Alto, CA
Permit No. 419

P.O. Box 1344
Palo Alto CA 94302
USA

Please visit our World Wide Web site at:
www.healthwrights.org
Also visit our new Politics of Health
Knowledge Network: www.politicsofhealth.org

RETURN SERVICE
REQUESTED

SUBSCRIPTION NEED RENEWAL?
Please check your mailing label.



Newsletter from the Sierra Madre #58

April 2007

HealthWrights

Board of Directors

Trude Bock
Roberto Fajardo
Barry Goldensohn
Bruce Hobson
Jim Hunter
Donald Laub
Eve Malo
Myra Polinger
Leopoldo Ribota
David Werner
Jason Weston
Efraín Zamora

International Advisory Board

Allison Akana – United States
Dwight Clark – Volunteers in Asia
David Sanders – South Africa
Mira Shiva – India
Michael Tan – Philippines
María Zúniga– Nicaragua



Using old paper plates and other throw-away items, Jose Herrera makes games, crafts, and educational toys for children with developmental delay ... but *all children love them because they're so much fun!* Visit Jose's fantastic "Museum of Garbage," on pages 9 & 10 of this newsletter.

CONTENTS

Page

<i>The Paradoxes of Educational Reform in Michoacan</i>	1
<i>The role of schools and teachers in building a Society For All</i>	4
<i>Child-to-Child</i>	4
<i>Integration of Disabled Children</i>	7
<i>"Museo de la Basura" (Garbage Museum) in Morelia</i>	9
<i>Choosing our Future</i>	11

This issue of **Newsletter from the Sierra Madre** was created by:

David Werner — Writing, photos, drawings
Jason Weston — Writing and Editing
Juan Hurtido — photos, Morelia Congress
Jim Hunter—Editing
Trude Bock — Proofreading
Dana Gundling — Proofreading

"Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted"

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

Please Note!

If you prefer to receive future newsletters online, please e-mail us at: newsletter@healthwrights.org