"It Takes a Village": Promoting Social and Educational Participation in Rural El Salvador

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Watching impish 6-year-old Diego play, it is hard to imagine how different his opportunities are from those of his twin brother Damian (all names used here are pseudonyms). Growing up in the same house in a small, economically impoverished rural village in El Salvador, both are bright, energetic and funny. But Diego is deaf and services for children with disabilities are limited and hard to access—especially for poor families in rural areas. El Salvador has ratified the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and enacted its own legislation establishing the right to education for this population. However, making that right a reality is difficult, as is the case in many other low-income countries. The numerous barriers include a lack of trained teachers and specialists, limited accessibility in and outside of the community, negative attitudes, under-resourced schools, and lack of effective enforcement mechanisms.

When the time came to enroll her small boys in school, their mother, Rachel, walked with them on a dusty road to a public elementary school about a mile away from their home. She discovered that, while Salvadoran law technically gives Diego the right to attend school, no one at the school had the expertise to work with children who are deaf. Legally, Diego could attend school, but they did not have a teacher who could use sign language or had knowledge of other strategies to communicate with him. If Diego attended the school, he would sit in class unable to fully participate or benefit from what was being taught. The communication barriers would isolate him and make it impossible for him to reach his potential.

The family lives in a small, remote village. A 30-minute walk and 90-minute bus ride is necessary to reach the capital, where most of the services for children with
disabilities are available. A school there teaches sign language as well as other subjects using sign language, and also offers classes for parents so that they can learn to communicate with their children. The family faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles to accessing those services, however. Diego was too young to make such a long trip alone. Like most people in their village, Diego's family survives by subsistence farming—raising corn and beans to eat with the hope of earning a few hundred dollars a year selling the surplus. His father works long days, both in the “milpa” (fields) and in a nearby town where he works selling spare parts. Rachel is busy with the typical activities of life in a Salvadoran village—carrying water, grinding corn to make tortillas and pupusas, walking long distances to the local market, feeding chickens, washing clothes by hand, and taking care of her twin boys. She could not take Diego to one school and his brother to another. The transportation costs for Diego and his mother were beyond their ability to pay.

Answers began to emerge when Diego's parents attended an “encuentro” (meeting) as part of a special project operated by International Partners (IP), a local NGO operating in El Salvador. The project’s goal was to identify individuals with disabilities in rural villages, to investigate barriers to their educational and social participation, and to develop strategies for addressing them. The “encuentro” brought together individuals with disabilities, family members, and professionals working in disability organizations in El Salvador to identify common needs of individuals with disabilities. Diego's family was invited because they participate in a community-based biblioteca (library) in their village that was operated by IP. The biblioteca provided homework support, access to books and computers, as well as enrichment activities ranging from language and math to art and music. Rachel served on the volunteer support committee. Diego and Damian were regulars at the biblioteca; Diego demonstrated an aptitude for computers. However, no one at the biblioteca knew sign language either. To communicate, they relied on a few simple gestures that Diego had developed himself. Without a better way to communicate at school, Diego would never be able to learn and develop as much as his brother.

Such bibliotecas are central to the community-based rehabilitation framework IP adopted for this project. This model, which places the community at the heart of the intervention component, includes several key features:

- Community-wide public awareness campaigns designed to sensitize community members to the rights, capacities, and needs of individuals with disabilities who live in their village
- Training materials focused on disability rights, universal design for learning, positive behavior support, and communication
- “Círculo de Amigos” (Circle of Friends) to organize friends, family, and neighbors to form a social network that supports the individual needs of persons with disabilities and their families and find resources that will enable the Círculo de Amigos to address critical needs.

The goal of the “encuentro” was to discover common unmet needs and identify available services. Diego's parents brought him to the meeting, where his charm and cooperative behavior attracted admiration from everyone. Diego's parents shyly told his story and shared their frustration that their clever and capable son did not have the opportunity for education. They soon became the first participants in the model de-
scribed above. Among the professionals at the “en-<ncuentro” was a sign language interpreter, who volunteered to provide a set of DVDs that would teach the form of sign language used in El Salvador. IP obtained copies and made them available in all of the community bibliotecas they sponsor. Once the family showed their interest by using the DVDs on the computers at the “biblioteca,” they were provided with access to a laptop and a set of DVDs that would allow the whole family to learn at home. The facilitator in his biblioteca attended a workshop offered by IP that focused on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and began using picture symbols to communicate with Diego and his peers about daily activities (e.g., a daily schedule that includes picture symbols).

Next, representatives from IP raised funds for a “beca” (scholarship) to pay for transportation and lunch so that Diego and his mother could go to the school that provided deaf education. In return, Diego’s mother agreed to teach sign language to a facilitator, children in the biblioteca, and interested adults in the community to expand Diego’s ability to communicate in the village. Since Diego and his mother had to leave before dawn, arrangements needed to be made to bring Damian to school and make sure he was cared for before and after school. Neighbors formed a “Circulo de Amigos” to support Diego and his family and volunteered to care for Damian when his mother was with Diego and walk him to school and home again.

Diego’s story is a happy success for him and his family. He, his family, and his community are learning to communicate and he is receiving the basic education that he would have otherwise missed. Community members are proud of themselves for the support they are giving Diego’s family, and they are volunteering to form a “Circulo de Amigos” for other people with disabilities in their community. Diego’s story demonstrates the power of a village to make sure that a child can grow and thrive.

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Resources
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