

STORY

Metza Mea: The story of a beautiful girl



“METZA MEA” is the word the girl just wrote with the wooden alphabet pieces she found in the table. Answering our curiosity, as to understand what it means, she tells us in Spanish: “It is my name”. Mateo Barbarán, her teacher, explains us that it is a Shipibo name that means “beautiful woman”.

We find Metza Mea and Mateo in the single-teacher multigrade school in the community of Calleria after a two-hour trip along the river Ucayali, who lets us penetrate into South America’s big lung, the impressive Amazon.

The girl had never watched television, but has lived a natural disaster and has felt threatened by abandon. Last year the river burst its bands due to the heaviest rains in the last 15 years and left her without home, clothes and temporarily without school. Her family, as well as many others had to leave their community. Like her, hundreds of indigenous amazon children lost between 45 and 60 days of classes. Nevertheless, the commitment of the educational authorities and the technical support of the international cooperation contributed so that almost every child accomplished the goals for the academic year.

“With UNICEF’s technical assistance and the financial support of the Canadian International Development Agency, CIDA, we were able to develop a one of a kind emergency curriculum.

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Capacity and competencies development topics were prioritized as well as a cross sectoral approach towards educational environment. We used the floods as a learning resource and understanding of why natural disasters occur and orient our lessons towards prevention actions” states José Díaz, from the Ucayali Regional Education Directorate.

The enthusiasm shown by Metza Mea and her peers during classes talks about the success of Mateo’s strategies to teach them to read and write in their native Shipibo language. Later on he will introduce them in the learning of Spanish as a second tongue.

Education in their mother tongue results in children with high self-esteem, with cultural identity and this is visible in the way children express themselves and in their academic achievements. Doing the contrary is leading students and educational system into failure. We were told this by two facilitators from the Regional Government of Ucayali Public Investment Project when they realized we were visiting Calleria school. They feel worried about the lack of teachers able to assume the challenge of intercultural bilingual education in the region. And they are right to be worried. In Ucayali, there are around 45,000 children that talk more than 14 languages different than Spanish and only 450 bilingual teachers.

Mateo is part of this small group. He is in charge of girls and boys from primary school. *“Sometimes parents do not want me to teach in Shipibo, as they believe that it is much better for their children to learn Spanish fast. But when they see that their children are able to learn much faster in their mother tongue they stop worrying”,* Mateo refers.

We remember Angela Bardales, Calleria facilitator, words: *“materials used in classroom have to be produced taking into account the community sensitivity, their views, giving them relevance”* when we see Metza Mea and her friends enjoying the lecture of a story about the yellow world of the animals.

The production of materials, like the story we are engaged this morning, has been developed with the support of CIDA and UNICEF PERU. *“We have organized working groups in which wise people from the communities also participate. With the technical advice of specialists pedagogical materials are produced in the community language and each time project facilitators come to visit they check if we are using them adequately”* the teacher comments.

“I am inside a shell, when it breaks I come out and my colour is yellow, who am I?” Is the riddle Mateo brings up. A couple of seconds later, children voices, Metza Mea among them, answer one louder than the other: *“a chick, a chick”*.

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We must get going now. We leave thinking that probably within some years the small beautiful woman and her peers will break the shell, and get out of Calleria to become the new bilingual teachers the Ucayali region demands.

[Spanish version](#)

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