



QUALITY EDUCATION

As community preschools help children do better in school, informal education centres give dropouts a second chance.

In the small, red brick Anglican church, nearly 100 children aged three to five years laugh, jump and dance under the watchful eyes of child-care workers. For the children, it is not a church – many of them are not Protestant – but rather a child centre, a community preschool.

Under the supervision of educators, children from the working-class neighbourhood of Betty in Kipushi, Katanga, have fun as they learn their first letters. Pre-kindergarten plays a fundamental role in early childhood development, allowing children to improve their linguistic abilities and boosting their chances of succeeding in elementary school.

Prudence Mwaluke Tshala has noticed that her five-year-old daughter has been making progress ever since she enrolled her in the daycare. “She speaks Swahili better than before,” she says. “She even speaks a little French. She tells me about her day. When she stayed home, she didn’t speak to me like that.”

Unfortunately, not all small children are enrolled in preschools like this one. Parents who wish to send their children there must pay 200 Congolese francs (40 U.S. cents) per child each month. For the poorest of the poor, this is a considerable sum. But it is a sacrifice that many families are willing to make.

Anastasié Sompó, vegetable vendor and mother of eight, did not hesitate to enrol her youngest daughter, who is three years old. "At home, the children don't have much to do," she says, "and it's risky if I leave them alone." One of her friends, Danièle Kashoba, sends her three-year-old son to this community daycare, which uses educational material provided by UNICEF. She says that the boy wakes up every morning saying, "Hurry, Mom, I have to go to school!"

Children who attend preschool have better chances of succeeding in primary school. At the neighbouring elementary school, which has been refurbished by UNICEF, principal Adolphe Kaluwe sees the benefits of daycare every day. He says that children who attend preschool are more self-confident when they reach kindergarten. They are not afraid of their teachers, they express themselves more easily, they can count and they know some letters. These children also have a better chance of completing elementary school. Early childhood education is a good way of making sure that pupils do not repeat a year or drop

out, a common problem in the schools of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the playground of this unusual school, children welcome visitors by singing, "You are welcome here! We greet you with joy! Make yourselves at home!" More than 400 boys and girls attend this informal education centre in Kisenso, a community plagued by extreme poverty on the outskirts of Kinshasa.

The school is modest. Plastic sheeting provided by UNICEF serves as a roof, and a few boards serve as walls. "This school is for vulnerable children," explains Félicité Mbalama, the former teacher who is now in charge of an association known as Bondeko ("Love Your Neighbour" in Lingala). "We teach orphans and impoverished children."

The goal of this remedial education centre, inaugurated in 2001, is to give children who were not able to complete elementary school a second chance. If these school children, aged nine to 17, receive their elementary school

graduation certificate, they can then attend secondary school or enrol in a vocational training programme.

The school is practically free. School administration asks parents to pay the equivalent of a beer, 400 Congolese francs (80 U.S. cents) per child each week. In such a poor neighbourhood, the sum is substantial. Only one out of four families pays regularly. But this revenue allows educators, who do not receive their Ministry of Social Affairs salary regularly, to survive. Although they are unpaid, they say they still prefer to stay with their pupils. Why? "Because we pity the children," answers one of the teachers, Raphaël Kibulu Malu.

In three years, these students complete the equivalent of six years in the formal school system. Discipline is strict, and the teaching staff insists on order and punctuality. But nobody is ever expelled. "We never ask children to leave," says Félicité Mbalama. "It's not allowed."

The classes are huge – about 65 students per teacher – but few children drop out along the way. Almost all of the students pass the final exams and

are admitted to secondary school. Unfortunately, many lack the financial resources to pursue secondary education.

But nine-year-old Dorcas Konde Landu dreams of completing secondary school and becoming a nurse, "to take care of children," she specifies. She says that she likes the informal education centre more than the regular school she used to attend. "The teachers were absent too often," she says.

One of her classmates, Régine Kimkue Lubala, has not spent much time in regular school. At 15, she still has not received her elementary school graduation certificate. Her father is unemployed. But her mother, who sells vegetables at the nearby market, encourages her to keep at it. "My mother says that school is important for me to become a grown-up," she says. Régine hopes to complete elementary school so she can enrol in a sewing course in a skills training centre.

