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# Valuing Brazilian Youth: IDRA's Coca Cola Valued Youth Program in Latin America

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**V**alorização do Jovem: that's how you say 'Valued Youth' in Portuguese. It was one of the first things that the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) had to learn when it introduced its Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program to Brazil eight years ago. IDRA's program had just celebrated 15 years as a research-based, exemplary model for helping students stay in school in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Puerto Rico. Now there was an opportunity to bring it to Brazil.

But first things first...

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization with a vision for schools that work for all children. It partnered with Coca-Cola in 1984 and began a dropout prevention program just as it was conducting the first comprehensive study of school dropouts in Texas. Its annual studies since then have shown that over the last 23 years, more than 2.6 million students have left school before graduating high school.

IDRA believes that the reason so many schools have failed to reduce dropout rates is that people have been blaming the students – claiming that their soul, their mind, their heart, or their community environment is unhealthy – rather than addressing the changes that professionals need to bring about to keep children in school.

## **The Idea**

Twenty-three years ago, a group of teenagers walked out of their high school and headed across the street to tutor little children. This marked the beginning of a program in San Antonio, Texas that would change the lives of thousands of people, and that would ultimately change schools.

It was inconceivable to many adults that these students had anything of value to offer. They were poor and came from minority communities; some spoke little English, had failed some classes and truanted from many others. They got into trouble more than other kids. These were the ones who elementary school teachers were glad to see leaving their classrooms and moving on to middle school. But they were never expected to graduate.

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Yet there were some adults who saw their inherent value and the contributions they could make and who were committed to helping others see it too.

Today, almost half a million families and educators across the United States and elsewhere have been positively impacted by the IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. While they are in the program, 98 per cent of the peer tutors stay in school: a remarkable statistic given dropout rates that reach 33 per cent for all students and 50 per cent for Hispanic students.

The idea behind the program is simple and may seem a bit unusual at first. IDRA works with schools to identify students who are considered at risk of dropping out of school and helps them become tutors of younger students. A key belief of the program is that all children are valuable; none are expendable.

Participating peer tutors have been the ones who traditionally *received* help. Never have they been asked to *provide* it. These were the 'throwaways,' students who were not expected ever to graduate from high school. Yet, when given the appropriate structure and support, they can and do succeed.

'I thought that I wasn't good because I had many problems. I thought I was a nobody,' explained one tutor. 'But when I started talking to my tutees and working with them, I felt different. Now I know that I can be somebody, and I can help others to do the same.'

The program has succeeded to the extent that it has because it subtly but powerfully challenges and changes people's beliefs and behaviors. The adults in the school and in the community stop perceiving these students as damaged once they see their contribution as tutors.

### **Programa Coca-Cola de Valorização do Jovem**

Could this program work in Brazil? That was the question facing the leaders of IDRA, Coca-Cola Brazil, PANAMCO/Spal, the secretary of education of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and other organizations in 1998.

Brazil is by far the largest country in Latin America and only slightly smaller than the United States. It has a population of over 188 million with about a third (25.8%) under the age of 14. With a literacy rate of 86.4 per cent and about 31.0 per cent of the population

living in poverty, education is an important priority for the country's social and economic development.

IDRA's Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program had to develop a 'planned variation' to address the particular issues that Brazil presented, so it went to the program's essence: those elements that would transcend cultural and geographic borders.

At its core, the program contains 14 essential components and five essential results. They serve as a guide to determine the most appropriate methods to preserve the program's integrity and capture and measure its impact. It was decided that any program variation must adhere to this essence.

### **Essence of Program**

- Direct rewards given to tutor.
- Adult directly working with and/or supervising students.
- Cross-level coordination.
- Accountability (assessment and evaluation).
- Planned instructional tasks (interaction between tutor and tutee).
- Tutors do not lose academic credit for participating in the program.
- Program acknowledges, celebrates and utilizes linguistic and cultural strengths.
- Receiving teachers value the tutors, understand their role, provide positive feedback, and monitor activities.
- Voluntary/willing participation by all.
- Regular class for tutors.
- Regular, consistent and predictable tutoring.
- Student-centered curriculum for tutors: tutoring, literacy and sense of self.
- Strengthening students( support network outside of school, including families.
- Cross-age tutoring (ongoing, sustained relationship; small ratio; ample age difference/grade level; appropriate level).

### **Essence of Results**

- Youth stay in school.
- Youth are more successful in school.

- Youth have an increased sense of self; expanded vision of their future.
- Youth feel connected to school; they feel they belong.
- Adults value these young people; in turn, the youth experience this appreciation

The Brazilian program was first piloted in 1999 in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The evaluation of the pilot indicated that all participants, including students, teachers, parents and professionals of the sponsoring organizations had gained something invaluable. The students changed their attitudes and outlook about education and life beyond school, resulting in renewed commitment to remain in school and achieve better academic performance. The teachers and other school staff realized that valuing students is an appropriate educational approach that has the potential of redefining schools. Parents were proud of their children's success and worked collaboratively with the schools to improve their children's education. Professionals from the sponsoring organizations found that helping their communities in supporting this program could make a significant contribution toward a better society.

Following the success of the pilot, the program started its implementation phase and expanded from two schools 1999 to 42 schools in the 2006 school year. Thanks to the adaptations made during the pilot phase, the program has integrated seamlessly into the Brazilian socio-cultural and education system and at the same time retains its intrinsic philosophical basis. In the program's eight years of operation in Brazil, nearly 20,000 tutors and tutees have participated in the program. It has been successful in keeping students in school, with an average of 2.5 per cent dropout rate during its eight years of operation.

### **The Parents**

The parents of the young tutors are an important part of the program. Most (75.5%) have lived in the same city for at least 10 years. The tutors' family size varies considerably from one to 20 members, with an average of about three children per family. More than half of the parents are employed full-time, working typically in what we would consider blue-collar occupations. The demographic data shows a picture of parents living modest lives on low incomes with little formal education to sustain their many children.

What is clear from the program is that parents in Brazil, like parents everywhere, want a better life for their children and see education as a way out of poverty. And like the program in the United States, parents support their children's education and are eager to get involved when treated with respect and value.

### **Tutoring Sessions**

The tutoring sessions are the heart of the program. Before the tutors begin, they attend several training sessions with their teacher coordinator where they learn, among other things, about their roles and responsibilities, the importance of their positive example in the school, their expected behaviors. Tutors observe the recipient teachers' classes to familiarize themselves with the class environment and to learn the types of activities conducted in the classroom. When the tutors are ready, tutoring begins.

### **Classes for Tutors**

Tutors and their teacher coordinator meet once a week to reflect on their experiences during the week. The teacher coordinator advises them on how to solve tutoring problems and to plan further sessions as well as reinforcing the various program elements. In addition, help is given to deal with school and personal problems. A significant amount of the period is spent working on activities from the *Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Tutor Workbook*.

### **The Bonus**

The bonus is the financial compensation tutors receive for their contribution to the education of their tutees. It is given to tutors in direct proportion to the number of sessions they tutor. A bonus is worth about three *reals* or U.S. \$1.00. It can be exchanged for food, clothes, medicine and other selected goods and services in participating stores. Tutors use their bonuses to help their families and to fulfill some small dreams of their own. When the parents were asked whether the bonus helped them and their children, 97.5 per cent said they had. The tutors' responses to what was the best thing they did with the bonus were as follows:

- *Ajudar a meus familiares.*  
Help my relatives.

- *Ajudei minha mae.*  
I helped my mother.
- *Comprar coisas fundamentais para minha casa.*  
Buy essential things for my home.
- *Ajudar o meu pai.*  
Help my father.

### Field Trips

Field trips provide a way for tutors to explore cultural and professional opportunities beyond their traditional environment. This is a way to broaden their horizons and provide opportunities for them to make plans for their future careers as they see new possibilities in the wider community. In Brazil, a field trip is typically a whole school affair: the teacher coordinators, the principals, many other teachers and the parents get involved in the pre-trip planning activities, the actual trips and post-trip discussions. In some cases, the tutees are also taken to selected field trips.

### Role Models

Role models and guest speakers encourage tutors to widen their scope of interest and possibilities. These visits give the tutors a chance to interact with people who not only excel in their professions, but also give back to the community through their leadership and example. This has proven to be an extraordinarily good vehicle for tutors to start thinking about their own future, including jobs and career opportunities.



### Program Impact

Evaluation is an integral component of the program implementation. Virtually every participant has assessed it positively, as have school personnel, parents and tutors. School staff report the strong impact the program has on tutors in terms of improved discipline, self-concept, dedication to their educational goals and in a general sense how it has improved their outlook about their present life and the future. Parents continue to credit the program with saving their children from the perils of the streets and instilling in them a renewed commitment to their education, families and society.

In a survey conducted last year, 817 parents said that they were impressed by the power of the project to change perspectives and behaviors. Most parents (87.2%) reported that their children changed their attitude or behavior regarding school after their participation in the program. They found that the program helped their children at school (97.4%) and at home (89.0%). Parents said that since their participation in the program, their children had a new sense of purpose and responsibility.

Parents reported having more meaningful communication with their children about important issues of school (77.3%) and personal problems (62.7%). They also reported that their children/tutors did more homework (61.5%), more household chores (59.0%) and helped their siblings (58.4%).

The program evaluation design included quantitative measures collected on a pre-test and post-test basis. These measures covered, among other things, tutor self-concept, attitudes toward school, desire to graduate and final year grades. In addition, tutors and their parents evaluated all aspects of the program and gave high ratings.

According to the data, one way in which the program affects the students is through expanding their circle of friends, introducing them to students with common interests related to school activities. Moreover, most tutors felt that they were now a part of the school – that they ‘belonged.’ Most reported that the program helped them in school and at home to deal more effectively with their families and friends.

### Their Stories

No chart or table can communicate the personal impact of the program as vividly as the stories of the

children themselves. Thirty-seven tutors were selected to participate in case study interviews. In the interviews, they showed a deep sense of humanity as they acquired new perceptions of life – lives that had presented them with difficult challenges. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

**Dora** is an eighth-grade student. She is 16 years old and lives with her father, who is a stone mason, and her two siblings. Dora thinks that her experience as a tutor was very positive because she learned how difficult it is to be a teacher. After the program, she became more outgoing and also more committed to her family. Her goal for the future is to go to law school. At present, she works as a hairdresser to help pay for school. When asked to identify the most important thing she would teach others she said: 'Value everybody.' She also voiced her gratitude for the opportunity to be part of the program.

**Joan** is a fifth-grade student who has just completed a school year as an IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutor. He is 15 years old and lives with his father, his aunt and two brothers. Joan's economic situation is such that his house is unfinished and lacks plumbing, among other things. He has seven siblings from his mother's side. Both parents have a fourth-grade education. Joan believes that he was given the opportunity to be part of the program because he needed to learn more things and to behave better. He said that his personal life changed dramatically after the program. Not only did he become more confident, responsible and well-behaved, but the money that he earned by participating in the program helped him to buy food for his family. He would like to go to college; his ultimate goal for the future is to be a firefighter.

**Priscilla** is a 12-year old, sixth-grade student who lives in a house with her unemployed mother as well as her brother and a family friend. She has three siblings, all of whom are in school. She reports that by being in the program, she has become more responsible and her relationship with her brother has improved. Before the program they always fought, but once she was around the other kids she started to feel calmer and less irritated. Priscilla says that it was very important for her to receive the bonus provided by the program because with it she could buy some clothes and food. She said that at the end of the year she would take her brother to a theme park.

**Gloria** is a 15-year-old, seventh-grade student who lives with her grandmother, aunt and uncle and two



cousins. Her parents are unemployed. The household income comes from her grandmother, who receives state benefits, and from her father, who participates in the informal economy as an occasional driver. Gloria found helping younger students to learn a positive experience. She says the tutees were three little angels that heaven sent to her so she could teach them. After the program, her behavior and grades improved tremendously and at home, her relationships became calmer and more loving. Her advice to new tutors is to use the school year to accomplish something because an opportunity like this does not happen every day. Gloria says that the year she was a tutor was a very special year for her.

### Closing

Who could have known over two decades ago in San Antonio, Texas that a group of teenagers who so many others thought of as troublemakers or lost causes would be blazing such a powerful path? They went on to become the first of many Coca-Cola Valued Youth on different continents who have become an inspiration to the children they tutor, positive leaders among their peers, motivated learners to their teachers, a source of pride to their parents and contributors to their communities.

*For more information on the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, contact the Intercultural Development Research Association at 210-444-1710, [contact@idra.org](mailto:contact@idra.org), or visit [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org).*