

"OUR 250 pre-primary and primary school pupils come from extremely deprived social environments which are the cause of serious educational problems. They live in poor shanty-towns such as Los Heroes de la Concepcion, where they are faced with alcoholism, prostitution and family violence".

Maria Eugenia Fuentes has been a primary school teacher for 16 years. Her speciality is plastic arts and for the last two years she has been headmistress of D-150 School in Conchalí, an old and populous working-class quarter in the north of Santiago, the Chilean capital. This primary school, providing classes for children between the ages of seven and twelve, has 14 teachers. It is included in the "900 schools programme" launched in 1990 by the Chilean Minister of Education, Ricardo Lagos, after the establishment of a democratic government under President Patricio Aylwin.

"All our pupils come from poor environments which are highly unfavourable for primary education", says the headmistress of D-150 School. "Many live in overcrowded housing and are psychologically and emotionally unbalanced. We are faced with the problem of many children who are under medication, and even with cases of epilepsy."

Children often come to enroll in school accompanied only by neighbours, and often they come on their own. "Otherwise their parents send them to the school and show no interest in their results. They consequently feel devalued and lack the 'model' of a father with whom they can identify. "To remedy this situation, parents are encouraged to take part in educational tasks and try to use teaching methods which link the children to their social environment," says Ms Fuentes. "Teachers remain in charge of lessons though,

Schools Of Hope

Juan Ibanez Elgueta

A project in Chile proves that quality education is possible even in the poorest schools.

explains the headmistress," and we use all the techniques available: drawing, painting, press cuttings, wood and plastic materials. We also use illustrations and murals and teach both reading and visual memory. In addition, we use material provided by local inhabitants or by companies operating in the area. We encourage pupil participation through group work: the children, at school with their teachers or at home with young educational workers and their parents, learn to know themselves, to be aware of their problems and to find possible solutions.

Considerable progress has been made. "We have been able to combine lessons, games in the playground and learning in the children's homes. It is through a global approach which includes teaching, civic and moral education and affection from the children's family that we can succeed in helping them face the reality of the outside world."

Outside Support. UNESCO's Regional bureau for education in Latin America which is based in Santiago, has also thrown its weight behind the project, with considerable material support. "To help with our work, the bureau has supplied us with duplicating machines, tape recorders to help assess progress in reading and writing and books which have enabled us to set up a basic library of 100 volumes."

UNESCO and its bureau have been supporting poor schools in Chile for several years, working extensively with non-governmental organizations. However, the 900-schools project has met with such success that it

has become a case apart.

"The project took on a new lease of life at the fourth conference of Education Ministers from the region (PROMEDLACIV) which was held last April 1991 in Quito (Ecuador), following on from the proposals approved at Jomtien (Thailand) at the World Conference on Education for All", according to Juan Cassasus, an expert at the regional bureau. "It now concerns ten percent of schools and of the country's primary school population: the poorest and most deprived school with the least resources and infrastructure and with the lowest level of school results."

Launched with a gift of five million dollars from Sweden and Denmark, the 900 schools project initially covered 969 municipal and subsidised schools totalling 160,000 pupils. In 1991, in light of the programme success, the government increased funding and extended it to 1,385 schools with 6,000 teachers and over 220,000 pupils.

The regional bureau, directed by education specialist Juan Carlos Tedesco, considers the project a major contribution to education in Latin America, having proved that it is possible to provide quality education in even the poorest schools.

The bureau has financed and designed materials for teachers and support staff in the schools. UNESCO also helps devise investment strategies for human and financial resources, as well as carrying out assessments of progress on the programme.

"By focusing on primary educa-

tion, this project is of considerable social importance and is linked to UNESCO's efforts to eliminate illiteracy", says Tedesco. The "P 900" project, the results of which were presented at an international seminar on "strategies for school success" May last year in Lisbon (Portugal), has been singled out by UNESCO as one of the great successes of the Mobilising Project to Combat Illiteracy which was implemented at the Jomtien conference. Under the Mobilizing Project it will be taken as a model and "showcased" in other parts of the world, especially those with similar socio-economic conditions. Subsequently, a film crew will go to Chile in the coming months to make a documentary to be broadcast on major television networks across the world.

Efforts will also continue to reinforce the skills of those involved in the project.

"The regional bureau," says Juan Cassasus, "will finance the production and distribution of five videos on mathematics and language teaching to be used in teacher training workshops. These workshops are the key to the success of the programme, as are the instructor workshops for some 3,000 young people from outside regular educational structures but who are strongly associated through their vocation and their community links with the homes of primary school children."

UNESCO, through the organization of a consultative meeting in Chile, also helped obtain approval from the World Bank for a loan of over 200 million dollars which will be used to finance an ambitious programme of "improvements in educational infrastructures" which will benefit, amongst others, these underprivileged schools.

—UNESCO Sources