



# A program showcase

## Maria's Preschool, Asunción, Paraguay

by Michael Kalinowski

Twenty years ago, after gaining experience working with the best local and foreign educators in Paraguay, Maria Burt decided to turn her dream into reality and open her own preschool. Her passion had always been caring for and educating children. In the beginning, Maria's first two classrooms were quite unusual. She 'borrowed' her parent's garage and remodeled it, with the support of her husband, brothers, and parents to help set it up. She says, "During recess we would take the children to play at my mother's beautiful garden. Then, later every day, 'Abuela Dei', as my mother called herself, would bake cookies and we would have great picnics. We always wanted to provide a warm, loving environment."

In 1998 Maria had the opportunity to buy a house near her original preschool, which was already too small to

accommodate the classes that she had been planning on adding. She says, "Shortly after completing the arrangements to the house I bought, I realized that we still needed more space for the increasing waitlist. Fortunately, the house next door went up for rent, so we seized the opportunity and rented it. We converted the rooms in the new house into more classes. By adding corridors and gates, we succeeded in connecting both houses. We converted two patios in the rented house into smaller playgrounds in order for the children to have more space to run around."

Over time the program has grown to 10 classrooms and 200 children, with five Kindergarten Groups: Kinder 1 for Small Babies (12 to 18 months), Kinder 1 for Big Babies (18 to 24 months), Kinder 2, Kinder 3, and Kinder 4. Every class has a Room Teacher and an Aide. Each Kinder 1 class has a Room Teacher and two Aides. All Teachers have an Early Childhood Teacher's Credential or a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology, and the Aides are university students who work part time in either the morning or afternoon sessions. Most of the teachers Maria hires come recommended from people she knows. It isn't always easy to find the correct person with the appropriate certification and a proficient level of English. Once Maria decides on a new teacher, she tries to pair up the new hire with an experienced teacher at the school. She often asks the new teacher to come and observe classes. The school also depends on two wonderful ladies who help clean up and the friendly handyman and gatekeeper. Maria considers these three people essential in having things run smoothly.

Maria's aim is to provide a stimulating and caring environment where each child is considered to be special and unique. Her staff has developed a state-of-the-art Early Childhood Bilingual English-Castilian Program, with English and Spanish language

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instruction. At her preschool the children become familiar and comfortable with the English language and develop into young and curious learners. Children learn through thematic units, stories, and songs during the daily routines planned according to the interests of the child. Parents are primarily highly-educated professionals, many of whom speak multiple languages.

Maria's goals, as translated from her program web site, are:

- *Social*: to adapt the school environment to the child, and to trust in his environment, make friends, and feel part of a group.
- *Emotional*: to experience pride and self-esteem, and develop independence and self-control with a positive attitude for life.
- *Cognitive*: to develop the curiosity to discover and express feelings using words to describe ideas and observations in Spanish and English.
- *Physical*: to develop fine- and gross-motor skills to help children manage their bodies.

Maria received her Bachelor of Science degree in Education from the National University of Asunción, her Master of Science in Education from the Université René Descartes in Paris, and a Master of Arts in Elementary Education from the University of Alabama.



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As a result of the high academic standards, all children who attend Maria's Preschool are admitted into Paraguay's best bilingual schools and do well in kindergarten and first grade. As Maria shared with me at the recent World Forum on Early Care and Education in Honolulu, "Parents love us because we take care of their children as if they were our own. We can barely cope with the demand for more space!"

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The Program Showcases are developed by Michael Kalinowski as a component of the World Forum on Early Care and Education. They are intended to highlight the work of particularly interesting, unique, and/or exceptional early childhood programs around the world. Selected programs will appear in future issues of *Exchange*, and are also available on [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com).