

SÃO PAULO, Jul 1, 2011 - In the last three years there have been no teen pregnancies among the youngsters at Casa do Zezinho, an extracurricular educational and cultural facility in Brazil attended by 1,500 children and young people from favelas or shantytowns on the south side of São Paulo.

A unique experiment in the sex education workshops has helped prevent teen pregnancy, a problem that tends to lead to school dropout and fuels poverty. Three years ago, a few boys and girls between the ages of 15 and 20 were selected to be the "pregnant" ones in class, and to wear a plastic belly for a few months that grows as the pregnancy advances.

The selected youngsters miss out on activities that pregnant women would normally have to avoid, such as engaging in sports like football – especially frustrating for the "pregnant" boys – or swimming in the pool on the Casa do Zezinho's 3,200 square metre property.

"All they could do was practice yoga," Dagmar Garroux, the founder and president of the institution who is known as "Tía Dag" or Auntie Dag, laughingly comments to IPS.

After the youngsters wear the growing belly month to month, the baby – a papier maché doll they have made themselves – is "born" and they have to care for the new infant, nursing and bathing it and changing the diapers – all of the responsibilities faced by young parents.

And they continue to miss the dances and parties organised at the Casa, just like adolescent mothers in the favelas, Garroux said.

Thanks to these and other creative initiatives, "the cycle of teenage pregnancy was broken" and the use of condoms increased among the youngsters attending the Casa, she said.

Numerous and varied activities are offered by this non-governmental organisation based in a small middle-class neighbourhood surrounded by three large, notoriously violent favelas, Capão Redondo, Parque Santo Antônio and Jardim Ângela, which are home to a combined total of more than half a million people.

A requisite for the children and adolescents admitted to the organisation is that they also be enrolled in a regular public primary or secondary school. (In Brazil, schoolchildren attend either the morning or the afternoon shift.)

Having a baby becomes a source of self-affirmation for girls steeped in poverty without opportunities in slum neighbourhoods with high proportions of women-headed households, high levels of domestic violence and drug-related crime, and low levels of education.

Between 2000 and 2009 the teen pregnancy rate in Brazil was reduced by nearly 35 percent, to just over 444,000 cases in this country of 192 million people. But births to girls and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 still represented one-fifth of all births, according to the Health Ministry.

When she came to the area to live and work, Garroux was a teacher who was dissatisfied with the "stupid" conventional teaching methods "stuck in the 19th century," which made her switch schools "every three months." In 1994, she founded Casa do Zezinho.

She developed what she calls the "rainbow teaching system", used in all activities at the centre, which is attended by youngsters from the surrounding favelas. The method is based on equal treatment for everyone, girls and boys as well as teachers and students, and on the concept that educating is love and sharing.

The day that IPS visited the Casa, the teachers stressed that they did not treat boys and girls, or gauge their academic progress, differently, since the goal is to strengthen their autonomy and personalities – somewhat revolutionary in a community where many parents still believe it is a "waste of time" for their daughters to go to school.

Garroux has had to convince many mothers that staying in school is the only way their daughters can have a chance at a better life than they themselves have had, and can have the same opportunities as boys and men – although she clarifies that they will still face widespread sexist discrimination and stereotypes.

"But they will have a much better opportunity to leave behind the cycle of violence, submission and poverty," said Tia Dag, who has become an expert at detecting signs of violence or sexual abuse among girls, and along with her team and social workers helps find solutions and therapy for the perpetrators and the victims.

In the informal school, there are 1,200 students between the ages of six and 21, as well as 300 "young adults" who attend night class. Another 2,000 are on a waiting list, because the Casa does not have space for them.

"Sharpening the five senses" is another of the basic premises of Garroux's teaching method, because "unless all of the senses are sharpened, you can't educate and learn," she said. For that reason, art, sports and cooking, combined with a large dose of affection, are priorities in the Casa.

"You can't educate without art either; you'll only form technocrats," she says.

The students are split up into seven grades, each identified with one colour of the rainbow. The six and seven-year-olds start out in the Violets Room, and then advance through the Jeans, Sea and River, Forest, Solar and East Rooms as they grow, ending up in the Heart Room, for 16 to 21-year-olds. After that age they can continue in the night courses.

Many return or stay on in the institution as monitors, teachers or other employees. In fact, 60 percent of the staff are "ex-Zezinhos", Tia Dag says.

One of them is Agenor Mendes, who runs the art workshop. A resident of the Santo Antonio favela, he first came to the Casa in 1999, at the age of 14, attended until 2004 and returned in 2009 as a teacher.

A graduate in visual arts who has worked in artistic photography, he shows great versatility teaching the kids painting, design, upholstery and a wide variety of other artistic activities. "We recycle, so the work of art is a product of the material available, whether it's scraps of material, wood or old magazines," he tells IPS.

A large group of teenagers are busy making mosaics, using colourful pieces of pottery, stones or other materials in another room. In music, the Casa has an orchestra that performs in the surrounding neighbourhoods as well as far-away theatres, and it also has its own recording studio.

"Musicians trained here teach in other projects and at the Free Music University, and play in other orchestras and bands," Tia Dag says.

Classes in capoeira (a blend of martial arts and dance developed by African slaves in Brazil), dance, theatre, computers, cooking, and gardening keep children and adolescents excited and involved in and outside of the three-story building, whose classrooms, hallways and stairs are asymmetric and crooked, as the premises have been refurbished and expanded in an improvised fashion.

Amidst the hubbub of hundreds of people busy with all kinds of activities there is a complete lack of tension. "We don't have teachers, we have mediators," says Tia Dag, explaining the horizontal relationship between staff and students.

Constant attention is paid to the question of gender equality, she says. From a young age, boys learn to knit and take part in dance groups, and there is no discrimination against gays or lesbians. One of the people who regularly takes part in activities in the institution is a transvestite, for example.

Thanks to the Casa, young homosexuals are starting to come out of the closet – something that is difficult to do where they come from, says journalist Saulo Garroux, who is heavily involved in his wife Dagmar's project.

Casa de Zezinho is highly respected and has become a reference point in its area of expertise, says Andrea Cruz, a psychologist at the Heirs of the Future Institute, which provides assistance to victims of violence in the favelas in the same area. (END)

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