Preparing Children to Learn: The Shaka Program

Jardín Paidahue • La Reina, Santiago, Chile • 2003

In 2003, Sylvia Langford was working as a psychologist at COSAM, a community mental health centre in Santiago. Children kept being referred to her for difficulties with attention, learning, motivation, and behaviour. After a while, the same thought kept surfacing: were they waiting too long?

By the time these children reached her, they'd already struggled. Teachers had flagged them. Parents were worried. Referral paperwork had been filed. Sylvia began asking whether some of these difficulties could be headed off earlier - by helping children develop the abilities they'd need before they ran into trouble at school.

Jardín Paidahue, an early childhood centre in La Reina, gave her a chance to test the idea.

The setup

Forty-four four-year-olds took part. Twenty-seven joined the learning activities; seventeen continued with their usual program and served as a comparison group.

Over roughly three months, the participating group completed 40 sessions of about 20 minutes each. Sylvia worked directly with the children three days a week; COSAM team members ran the sessions on the other two days.

The sessions covered language, movement, music, observation, and early writing activities. None of it was academic curriculum. The point was to develop abilities that would help the children learn: concentration, observation, understanding and following instructions, participation, and increasingly independent work. Sylvia watched the children's responses and adjusted difficulty, instructions, and activities as she went.

The central question was practical: how do you design learning experiences that four-year-olds can understand, attempt, and practise successfully?

Measuring the results

Both groups took the Basic Concepts Test (developed by Chilean psychologist Neva Milicic) before and after the three-month period. The test measured vocabulary and basic concepts needed for learning.

Here's the important part: the participating children hadn't been directly taught the content on the test. That material was still part of their regular teachers' curriculum. The question was whether developing underlying learning abilities might help children get more out of the teaching they were already receiving.

What the numbers showed

Group	Initial average	Final average
Participating children (27)	21st percentile	48th percentile
Comparison group (17)	21st percentile	23rd percentile

The participating group's average jumped 27 percentile points. The comparison group moved two.

Teachers also reported changes in the children's willingness to participate, their independence, and their ability to engage in classroom activities. Those behavioural observations are encouraging but weren't measured by the test.

A year later

The following school year, Sylvia visited Complejo Educacional La Reina and spoke with a Pre-Kinder teacher whose class included ten children from Paidahue. The teacher described how these children's independence made her work easier. Because they could begin and complete activities with less help, she had more time for the children who needed extra support.

That's one teacher's observation, not a formal follow-up study. But it raised a question that kept coming back in Langford's later work: could developing children's independence benefit not just the individual child, but the learning environment of the whole class?

What Paidahue started

This small project helped shape a principle that would run through everything Langford developed afterwards. Preparing children to learn isn't about teaching academic content earlier. It's about developing the abilities and habits that help children understand instructions, manage an appropriate challenge, concentrate, practise, and become increasingly independent. Those foundations can help children make better use of whatever their teachers are already providing.

The limits

This was a small, early study at one childhood centre. The participating group showed a substantially greater increase in test scores, but the results can't prove the activities alone caused the difference. The test measured vocabulary and concepts, not behaviour or self-control. Reports of behavioural changes and the later classroom observation were anecdotal. The findings helped guide further development of the Langford approach, but they shouldn't be read as proof that any classroom will see the same outcomes.

Source: Jardín Paidahue project, La Reina, Santiago, Chile, 2003. Basic Concepts Test assessments and subsequent teacher observations.