Changing What Is Possible: The María Escobillana School Experience

How school leadership, shared teaching practices and confidence in children's capabilities helped change a learning environment

Colegio María Escobillana Guzmán | Graneros, Chile

A principal determined to make a difference

In May 2014, more than 2,000 teachers and education leaders gathered at the Líderes de la Educación del Futuro seminar, held at Estación Mapocho in Santiago, Chile. Psychologist Sylvia Langford was one of the speakers.

Among those attending was Alejandra Araya Matus, principal of Colegio María Escobillana Guzmán - a school in Graneros, in Chile's O'Higgins Region, serving a socially vulnerable community.

Alejandra wanted to change her school's educational reality. She was looking for ways to build children's willingness to try, strengthen learning habits in classrooms and create conditions where teachers could work more effectively together.

After the seminar, she decided to bring in the Langford Method. She wasn't interested in just adopting another program. She wanted something that would give her teachers a shared way of thinking about learning and children's development.

Creating a common direction

One of the hardest things for school leaders is getting consistency from one classroom to the next. Teachers arrive with different experiences, beliefs, expectations and ways of responding when children struggle.

Alejandra saw that her teaching team needed common goals to work towards. Through the Langford Method, the school started working on everyday learning habits: following instructions, self-control, independence, willingness to act, staying calm and practice.

These habits were meant to support children's active participation in learning. The point wasn't to demand the same response from every child. It was to set up conditions where children with different starting points could understand what was expected, try activities, practise and gradually get better at working on their own.

This also meant teachers had to look at their own practices. Clear instructions, consistent expectations, appropriate challenges and chances for children to act independently became part of a shared approach.

Changing children's learning experiences required changes in how adults organised and guided those experiences.

What the principal observed

After about four years, Alejandra reflected on the changes she'd seen. She described how the school was becoming recognised in its community because of the way children behaved and participated.

“People who come here, who visit and get to know the school, ask what is happening here, because the children behave differently.”

Alejandra Araya, principal - translated from Spanish

Alejandra had watched children who started in preschool and were now in Year 4. She described real changes in how those children approached everyday school life.

For her, the changes went beyond scheduled activities. They were about the habits children were building and how the school community was pulling together. Her account points to the value of sustained practice and leadership that holds a consistent direction over time.

When children surprise their teachers

One of the most telling accounts came from physical education teacher Cristian Sepúlveda.

Cristian was particularly interested in students in Chile's School Integration Programme (PIE), which provides additional support to children with identified educational needs.

He described seeing improvements in concentration, attention, memory and self-control among some of these students. He was clear that the changes didn't happen quickly. They became visible through sustained practice.

What surprised him most was how students receiving ongoing special education support - including some with mild intellectual disabilities - performed during mental calculation activities. Some finished before their classmates.

“There are classes where the students receiving ongoing support are the first to finish the activity, and that surprises me.”

Cristian Sepúlveda - translated from Spanish

Cristian hadn't expected that. His experience made him rethink what these children might be capable of.

A child's diagnosis or current difficulties can help educators figure out what support that child needs. But they shouldn't automatically set the limits on what the child might learn.

Cristian's account shows why teachers need chances to see children's developing capabilities rather than relying only on what students haven't yet shown. It also speaks to the value of activities that let children experience progress for themselves.

The courage to change teaching practices

Cristian also talked openly about a difficulty many teachers recognise. Trying something unfamiliar creates uncertainty. Teachers may wonder whether a new approach will work, whether children will respond or whether the activities will eat into regular lesson time.

Cristian acknowledged those concerns. He described how fear of failure or of losing teaching time could make teachers reluctant to try something different. But what he saw in his students made him reconsider.

He'd watched children do things he hadn't expected - including students who needed extra educational support.

What if some of the changes we hesitate to make could actually help children become better prepared to take part in the learning we're already trying to provide?

Clear instructions, attention, self-control, independence and systematic practice aren't separate from academic learning. They help children engage in the activities through which learning happens.

But building these habits on their own isn't enough. Teachers also need to consider whether their explanations are clear, whether activities match children's current level, whether there's enough practice and whether children have chances to take on harder challenges.

Improving educational opportunities means paying attention to both children's learning habits and the teaching practices that support them.

Inclusion begins with opportunities

Cristian's observations offer a useful perspective on inclusion. Inclusion means more than having children physically in the same classroom. It means creating opportunities for them to participate, learn and develop alongside their classmates.

Children don't all start with the same abilities or move at the same pace. Some need extra guidance, adjustments or specialist support. Those needs don't disappear.

But good support should also give children chances to use and build their own capabilities. When Cristian saw students receiving ongoing support complete activities successfully, he started rethinking his expectations.

His experience doesn't prove that every child will reach the same outcomes or that one method can resolve a disability. It does show the value of staying open to what children might learn and asking whether the opportunities we provide actually allow that to happen.

The importance of school leadership

Alejandra's role was central to getting the work started. She recognised that changing a school's reality required more than individual teachers working alone. It needed a shared direction, consistent expectations and a willingness to question established practices.

The Langford Method gave her a common approach that helped bring teachers together around building children's learning habits and capabilities.

But the work belonged to the school community. Leadership created the opening. Teachers were responsible for making the approach part of their everyday work.

The experience shows how a principal's educational vision can encourage teachers to rethink what's possible in their own classrooms.

Developing the capacity to keep changing

A good educational approach should do more than introduce new activities or routines. Ideally, it should also help teachers grow more confident in their ability to observe, question and improve their own practices.

At María Escobillana, Alejandra's leadership set a shared direction while teachers like Cristian started rethinking their expectations and discovering new possibilities for their students.

Once a school has seen that changing its practices can open up new learning opportunities, can its teachers and leaders use what they've learned to identify and pursue further improvements on their own?

The available accounts don't tell us what additional changes the school made afterwards. But the experience invites thinking beyond one particular method.

The longer-term educational goal isn't dependence on an external program. It's a school community that increasingly recognises challenges, examines its practices and makes thoughtful changes to improve children's opportunities to learn.

What this experience teaches us

The María Escobillana story offers a different angle on educational change. It's about a principal who wanted to change her school's reality and teachers who began seeing their students differently.

Alejandra saw changes in how children participated and in the school's learning environment. Cristian discovered that students who needed extra support could do things that surprised him.

His experience pushed him to rethink his expectations and his willingness to try different practices.

These are personal observations from educators, not findings from a controlled study. But they raise questions worth thinking about.

How often do we underestimate children because of their current difficulties? How often do we stick with familiar teaching practices because we're not sure something different would work?

And how might our classrooms change if we focused not only on identifying children's difficulties, but on creating conditions that help them develop what they don't yet have?

Final reflection

The María Escobillana experience started with Alejandra Araya's determination to improve what was available to the children in her school. Her leadership encouraged teachers to work towards a shared approach.

The changes she saw were reflected in children's everyday school life. Cristian Sepúlveda's account offers an especially useful lesson: children sometimes showed abilities he hadn't expected them to develop.

His observations reminded him that teachers' expectations and practices can shape the opportunities children get.

The message here isn't that educational change is easy or that every difficulty can be overcome with one approach. It's that teachers and school leaders have the capacity to rethink their practices, create new learning opportunities and find capabilities in children that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Changing educational realities starts with being willing to look at what we can do differently.

Perhaps the most lasting contribution of any educational approach is what teachers and school leaders become capable of changing after the approach itself has been introduced.

Before deciding what a child cannot achieve, have we explored what we could change to help that child learn?

Source note: This historical case study draws on Sylvia Langford’s account of the 2014 Líderes de la Educación del Futuro seminar and subsequent collaboration with Colegio María Escobillana Guzmán, together with the Spanish testimonies of principal Alejandra Araya and teacher Cristian Sepúlveda. The quotations have been translated from Spanish. Described changes are educators’ observations, not independently measured effects or evidence of clinical treatment.