

Improving Education Quality and Access in Colombia through innovation and participation: The Escuela Nueva Model

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Lack of quality education is one of Latin America's great blights, however pockets of excellence exist that serve as inspiration for the future. The Escuela Nueva model, which has proven to be an effective model for primary education, now benefits over 5 million children in 14 countries.

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Summary

The Escuela Nueva (New School) system is an example of how local innovation in education can become national policy. This occurred in Colombia where founders of the Escuela Nueva Model pioneered new teaching methods (including multigrade teaching), forms of training and learning materials in response to a situation where there were not enough students or teachers for "complete" primary schools in rural areas. Since the initiation of its activities in the mid-1970s (financed by USAID), the model has been adapted by several other countries in the region and is now starting to be expanded into Africa. Educators from over thirty five countries have visited Colombia to learn about the Escuela Nueva model.

More than 30 years ago, the Escuela Nueva model was already putting into practice modern, 21st century thinking such as that coming out in recent specialized literature and meetings on education in Latin America. These include ideas such as the need for a cultural change to improve quality in Basic education and the need to promote a shift from transmission of knowledge to social construction of knowledge (Schiefelbein 1991).

Achievements

By the end of the 1980s, the Escuela Nueva had proven that quantitative and qualitative improvements could be made in even the most disadvantaged schools. During the 1988-1996 World Bank-financed project to universalize primary education, which incorporated the Escuela Nueva model, the number of students increased by 45.6 percent overall in rural schools. In urban schools, the number rose by 7.6 percent. In a comparative study of 11 Latin American countries, Colombia was the only country, after Cuba, to achieve higher results in rural public schools than in urban ones (except in megacities). Several evaluations from 1982 to 1997 have confirmed that children from Escuela Nueva have achieved higher scores in language and mathematics in the 3rd and 5th grades and significant reduction in drop out and repetition rates. Children have also demonstrated improvement of self-esteem and civic behavior. In both Guatemala (Chesterfield 1994) and Colombia (Forero-Pineda 2001, Lainsbury-Pitt 1999), studies have shown that children in Escuela Nueva schools obtain better results in democratic behavior (including peaceful social interaction) than in traditional schools (Little 2006).

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The program evolved from a local and departmental innovation to national implementation in over 20,000 schools across Colombia. In tandem with other educational reforms, Escuela Nueva has played a major role in the significant progress Colombia has made in extending education to the poor, particularly in rural areas. It is one of the bottom-up innovations that have survived the longest, despite the administrative and political changes of the educational system in Colombia.

The flexibility and adaptability of the framework for this model is such that cultural and social differences are easily incorporated, facilitating application in a variety of culturally different regions in Colombia as well as other countries as varied as Brazil, Guatemala, Panama, Dominican Republic, Uganda, Guyana and the Philippines, among others. To build upon and sustain its achievements, the Escuela Nueva Foundation maintains alliances with a wide array of international institutions, governments and educators.

The Escuela Nueva Model

The Escuela Nueva, which makes the school the unit of change to improve the quality of education, started with two fundamental assumptions: 1) that improving education effectiveness would require creative changes in the training of teachers, in the administrative structure, and in relations with the community, and 2) that it is essential to develop innovations that are replicable, decentralized, and viable technically, politically, and financially. In other words, the design of the system must include plans for going to scale. Key characteristics of the program include:

1. Students – The system promotes an active, reflective and participatory learning process, the ability to apply acquired knowledge to new situations; an improved self-concept, cooperative and democratic attitudes; and a set of basic skills in language, mathematics, science and social studies, all within a ‘child rights’ context.
2. Teachers – The system promotes the role of the teacher as guide and facilitator rather than a presenter of facts and encourages an active role in the surrounding community. Instruction is active, participatory, child centered and personalized. The main objective is to qualify the role of the teacher to guide, orient and evaluate the learning processes, avoiding time spent in routine instruction.

Teachers are trained through local in-service and replicable workshops that follow similar methodologies to those they will later apply to their pupils. Workshops are practical rather than knowledge-focused. Teachers are trained to use and apply the Escuela Nueva curriculum elements, at classroom and community levels and to adapt student guides to the child’s level and local environment when needed. Training also facilitates the development of skills in multigrade instruction, critical for rural areas.

Model schools allow teachers to observe schools in operation to promote new behaviors and attitudes towards improved teaching practices. Through local follow-up workshops, at microcenters, teachers interact and learn from other experienced teachers, share and reflect on their teaching practices and solve concrete problems. These facilitate a future second stage, of more in depth knowledge where distance education institutions can support continuous teacher development.

3. Administrative structure – Escuela Nuevas try to promote a guiding a collaborative relationship with teachers, rather than a rigid and controlling one and encourage professional

development through action research. The model develops the ability to effectively manage teacher training and creates positive attitudes toward strategic methodology.

4. Relations with the community – The system promotes a partnership with teachers, children and the local community. It offers parents, relative and community at large the opportunity to participate in school activities and ensures their culture is fully valued in daily school activities.
5. Participation is a crosscutting dimension of all the components of the system and has contributed to the quality, sustainability and impact of the learning process. The real actors of change and of the reform are teachers, children and communities.

Tools/Curriculum

1. Learning guides – These guides are self instructional, serve as textbooks and are interactive. They promote child-centered active learning, link learning experiences with family and community and promote the development of thinking abilities.

Cooperative Learning guides facilitate pair as well as small group work with tutorial child to child strategies and serve as planning tools for the teacher. The guides are organized sequentially and in such a way that they can be readily taught by less qualified or extended by more skillful teachers (Neuman, 1980). They also combine core national curriculum with possibilities for regional and local adaptations made by teachers during the training courses. The study guides can be produced at a national level, which reduces printing costs, while the regional and local materials that are developed can be produced with simpler and less expensive technologies.

2. Flexible promotion/advancement – This mechanism, adapted to the lifestyle of the rural child, allows students to advance from one grade or level to another at their own pace thus allowing children to leave school temporarily in case of illness, or for any other valid reason, without jeopardizing the chance of returning to school and continuing with their education.
3. Other curriculum elements - classroom libraries, learning corners that promote articulation between the school and the local culture and community, school government, and student committees linked to community groups and projects all contribute to improved learning.

Student government and cooperative group learning foster democratic behavior help reduce prejudice, and promote non-violent conflict resolution helping to develop skills, values and attitudes for active citizenship at school.

These effective strategies and characteristics of the model have helped Colombia to provide its citizens with a complete primary education and improve its quality in areas where little or none existed before.

Lesson Learned

As indicated above, significant achievements were made, however expansion coincided with the country's nationwide decentralization policy and a Ministry of Education reorganization diverted attention from rural schools leading to significant losses in effectiveness and efficiency. While some of this kind of reduction is inevitable in going to scale, a host of new legislative, administrative and

financial procedures exacerbated this tendency. Given the success of the program, within this complex context, a number of lessons can be drawn from the Escuela Nueva experience.

A study by Michael Drabble (1999) said of the Escuela Nueva: “The incremental approach of small, effective changes instead of a mega reform, the fact that small solutions were introduced in teachers’ daily work and the empowerment of school personnel were essential to the bottom-up approach and to its continued survival.”

Success is greater in regions where communities were involved, and when teachers’ local learning circles continued. Here teachers have made local adaptations to the curriculum and taken ownership of the process.

The continuous mentoring of the original core team, who despite many changes and circumstances have managed to keep the innovation alive and running has been important to the survival of the model. Fundación Escuela Nueva Volvamos a la Gente (Escuela Nueva Foundation), established in 1987 by the original team of authors and founders of the Escuela Nueva has made adaptations of the approach to urban areas and areas with displaced populations and continues to provide technical assistance to several regions of the country. Currently, it is leading an effort to establish a network of teachers and schools that apply the innovations.

Many of the best examples of where the model has been successful are where there was a strong alliance with civil society. The Coffee Growers Association has been an outstanding partner and many of the best Escuela Nueva schools are found in the coffee growing region.

The existence of interactive learning textbooks or learning guides with processes handled by the children themselves has permitted the pedagogical process to be adequately implemented. Ironically, many children have been able to orient new teachers, newly arrived without any previous training.

The fact that there has been constant external evaluation of the model has maintained the interest in the Escuela Nueva as an innovative and effective framework.

The continual support of international organizations such as World Bank, Unicef, IADB, AED, Plan International, among others has contributed to keeping the Escuela Nueva evolving.

The systemic approach has permitted that, at a minimum, some of the components and elements work when others do not, generating a positive net effect, even if small.

The demand and successful application in other countries show that the model can inspire and be adapted to other contexts, which in turn, generates additional demand. Countries like Brazil, Paraguay, Panama, Peru, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Guyana and Uganda, among others, are incorporating components of Escuela Nueva in their educational reforms. In addition, most Latin American countries now emphasize child-centered learning, and the organization of experiential teacher training and teacher learning circles in their educational reforms. They are attempting to impact teacher training, textbook, and assessment policies, three core dimensions of the Escuela Nueva model.

When implementation has emphasized participation and community involvement, the innovation has been most likely to survive and develop.

How to Implement the Escuela Nueva Model

The effectiveness of the model is largely dependent on two key interventions: 1) the implementation of an effective teacher training program using the ©Escuela Nueva teacher training manual and a follow up strategy, and 2) the design and production of flexible, self-paced ©interactive learning guides for children which serve as textbooks, workbooks and teacher guides.

Three operational strategies include: 1) the organization of demonstration schools so that teachers may directly observe new teaching methods, talk to teachers using the method etc., 2) the sequence of training workshops using the teacher training© manual follow methodologies similar to those in the children’s learning guides, 3) the organization of teacher learning circles or microcenters bring teachers together to reflect on their teaching practices.

Phases for implementing the Escuela Nueva model include:

The Awareness Phase – In this phase motivation and advocacy meetings would be held for policymakers to explain the model, its relevance and its success. Field visits would be made to nearest available Escuela Nueva demonstration schools.

The Design and Pilot Phase (12-18 mo) – With technical assistance from the Escuela Nueva Foundation, this phase begins with start-up workshops with planners, trainers of trainers, teacher training institutes, writers and teachers of demonstration schools. The objective of these workshops is the development of skills for organizing multigrade schools using the Escuela Nueva approach, curriculum planning and writing and validating of learning guides. Other parts of the phase include the organization of demonstration schools and teacher learning circles. The Foundation accompanies and gives feedback during this entire process.

The Implementation and Gradual Expansion Phase – This phase includes the workshop for trainers of trainers, workshop for new teachers and the workshop for “learning to use” children’s guides. The objective is to develop skills for training new teachers in the Escuela Nueva approach and in using the learning guides.

New Developments for New Contexts

The Escuela Nueva model is non static as it is continually adapted as needed so as to provide creative solutions for persistent or newly arising challenges in the education sector. The Escuela Nueva Foundation continues to innovate and build upon past advances within the original Escuela Nueva model framework. Some of the new developments responding to new contexts include:

1. Developing the urban version of the Escuela Nueva in marginal areas - The success of the Escuela Nueva in the rural areas brought to the attention of the Escuela Nueva Foundation team its potential application to urban schools. In 1987, with support of the Inter-American Foundation, the Foundation started to adapt the Escuela Nueva model to urban regions, calling it Escuela Nueva Activa™ (Active New School). This project was designed for schools in some of the poorest urban areas and has been applied in a variety of public and private school settings in several cities of Colombia and is gradually expanding it to other cities. An evaluation led by the National University of Colombia from 2000 – 2002 of 20

institutions executing the model in Bogota, confirmed an increment in language skills of 40.36% and in math of 69%.

2. Developing the model for displaced and migrant populations – Since 1985, there are 3,100,000 displaced persons in Colombia, 54% of which are 18 years old or younger and 30% of them 5 years old or younger; 91% of them have been expelled from small municipalities and rural areas, while 9% have been expelled from capital cities; 50% of them migrate to capital cities.¹ This has led to major disruptions in children's schooling and has had serious socio-psychological effects thus requiring a somewhat differentiated (from conventional methods) approach to teaching and learning.

Many aspects of the original Escuela Nueva model make it relevant for these populations. In 2001, The Escuela Nueva Foundation began the process of adapting the program to serve displaced migrant populations through a new strategy called *Círculos de Aprendizaje – Escuela Nueva Activa*TM (*Escuela Nueva Learning Circles*). The *Escuela Nueva Learning Circles*TM, which provide “youth tutors” for groups of students, to facilitate the transition of migrant displaced children into schools, attracting them and maintaining them when conventional schools fail to adapt to their needs. Additionally, the program contributes to conflict management, developing habits of peaceful coexistence, constructive behavior and social integration.

The model has been adopted as national policy for the integration of displaced, migrant children. The original pilot project in Soacha, financed by USAID in 2003, showed such promising results, that it is being replicated in other areas. As it began, 55% of children were excluded from the school system; after one year of intervention, there was 100% enrollment. UNESCO/OREALC evaluations showed that children in *Escuela Nueva learning circles* obtained the highest level of improvement in both language and mathematics (36.1% and 30.4% respectively) with some children showing scores above the national average. Children's self-esteem was also improved by 18.5%. Today 87 *Learning Circles* have been created and successfully operated in 7 municipalities of Colombia with high rates of Internally Displaced Population serving 1,305 students.

3. Responding to increased demand for secondary education and coherence in approach and methodology between primary and post primary levels.

The *Escuela Nueva* model, with its two main emphases on learning and participation, is continually evolving. Also, the new information and communication technologies allow for more distance interaction between teachers and planners, and communities to the benefit of all. In summary, the flexible nature of the *Escuela Nueva*, honed over twenty years, can still be called the pioneer for the twenty first century.

¹ Information System on Forced Displacement and Human Rights (SIDHES) y (CODHES).

The Escuela Nueva Foundation offers services in Curriculum Development, Training, Educational Assessment, Research and Development and Partnership Creation. For additional information regarding the Escuela Nueva or to contact the Foundation for assistance in adapting/applying the Model to other regions/countries, contact:

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