
SITE VISIT: The New School Programme (Escuela Nueva)—More and better primary education for children in rural areas

Source: Vicky Colbert, Clemencia Chiappe and Jairo Arboleda, UNICEF Colombia, 1990.

While not including an early childhood component, the Nueva Escuela from Colombia is illustrative of the way in which the structure, curriculum, and pedagogy of a primary school can be linked appropriately with community needs to make the school a more welcoming and supportive place for children, while at the same time stimulating their learning and achievement.

The Escuela Nueva was organized in 1975 in response to persistent problems in rural education. The basic assumption behind the effort was that things had to be done differently if children were going to be educated in rural areas. The programme started with two fundamental assumptions. The first was that innovation at the level of the child requires creative changes in the training of teachers, in administrative structures, and in relations with the community. Accordingly, the programme was designed to offer an integral response to these assumptions through the development of four components: curricular, training, administrative, and community. Thus, it features concrete strategies for children, teachers, administrative agents, and the community.

Second, from the outset, it was essential to develop mechanisms that are replicable, decentralized, and viable in a technical, political, and financial sense. In other words, the design of the system had to include how to go to scale. In 1985 the programme was adopted as the national strategy to universalize primary education in rural education in Colombia.

Curriculum content. The curriculum promotes active and reflective learning, the ability to think, analyse, investigate, create, apply knowledge, and improve children's self-esteem. It incorporates a flexible promotion mechanism and seeks the development of cooperation, comradeship, solidarity, civic participation, and democratic attitudes.

The curriculum is socially relevant and inductive, and concrete. It also provides active learning experiences for children. The package includes study guides for children, a school library with basic reference material, activity or learning centres, and the organization of a school government. The study guides follow a methodology that promotes active learning, cognitive abilities, discussion, group decision making and the development of skills that can be applied within the environment, thus making the link between the school and the community.

The study guides also contain a sequence of objectives and activities to be developed at the pace of the student, thereby allowing for flexible promotion. The guides are adapted to the lifestyle of the rural child. Within the flexible promotion system, children may advance from one grade or level to another at their own pace. The system allows children to leave school temporarily to help their parents in agricultural activities, in case of illness, or any other valid reason, without jeopardizing their chance of returning to school and continuing their education. The concept of adapting to the child by incorporating flexible time is a highly important learning variable in this model.

Another important characteristic is that the study guides combine a core national curriculum with possibilities for regional and local adaptations made by the teachers during the training workshops.

The adoption of self-instructional guides comes in recognition of the need to facilitate the workload of those teachers who have to handle more than one grade at a time. The study guides are used by groups of two or three children to encourage group work processes.

Teacher training and follow-up. This component promotes in teachers a guiding and orienting role, as opposed to one involving the mere transmission of knowledge. It also encourages a positive attitude toward new ways of working in rural education, the acceptance of the teacher's role as a leader and dynamic force in the community, and it fosters a positive attitude toward the administrative agents and technical assistance.

Training and follow-up for teachers and administrative agents involves in-service training workshops. A series of four basic workshops, one for administrative agents and three for teachers, in one year's time, are essential to correctly implement the methodology. After each of the workshops there is an opportunity for teachers to meet once a month to exchange ideas, analyse problems, and discuss results.

Group discussion (sometimes in the teacher's own classroom) is used to promote positive attitudes toward the programme, and to provide teachers with information and strategies. This approach to teacher training maintains that if the learning model proposed for children is active, discovery-oriented, tied to the community, and with an emphasis on creativity and cooperation in group projects, the process of training teachers must have similar characteristics. This is why the training materials follow a similar methodological pattern and process as the children's study guides.

Administration. This component promotes a supportive rather than controlling role for administration. Administrative agents are required to integrate pedagogical practices into their administrative functions. As noted, one of the four workshops offered each year is for administrators. The workshop for administrative agents/supervisors has as its objectives: to develop the abilities of the staff to guide the application of the Escuela Nueva methodology; to develop the abilities of staff to follow-up the implementation of the programme while working with teachers in the classroom; and to modify their traditional role in such a way that they become an immediate resource person for teachers in the learning process.

The community. This component encourages the mobilization of parents and community to increase their involvement in school activities. Some of these activities include becoming familiar with the new educational approaches, helping to gather simple information on the community, improving the physical space and furnishing the classrooms, and helping to organize the library and/or the activity centres.

Specifically, the programme gives teachers the guidelines for the preparation of a community map, a family information register, a calendar of agricultural events, and various social and cultural monographs to increase the knowledge of the community. This is the first step toward a process of community development, and it is essential regardless of whether or not the teacher lives in the community.

In addition, the written materials used by the students include community content, thereby encouraging students to apply what they learn in their real life to their school life, and to promote activities that contribute to improvement of the overall community.

Evaluation. The impact of the programme is now becoming evident, particularly when children from Nueva Escuela are compared with children from the traditional system. Formative evaluations have been conducted at both the student and teacher level at different periods of time. For example, in tests given on socio-civic behaviour, mathematics for third grade, and Spanish for third and fourth grades, children of the Escuela Nueva scored considerably higher than those in traditional rural schools. An analysis of self-esteem showed that children enrolled in the Nueva Escuela programme have a higher level of self-esteem than children in other rural schools. The fact that self-esteem of girls equalled that of boys is particularly important and demonstrates the equalizing effect of the participatory methodology.

However, the growing demand for implementation of the programme and the positive reaction of teachers, administrative agents, and the community are the best indicators of success.

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
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