



Collaborative Pedagogical Transformation - Colombia (Escuela Nueva)

Carlos has been a teacher in the forests of Colombia for most of his life. It “has become my life project,” he says. For the last 12 years, he has taught students from six grades – early elementary to middle school – all together in one room in a remote, rural school high in the Andes. When we enter Carlos’ school, the president of the student council, a middle-school aged boy, welcomes us. They are working on math and literacy in their learning guides, but they are particularly excited about their school gardens. Using their learning guides, they follow the curriculum at their own pace while Carlos and the other students guide and assist them when necessary. It’s a highly cooperative environment – teachers supporting students and students of all ages assisting each other.

Outside, the forest teems with life. Carlos and his students have turned this environment into a multi-grade classroom as well. There is a space to watch and record observations about birds. There are gardens in raised boxes including carrots and other root vegetables which they market and sell locally. There’s even a makeshift playing field behind the school where students kick around a threadbare soccer ball during a break from classes. Nature and physical activity are integral rather than incidental to learning here. These form the content for math, science, and literacy – the subjects becoming authentic and real, connected to the school’s backyard. Learning comes alive here.

Carlos connects the experiential learning in the garden to the math, literacy, and science lessons in the learning guides – the content varying depending on the grade level of the particular student in the multi-grade classroom. But the lessons extend beyond traditional academics. Carlos also wants the students to learn about peace and democracy, which is why his students are active members of the classroom community and teach one another each day.

At one point, Carlos’ principal, who oversees several small schools in her cluster, rides up on a motorcycle and removes her helmet. Narda is just as proud of the school as Carlos and the students. As we walk with her, a much younger student shows us the mural at the front entrance of the school. It is a colorful map that students have made of their local area so they and their teachers know where the school is in relation to their homes and other natural landmarks. This is the pedagogy, culture, and life of learning at *Escuela Nueva*.

To give children in rural Colombia a chance, Vicky Colbert, founder of *Escuela Nueva*, and committed educators who came to work with her had to teach children the power of community, democracy, and engagement. Colbert and her

colleagues didn't just want greater access to basic education. They wanted to transform learning in ways that gave meaning and purpose for millions of poor or disadvantaged children. In a country that had been torn apart by violence, drugs, and corruption, she and her colleagues first began implementing and spreading their student-centered, democratic model of learning in the most improbable of circumstances.

The vision of learning in *Escuela Nueva* is that it is cooperative, relevant, engaging, experiential, flexible, and personalized, so children can follow the curriculum "at their own rhythm." "Relevance for us is crucial," Colbert explains. "We need a relevant curriculum specifically for the rural areas," she says. The distinctive approach to learning in *Escuela Nueva* is supported by the learning guides that are low-tech and low-cost – somewhere between a book and a worksheet – that are adjusted to each student level.

In order to share this vision with teachers, *Escuela Nueva* provides initial training on the active pedagogies that are central to its student-centered model. But the real learning happens in the follow-up collaboration – the micro-centers – where teachers support one another to learn, understand, and implement the model more effectively. One aspect of the micro-centers, the demonstration site, is an integral part of how teachers can learn from teachers, Carlos explained. "I am very open to receiving teachers new to the model," he said, "especially when those teachers are open to learning the *Escuela Nueva* model." By observing and engaging in relevant, active learning and being able to put questions to the teacher hosting the demonstration, new teachers move quickly from theory to practice to envision what the model might look like in their own classrooms.

Beyond the micro-centers, *Escuela Nueva* staff and supporters have also created a network, often set up around a particular cluster of schools or state. The network consists of teachers participating in micro-centers, along with those who do not have the opportunity to meet regularly in those centers, to continue to learn more about active pedagogies from one another.

Progressive, student-centered practices have sometimes been criticized for being an indulgence of educational romantics that do not get results. The evidence of the *Escuela Nueva* model, however, is that it works. Studies have shown that *Escuela Nueva* students generally outperform other Colombian students in conventional public schools and that, other than Cuba, Colombia was more effective than its Latin American counterparts in serving its rural students. The positive impact comes from the focus on active pedagogies and the democratic model of learning.

Though the challenges facing them are as real as the mountains that separate the schools, the proof is visible to Narda, Carlos, and Vicky Colbert. As

students learn together in their school garden, the *Escuela Nueva* model, too, continues to grow and nourish the rural communities of Colombia.

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