

Active citizenship in Colombian schools

Participation in school organisation is seen by some as a key element in learning to be a democratic citizen.

Ray Harris reports on an innovative scheme in Colombia which is having remarkable effects not only on the pupils themselves but on the wider community.

Escuela Nueva or 'New School' is an educational initiative in Colombia within the formal education system. It was developed in the 1970s as a reaction to poor achievement of children in rural areas. It was here that children's attendance was necessarily erratic as they responded to the pressures of the agricultural seasons, and found themselves continually repeating grade levels and making little progress due to the irrelevance of a curriculum that was planned for urban areas.

The basic concept of Escuela Nueva is of the school as a community-based centre for democratic learning. Children are involved at every level of the organisation and running of the school. Eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds are given real responsibilities within the school and it is not surprising that through 'assisted participation' most children are able to grow, develop and flourish in such a learning environment.

For children to become agents of democracy they have to practise democratic values and be encouraged by school student leaders, and it is through the formation and conduct of the student government that learning for active citizenship is implemented. By participating, the students develop tolerance to differences and a willingness to understand the point of view of other students. Elected committees for taking specific responsibility involve most of the children and the committees have the task of planning and managing the schedule of activities, some of which may take place outside of school time. Action in some form is the usual outcome of students' committees.

Children learn to act with authority and responsibility in the organisation and management of the school, and also to integrate cognitive processes involving social skills, affective attitudes and moral development. The curriculum itself reinforces these processes by encouraging cooperative learning and the development of cognitive and social skills as well as self-evaluation.

There is a long-term view taken at school and community level and it is expected that the experience of developing democratic structures and leadership roles will be replicated in the wider context of adult life. The student government has close contacts with the community through school/community projects and the attendance by student leaders at village council meetings, where they learn democratic principles through the structures of such meetings. There is an understanding that students may also advise village councils of improvements they could make to such meetings.

At the beginning of each year the school government produces a *Manual de Convivencia* (manual for coexistence).

This document, prepared together with parents and teachers, replaces the taken-for-granted nature of rules in traditional schools, which are often handed down by the school administration without consultation. The manual includes sanctions for children who fail to meet the agreed norms. The programme links the protection of children's rights with the taking of responsibility by all members of the school and wider community.

The school organisation and curriculum are naturally child centred as there is a built-in flexibility in the school system which responds to the working schedules of children and it is in this way that the curriculum is integrated with the life of the community.

In some parts of Colombia which have suffered particularly at the hands of paramilitary groups and 'guerrillas', Escuela Nueva has been found to provide protection for many villages by developing solidarity amongst members of the community. This a real outcome of the programme but others have been found as well. Recent evaluations (Psacharopoulos *et al* 1992) have found that there are significant achievements in terms of self-esteem, creativity and civic behaviour such as sense of cooperation, responsibility and solidarity. School drop-out rates have decreased and community participation in school-related activities has increased. From a more recent survey in Latin America, Colombia was the only country where achievements by rural schools were higher than those from urban schools.

Escuela Nueva has been quoted as one of the three most innovative programmes in basic education in the world and is expanding to such countries as Brazil, Guatemala and Guyana as well as proposed developments in Uganda and Zimbabwe. Escuela Nueva is a sophisticated education model which has evolved over 20 years and is still being adapted and improved to meet the changing demands of rural living.

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References

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