



**The Escuela Nueva (The New School) in Colombia; An Innovative  
Educational Program in  
Developing Countries.**

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## The Escuela Nueva (The New School) in Colombia; An Innovative Educational Program in Developing Countries.

### **Introduction and Significance**

The Escuela Nueva (The New School) in Colombia is one of the widely recognized programs that tend to improve the quality of education in rural areas. The program is an innovative educational program that was initiated to improve the students' lives for the better (FEN, 2018). It is widely recognized because of its positive impact on the educational outcomes and the reapplication in many other countries. Escuela Nueva is well known as one of the most successful public policy reforms in Colombia and other developing countries. This program was recognized by many international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank (FEN, 2018). Educators and researchers from over 35 countries visited the Escuela Nueva to implement this model in their countries (FEN, 2018). In addition, the program was adopted in 16 different countries, and it was selected as one of the top 100 NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) of the world. In 2013, Escuela Nueva program was awarded the WISE Prize because of its outstanding contributions to education (Qatar Foundation, 2018). This paper highlights the Escuela Nueva program as one of the most innovative educational programs in Colombia. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the educational problems that Escuela Nueva addresses with the purpose of highlighting key features of this innovative program.



## **Description of the Country and Education Sector**

### **Geographic and Historical Facts of Colombia**

The republic of Colombia is located in the northwest of South America. It shares borders with Panama from the northwest, Venezuela and Brazil from the east, and Ecuador and Peru from the south, and Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Jamaica, Dominican Republic and Haiti share maritime limits with Colombia (Cancilleria, 2018). Colombia was colonized by Spain for a long period of time. On July 20, 1810, Colombians protested in the streets against the Spanish rule. This demonstration led to permitting Colombia a limited independence and later permanent independence (Novelli, 2010). The republic of Colombia was called New Granada until 1886, when it got its current name. Even after its independence, conflicts and civil war continued in Colombia. The popular two insurgent groups are the National Liberation Army (NLA) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (RAFC) (Petras, 2001). The conflicts between those groups were mainly because of the inequality of distribution of the political power and wealth of a country with great national and human resources (Novelli, 2010).

Furthermore, the country suffers from the problem of violence against educators. According to Novelli, (2010) “between 1991 and 2006, 808 educators were assassinated, 2015 received death threats, 21 were tortured, 59 disappeared, 1008 were forced to leave their homes and jobs for fear of violence, and 161 were arbitrarily detained” (p. 277). However, there is no clear cut answer concerning why educators have been victims of violence. Some of the reasons for this violence might be because teachers historically have always been in the forefront of different reforms such as national liberation and opposing processes of neo-liberal education,



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which later became globalized especially by the World Bank (Novelli, 2010). However, these conflicts and civil wars started to decrease, and the democracy and peaceful features started to increase, especially with the contribution of former presidents like Alvaro Uribe who ruled from 2002 to 2010 (Forero-Pineda, Escobar-Rodríguez, & Molina, 2006). With the help of military support and United States President, Uribe ran a campaign against armed paramilitary groups (Forero-Pineda et al., 2006).

### **Education System and Governance**

The Ministry of Education in Colombia was established on the 1st of January in 1928. It is the institute that is responsible for overseeing education affairs all over the country (Mauro, 2012). The ministry has an important role in developing and implementing work competencies. The education system was centralized until the 1990s, when the system shifted to be more decentralized and municipalities were given more power and revenue than before as a step toward decentralization (Mauro, 2012). Colombian compulsory education continues for nine years. The first cycle is the primary education, which starts with at least one year of pre-schooling, then four years of elementary schooling, and students start in the age of six. The second stage of education lasts for six years and is divided into two cycles: the basic cycle is four years of lower secondary education and the other cycle lasts for two years of upper secondary education. In the two years of the upper secondary education, the students should choose either to continue in academic or technical tracks (UNESCO-IBE, 2010). The technical track trains students to work in production or service industries, and it is divided into five different tracks:



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the industrial track, the commercial track, a pedagogical track, the agricultural track, and the social promotion track (UNESCO-IBE, 2010). However, in order for the students to be admitted to the universities they should pass an entrance examination or test for access to universities.

In regard to supporting the vocational field, the Ministry of Education was aware of the fundamental role of recruiting the country's future workers, so they created the National System of Education for Work (SENA) in 1957. This institution is accountable for articulating the efforts of public and private schooling, technical secondary, technological technical, professional and non-formal education (SENA, 2011). Additionally, in 1991, the Ministry of Education launched the national voucher program, which is considered an attempt toward decentralizing the education system that happened later in the nineties (King, Orazem & Wohlgemuth, 1999). According to King et al. (1999), "the primary aim of the program is to raise the transition rate from primary to secondary education, especially among the poor, by expanding secondary school capacity in areas with insufficient public secondary school supply" (p. 4). Establishing the voucher program was a great contribution to provide a quality education to the less privileged students.

### **Challenges Facing the Education in Colombia**

One of the prominent challenges that influence the education in Colombia is the underfunding issue. In the last few years, students have been protesting in the streets against the dire state of higher education in the country (Rojas, 2009). Therefore, further financial attention should be given to education in general and higher education in particular. The problem of social status differences among Colombian is the fundamental reason behind inequality access to



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education. According to Melguizo, Torres, and Jaime (2011), 60 % of individuals with high social status enrolled in colleges, while the percentage of low income individuals' enrolment was less of 10 %. However, the government has been putting effort into increasing financial aid for students with low and middle incomes. With the support of loans taken from the World Bank in 2003, the government expanded education opportunities for low income students and established the Acceso con Calidad a la Educació'n Superior (ACCES) program which is concerned with providing access to high quality education (Melguizo et al., 2011). The challenge of providing quality education to low-income students is not only apparent in urban areas, but there are many disadvantaged students in rural areas where the problem is worse because schools lack resources and teachers need network support (Colbert, 2009). These issues are the essence of the intervention educational program Escuela Nueva which aims to improve education in rural areas and provide educational and pedagogical support to teachers (Colbert, 2009).

The education in Colombia is free, but according to the World Bank (2003) in reality the education is not fully free and families are required to contribute to the schools with fees and supplies. This issue challenges people from lower social status, and sometimes hinder them from access to education. There is also the problem of students not attending schools. More 10 percent of students between ages of 5 to 15 were not enrolling school (UNESCO-UIS & UNICEF, 2005). Furthermore, the quality of the public education is another challenge for students and educators. With the insufficient education quality, students are not educated well and educators need to devote extra effort to develop the quality of education and solve educational problems



face the students. All of those issues are not resolved, but the efforts last until the current year, 2018.

## **Description of the Escuela Nueva and the Problem It Addresses**

### **Description of the problem**

Children who live in conflict areas face many challenges in terms of access to schools and quality of education (FEN, 2009). Children in Colombia experienced poverty, violence, and lack of social services (FEN, 2009). In Colombia, more than one million students under the age of 18 live in a state of displacement. About 85 percent of students are not able to go back to school after displacement (FEN, 2009). Displaced students need schools that pay more attention to their psychological and social needs and that help develop their cognitive and social skills. The Escuela Nueva program successfully addressed the quality of children's education in conflict areas. This program focuses on the difficulties of small, multi-grade schools by linking communities, teachers, families, administrators, and policymakers (Luschei, 2014). The Escuela Nueva program is a response to some educational problems that Colombia experiences, especially in remote rural areas, such as traditional teaching methods that don't engage students, low student achievement, and high repetition rates. Teachers in the Escuela Nueva schools are not transmitters of information but facilitators of learning.

This program started in the mid-seventies as a small project in Colombia to improve the quality of education in urban areas. Rural education in Colombia has lagged behind many



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developing countries (World Bank, 2000). The Escuela Nueva program derived from the Unitary Schools that were sponsored by UNESCO. The program shifted the focus from good teaching to good and effective learning (Schiefelbein, 1992a).

The founders of Escuela Nueva created this innovative model by implementing new teaching methods and training teachers to help marginalized students complete their primary education in rural areas (Colbert, 2009). Many countries have adopted this program, and educators from over thirty-five countries have visited Colombia to observe the Escuela Nueva schools. During 1988-1996, the number of students increased to 45.6 percent in rural school and to 7.6 percent in urban schools. In addition, Colombia was the only country after Cuba that achieved higher results in rural schools than urban ones (Castro, Verdisco, & Aimee, 2002).

### **Description of the Program**

The Escuela Nueva model is a method of teaching in rural schools, where one or two teachers teach all grades of basic education in one or two multi-grade classrooms (Velez, 1991). Students complete their education at their convenience. If they need to leave school, later they can continue from where they had stopped (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000). The program is a new concept of rural education that is based on some methodologies such as developing participative learning and helping students to continue their education without repeating grades. The Escuela Nueva was designed to promote equity between marginalized students in rural and urban school areas, as this is one of the major educational challenges in Latin America (Kline, 2002).





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The Escuela Nueva addresses four major components: community involvement, curriculum, teacher training, and administration. The curriculum content consists of guides for students, to help them apply what they learned in the classroom to their life (Velez, 1991). The curriculum promotes critical thinking, active learning and it improves students' self-esteem. It also improves students' cognitive abilities and social skills, which helps them to link between schools and community (Velez, 1991). The student guides are designed to be used by two or three students, which encourages teamwork and collaboration. In addition, the Escuela Nueva system adapted to the students' needs in rural areas. For example, students are allowed to leave the school if their parents are sick or when they need to help their parents with agricultural tasks, without affecting continuing their education (Velez, 1991). Secondly, the teacher trainings and follow-up component is conducted through a series of workshops that help teachers to learn how to implement the Escuela Nueva program (Velez, 1991). This component involves four workshops that help teachers to learn how to manage the new materials. Teachers can meet monthly to discuss the results and to exchange their ideas (Velez, 1991). The third component is the administration in the Escuela Nueva schools, which introduced students to a democratic way of life (Dongen, 2002). Administrators and supervisors attend a workshop yearly to improve their ability in guiding the staff in implementing the Escuela Nueva methodology (Velez, 1991). Administrators' roles serve as a source for teachers who have questions or concerns regarding the application of the model and the learning process (Velez, 1991). The community involvement is also a significant component to encourage parents, teachers, and students to engage more in school activities (Velez, 1991).



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The principal features of the Escuela Nueva is that it develops consistently over time and allows flexible promotion. The program encourages collaboration between students, teachers, and parents. The schools provided study corners and a small library. Many school activities encourage parents and the community to get involved in their children's education. The program also supports peer instructions where older students coach the younger students (Kline, 2002). The Escuela Nueva program uses new educational materials, which encourage the application of what students learn in school to real life in rural communities. Students develop civic and democratic behavior, and they relate what they learn in the classroom to their daily life (Dongen, 2002). This program supports teachers, where teachers meet every month to discuss their experience, training, and concerns (UNESCO, 2012). The program improves students' performance, increases community participation, and helps in reducing the dropout rates. Cooperative learning and student government encourage democratic behavior that develops students' social skills and positive social interaction (Colbert, 2009). Students who attend the Escuela Nueva schools are able to communicate well and improve their writing, reading skills, and performing basic mathematics operations. In addition, the cost of implementation of the program is low, which makes it more effective when taking into account that many Latin-American countries are low-income countries.

### **Key actors and levels in designing and implementing the program**



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Because of the conditions of Colombia, Vicky Colbert and other co-authors designed the Escuela Nueva model to improve the quality of basic education in urban and rural areas. Colbert is the founder of Fundación Escuela Nueva. She is internationally recognized because of her remarkable achievement in promoting equity for marginalized students. Colbert served as a Vice-Minister of Education in Colombia, and she worked as an advisor for the World Bank and UNICEF in Latin America and the Caribbean. This non-profit organization continues supporting the Escuela Nueva model with offering services in teacher training, educational assessment, curriculum development, and research development (FEN, 2009). There are three major phases for the implementation of the Escuela Nueva program. First, the awareness phase where meetings held for policymakers to discuss the model, its purpose and success. Also, field visits are made to the Escuela Nueva demonstration schools. The second phase is the design and pilot phase (12-18 months) which includes workshops with planners, trainers, teachers, writers and teachers of demonstration schools. The purpose of these workshops is to develop skills for organizing the demonstration schools. The third is the implementation and gradual expansion phase, and it includes workshops for new teachers on how to use the learning guides (FEN, 2009).

The municipal and departmental administrations are important actors who helped the implementation of the Escuela Nueva model. The efforts and the motivations of the Secretaries of Education and Directors were essential for the success of the model of Escuela Nueva. Students, teachers and communities are also key actors in designing this program. All the



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workshops, the trainings, learning guides and the school community relationships are encouraged by the social interaction and participation, which helped the Escuela Nueva methodology to be sustained over time (FEN, 2009). There are other key actors in the case of the Colombian Escuela Nueva that helped the program to achieve its goal and succeed, such as the Interamerican Foundation that supported Fundación Escuela Nueva to implement the model in urban regions in 1989 (Colbert, 2009). There are also other institutions that were the main actors in implementing the Escuela Nueva program such as the Coffee Growers Federation and the FES (Fundacion para la Educacion Superior). These two actors helped promoting and sustaining the Escuela Nueva methodology (Colbert, 2009).<sup>11</sup>

## **Analysis and Recommendations**

### **Assessment of Escuela Nueva**

Escuela Nueva has achieved several educational successes and has been recognized by many educational organizations. In 1989, the World Bank considered Escuela Nueva as one of the successful programs that had achieved outstanding influence on public policy globally (Castro & Verdisco, 2002). In 2000, the program was selected by the United Nations in the Human Development Report as one of the three greatest accomplishments in Colombia (Epstein, & Yuthas, 2012). Scholars noticed that the program impacted positively on girls' participation, students' self-esteem, and discipline among students (Pitt, 2002). Moreover, in a study done in one of the violent areas in Colombia in 2006, researchers stated that Escuela Nueva led to



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peaceful interactions and democratic deeds among students (Forero-Pineda et al., 2006). The program also makes Colombia one of the countries in Latin America in which rural schools outperformed urban schools in most areas according to UNESCO's 1998 First Comparative International Study on the Quality of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (Pitt, 2002). Some evaluations revealed that the third grade students in Escuela Nueva schools scored higher than their peers in traditional schools in the Spanish and Mathematics test (McEwan, 1998). The educational innovation Escuela Nueva was also recognized by the Qatar Foundation's WISE Prize, which is an important prize similar to the Nobel Prize (Qatar Foundation, 2018).

### **Failures of Escuela Nueva**

As the program has successful sides, it also has some drawbacks. There are some observed issues in the training sessions that Escuela Nueva's teachers receive. Although the program enhances the cooperative learning, some teachers still use the passive pedagogical approach based on repetition, lecturing, copying from board, and memorizing because teachers have been taught in this manner, and the training sessions do not actively clarify to teachers how they could apply the cooperative learning theory in a classroom (Kline, 2002). Therefore, any failure in training Escuela Nueva teachers would lead to poorer performance. On the other hand, The Ministry of Education became the accountable authority to expand the program, and this expansion became one of the objectives of the national plan to lift up the country from the poverty (Pitt, 2002). Tackling this massive expansion was a heavy load for the ministry, which was required to provide the program with management support, especially after the



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decentralization movement. The consequence was that the program suffered from low educational quality (Pitt, 2002). Furthermore, the managerial agents of the decentralization process were not accurately trained to deal with Escuela Nueva approaches which led them to make unfortunate decisions (Pitt, 2002). For example, they moved many of the original Escuela Nueva teachers from rural areas to urban ones and hired less trained teachers in rural areas who reverted to the traditional approach of teaching as a result of their lack of training and experience. Moreover, the program in some areas received less attention and insufficient funding, so those schools lacked school supplements and library stock (Pitt, 2002).

### **Lessons Learned From Escuela Nueva**

The Colombian Escuela Nueva provides a well-designed educational innovation that can be viewed as an example to be tracked. Other reforms should learn from how Escuela Nueva even if it appears as “compromises the quality of the reform by packaging the components and 'freezing' its further development and adaptability from Colombian experience of expanding Escuela Nueva to the national level" (Kline, 2002, p.177). Escuela Nueva is the solution to provide access to education in remote and rural areas that cannot be funded greatly as the program bases on the multigrade system which requires less fund because only one teacher can be hired to teach multiple grade students (Pitt, 2002). Another distinguished characteristic that can be adopted is that Escuela Nueva marks with its flexibility in level promotion. For example, once a student completes the required objectives of a certain level the student advances to the next level, so students can save time and finish from primary school with less studying years



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(Pitt, 2002). Furthermore, the program is considered as a solution for the repetition problem as the case in Colombia where the repetition rate in rural areas have been reduced with the program, and students became more prepared to advance to the next level than with the automatic promotion program (Forero-Pineda et al., 2006).

The Escuela Nueva is a well-structured system that follows various teaching methods which can be easily adopted in many education settings. The curriculum comes with students' guides and the teacher manuals that support both the teachers in their roles as facilitators and the students to be self-directed learners (Colbert, 2002). The peer tutoring and cooperative learning are highly encouraged and students interact and ask each other for the learning purposes (Colbert, 2002). Therefore, it is observed that Escuela Nueva fosters students' responsibility by, for instance, having the students monitor their own selves' attendance and post their personal calendar (Pitt, 2002). Moreover, the taught subjects are cautiously chosen in a way that guarantees covering subjects from social science, science experiments, and English literature (Pitt, 2002).

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

Vicky Colbert stated that the transition from a pilot project to a program was associated with a learning process where they learn from mistakes. The Escuela Nueva methodology is imperfect, however it improves consistently. Based on the previous analysis, these are some suggestions to the program of Escuela Nueva:



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- **Consistently evaluate the curriculum:** areas of improvement in the Escuela Nueva program include revising and evaluation the curriculum to suit every country. Taking into the account the language and the culture of the countries where the program transferred to is also important for the success of the program. In addition, it is also significant to work on improving the learning guides through the input of teachers and community members. Involving teachers and community in the curriculum and the program strategies will improve the successful implementation of the program (Dongen, 2002).
- **Consistently evaluate the teachers' performance:** training of teachers has to be an ongoing process. Improvement of teachers' performance includes improving teacher-training sessions, and training teachers in a way suitable to their needs and problems. To improve the Escuela Nueva program, it is important to identify the factors that affect teachers' motivation to implement the Escuela Nueva program.

**Increasing funding:** Although Ministry of Education in Colombia and other NGOs fund the program, there is still a need for further attention to funding as some schools suffer from fund cuts and shortage in the provided schools' supplements and materials (Pitt, 2002).

### **Recommendations for Applying the Program to other Settings**

Implementing this program in other countries is highly recommended as long as the strategies of the program are implemented carefully. The Nueva Escuela program can be implemented in any context since its purpose is to improve the quality of education (FEN, 2018).





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For example, Bolivia trained teachers in 2000 schools and adapted the textbooks; however, the result was rather poor because textbooks were traditional, and teachers did not visit the demonstration school (Schiefelbein, 1992b). However, it is highly recommended for developing countries because of its cost-effectiveness. The average annual cost per student is \$10 USA including the teacher training and the learning guides, which makes the program one of the most effective educational program for underrepresented students in rural areas (FEN, 2018). Studies suggest that the Escuela Nueva program is effective and cost-effective since it helps improve students' performance and expands access for students from low socioeconomic status (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000). Therefore, The Escuela Nueva model as an innovative program is recommended for poor countries in rural areas (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000). In addition, teachers also have to be convinced of the merits of Escuela Nueva program. Studies show that many teachers hold negative attitudes towards their role in multi-grade-classes (Kline, 2002). Discussing with teachers the successful results of the program in the other countries will motivate teachers to achieve the goals of the program. It is also important to maintain strong community participation as a main component of the success and effectiveness of the program (Luschei, 2014).

In addition, when transferring the Escuela Nueva model to other countries, it is important to put into consideration two key aspects: capacity and will of teachers (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000). According to Benveniste and McEwan (2000), the capacity and will of teachers might impede the large-scale implementation of the Escuela Nueva program in Colombia and other



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countries. Limited capacity of teachers may weaken the successful implementation of the program. In addition, the negative stigma associated with rural schools and multi-grade teaching is one of the variables that reduce the teacher's will to implement the program (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000). Moreover, there are other factors that affect the successful implementation of the program in other countries such as the capacity to achieve the reform, resource constraints, and the incentives of parents, students and teachers (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

Finally, the successful experience of the Escuela Nueva model encourages other countries to implement the program. It is widely recognized for being one of the most successful public policy reforms in Colombia and other developing countries. The Escuela Nueva model is recognized by many international organizations, and it won many prestigious awards because of its outstanding contributions to education. The main purpose of this innovative program is to promote equity between marginalized students in rural and urban school areas. It successfully helped to solve some educational problems that schools in Colombia experienced, such as traditional teaching methods, low student achievement, high rates of dropping out, and repetition. The Escuela Nueva schools have lower repetition and dropout rates, and students in the third grade at Escuela Nueva schools surpassed their peers in rural areas by 19 percent in Math and 12 percent in Spanish (Luschei, 2014). Therefore, the program proved its effectiveness in improving students' achievement and success. The positive results of the program on students' outcomes and its adoption in other countries is a clear evidence of its success and effectiveness.



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A limitation of the study is that a large number of good resources are written in Spanish, which require more time to translate and interpret the content; however, the results are worth it. In addition, the evaluations of the program suggested that the program has a positive impact on students' outcome, girls' participation and self-esteem. The Escuela Nueva methodology helps in building peace and democracy in regions that experienced violence and conflicts. Students' behavior inside classrooms has an impact on their behavior and relationships outside classrooms. The program also has a positive impact on the peaceful social interaction of children. However, for further analysis to be conducted, it is important to study the results of applying the Escuela Nueva methodology in the other settings. The program succeeded in providing many lessons to be learned and followed by other educational innovations, especially for problems as the lack of access to education in rural areas and the level repetition problem. Also, teaching techniques of the program are excellent examples to be adopted. Therefore, implementing the Escuela Nueva model into other settings will definitely enhance educational outcomes and will prepare students for lifelong learning.

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