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15 Minutes

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, **www.ssireview.com**

15minutes

More than 5 million students are enrolled in schools affiliated with Vicky Colbert's Escuela Nueva.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ESCUELA NUEVA

Vicky Colbert

SSIR *Managing Editor Eric Nee spoke with Escuela Nueva's president Vicky Colbert about her efforts to change the way children are educated.*

Step into a typical classroom in rural Latin America, Africa, or Asia, and you're likely to see a teacher standing before a large group of students, all sitting upright in rows of neatly arrayed desks, reciting in unison a lesson they have just memorized.

Step into an Escuela Nueva school and the scene is very different. Students are typically scattered around the room at various learning centers, each working diligently on a personalized learning program, while the teacher moves from one student to another to help them work through a particular problem.

The traditional approach to education is centered on the teacher, whereas Escuela Nueva's approach is centered on the child. In an Escuela Nueva school the teacher's role is to help every child advance at his or her own pace. Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education. This is not a new pedagogy, but for most of the communities that Escuela Nueva operates in, the approach couldn't be more revolutionary – or successful.

Vicky Colbert launched Escuela Nueva in 1975 to help teachers in rural Colombia improve their schools. Many schools adopted the model, and the benefits were substantial. In 1996 UNESCO found that Colombia was the only Latin American country where rural students outperformed urban students. Today, more than half of the country's 34,000 rural schools have adopted the Escuela Nueva model, and urban schools are beginning to do the same. The concept has also taken root outside of Colombia: Escuela Nueva now operates in more than a dozen Latin American countries as well as in the Philippines, India, Uganda, and Kenya.

One of the keys to Escuela Nueva's success is that it enlists the support of government, nonprofits, and for-profit businesses behind the common goal of improving education. To achieve her goals, Colbert has spent many years working inside and outside of government. She served as Colombia's vice minister of education and as an educational adviser to UNICEF. Today, Colbert focuses her time on building the Escuela Nueva Foundation.

ERIC NEE: Why have you dedicated the last 30 years to educational reform?

VICKY COLBERT: When I came back from Stanford University [where she received an M.A. from the School of Education in 1973] to Colombia to work in education, the first thing I saw was a tremendous inequity in the schools – high dropout rates, high repetition rates, no results, no learning, low teacher morale, nothing of what

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the child learned had any relevance to the community and to his or her family, no learning materials, traditional teacher-centered methods, and ineffective teacher training.

So I started working as a government coordinator with rural Colombian teachers to try to improve things. Instead of attacking each of these problems in isolation, we saw that it had to be a large, systemic approach. It also had to be a cost-effective approach because anything we designed had to be scalable so that it could influence national policy. For eight years I ran around the country working with Colombian teachers. It started as a local innovation in the rural areas in Colombia and finally affected 20,000 schools around the country. Most of these rural schools are small, with only one or two teachers.

What changes did you make in the schools?

Some children learn faster and others go slower. That's the way children learn. Instead of spending so much time at the blackboard giving information, the teacher's new goal is to spend more time helping student comprehension and catalyzing students. Students work at their own pace using self-instructional learning materials that we have developed. To keep it affordable, these materials are reusable. In addition, anything the child learns has to be relevant and applied with the family and the community. That way you ensure that the child becomes an agent of change in his or her family.

This is not a new educational concept. I learned many of the ideas when I was studying John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and other great pedagogs at Stanford. What was beautiful about the Colombian experience is that these small, multigrade schools force you to innovate. This is cutting-edge pedagogy right now: cooperative learning, children learning to discuss and interact, children constructing knowledge together, and self-paced learning. At present, Escuela Nueva is reaching approximately 5 million children in 14 countries in the region and several other countries around the world.

What challenges did you encounter?

By the early 1990s the model had been adopted by much of the Colombian educational system [27,000 rural schools in 1992], and it was starting to be adopted in other countries as well. But soon after, we began having problems in Colombia. Innovations often fail within bureaucracies. That's because they are very vulnerable to political and administrative changes. One lesson we learned is that to create lasting change in education, you can't rely solely on the government. Instead, you need to have public-private partnerships.

We learned how to work with the private sector in Colombia. So now, wherever Escuela Nueva is – Mexico, Guatemala, Brazil – I'm doing exactly the same thing I did in Colombia. I'm trying to work with the private sector. I have learned that unless you have these public-private partnerships, you cannot ensure quality or sustainability. We continued working with the Colombian government, but by building our NGO and creating partnerships with groups like the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia, we were able to revive the movement.

Why were coffee growers interested in school reform?

If you run a company and your employees don't know how to work in teams, can't follow instructions, and don't have basic skills, that's a problem. The growers were very aware that the indicators of performance in the labor market are exactly the same as school performance. They saw that Escuela Nueva was good for their business and became a very progressive force. The growers helped put pressure on the government and also gave a lot of support to teacher training. Without good-quality basic education you will never have economic and social development, peace, and democracy.

Have you established a formal partnership with any multinational corporations?

We're right in the middle of looking for one now. This is a critical moment, because we have a proven solution, and now we need a corporate partner to help us expand. One of the things we have done that provides some interesting opportunities for working with corporations is printing the names of companies on our educational materials. In return for a company's financial support, we put its name on the learning materials. That creates a link between government, the business sector, and our NGO so that all three are working together. The companies are happy because they see their names on the materials that are being used in the school. It's a wonderful way for the private sector to finance us, because they know their money is not being wasted.

What else did Escuela Nueva do in the 1990s to get back on track?

We got back into the political arena. I started creating international conferences on Escuela Nueva to publicize the results of research that had been

conducted by the World Bank, Stanford, Harvard, the University of Toronto, and other organizations. UNESCO reported that Colombia had the best rural primary education in Latin America and that rural schools performed better than urban schools in small cities. I also realized that we have to create institutions to sustain the idea. It's not enough to work only for curriculum innovation. We also have teacher training, community development, and management training. It's a whole systemic approach.

What is the biggest challenge you face when trying to establish Escuela Nueva in other countries?

The main challenge is getting teachers to demand the program. You can't have reforms by decree. They have to come from the bottom up. The real actors of change are the children, teachers, and communities. For us this is not just educational innovation, it's also a model of bottom-up social change. One of the ways to do this is to create demonstration schools so that teachers can see it for themselves. That way we can promote a demand-driven approach.

What criteria do you use when deciding whether to venture into another country?

We want to be sure, first of all, that we have teachers who are eager to adopt the program. Second, that the effort is supported by an NGO, the government, and the private sector to ensure that it can be scaled up. We cannot depend on one person or two persons to make replicability happen.

Could your approach work in developed countries like the United States?

Why not? It has been proven that

cooperative learning works. It works in urban areas in Colombia. My challenge right now is that I don't want it to be seen as just for second-class citizens. That's why I'm starting to get it into a very important elite school in Colombia. We don't want to create the impression that this approach is just for the poor.

What are your goals for the next five years?

We're beginning to work on secondary education as well as primary education in Colombia. We're producing a prototype kit for primary education in other countries. And we're producing an international prototype kit for creating schools in emergency situations in various countries, with a strong emphasis on life skills and social skills in children. We have developed a great deal of experience doing that in those parts of Colombia that are under conflict or where children have been displaced to other areas because of conflict. [Large parts of Colombia are under the control of guerrilla or militia organizations.] We are also expanding our programs with universities so that we can develop more research and evaluations of our programs that demonstrate measurable results.

You mentioned that Escuela Nueva is moving into secondary education. Why are you doing that now?

In the rural areas of Colombia where we work with the coffee growers, we have already gone into post-primary education – sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. Now we want to do it elsewhere. The reason we want to do this is because we have all of these children taking leadership initiatives and learning to learn, and when they go on to secondary schools they often come into a teacher-centered type of setting, everybody learning at the same pace, reading the same page.

Many of our students find this style very frustrating. That is one of the reasons we're now working in secondary education in Colombia. One of the big problems in Latin America is keeping children in school. That is why the challenge right now is for us to focus on post-primary and secondary education.

As you expand into other countries, how do you make sure that the reforms stick and that they don't revert backward as you did in Colombia during the 1990s?

First of all, it's very important that teachers, children, and communities take ownership of these programs. The other factor is establishing strong public-private partnerships because real change doesn't take place in the ministry of education, it takes place at the community level and at the school level. This is one of the reasons why Escuela Nueva has survived and been sustained. But definitely, when we go into another country these are the things we have to tackle. It's not only establishing the public-private partnerships, it's also figuring out how to incorporate social participation from the outset. □