**Students Put Democracy Into Practice at Escuela Nueva Schools**

At the beginning of September, children in many countries return to school. In classrooms all over, students sit in lines of desks facing the teacher. The teachers talks about the subject of study. The students listen. They raise their hands to let the teacher know when they have a question or an answer.

But, this is not how things are done at Escuela Nueva schools. There, students of the same grade level sit together in small groups. They work on a lesson at their own speed. They work individually but also help each other learn the lesson.

Then, the older students in the room help the younger students understand the lesson before moving on to another.

Teachers at Escuela Nueva schools do not stand in front of the classroom and lecture.

The teaching method is a model of democratic values. Students are involved in every element of how the school operates. They make decisions about how and what they learn.

For example, classmates elect students for leadership roles and to perform jobs such as cleaning and social activities.

Educating children is one of the biggest challenges in the poorest parts of the world. Many rural schools, for example, have only one classroom. This means they teach students of mixed grade levels at the same time. Escuela Nueva uses these limitations as a strength and is quickly becoming a model for the world’s classrooms.

**A Brief History of Escuela Nueva**

The phrase ‘Escuela Nueva’ means ‘New School’ in Spanish. The name fits, as this learning method is not like that used in traditional schools. These schools make it easy for students to learn at their own speed and return to school after long absences.

Clara Victoria Colbert developed the model in the mid-1970s in Colombia. Colbert comes from a well-known Colombian family with a history of educational involvement. Her goal was to provide a good education to the world’s mostdisadvantaged students.

Colbert believes that Escuela Nueva improves peaceful social interactions through its focus on democratic values, cooperation and empathy. Colbert describes the method as “cooperation in action.” The Spanish word “convivencia,” means “living together” or “coexistence.” This is central to learning in Escuela Nueva schools.

Another example of convivencia is that parents and teachers work together to make decisions about the schools.

When she developed Escuela Nueva with these values in mind, Colbert hoped to support social progress in Colombia and beyond.

Colbert told NPR, America’s public broadcaster, that good quality basic education is necessary for social development, economic development, peace, and democracy. “It’s the only way,” she said.

Today, the Escuela Nueva model is widely praised because of its long list of successes. Students at these schools attend classes at a higher rate, have betteracademic success, and drop out at a lower rate.

According to the New York Times, in Colombia alone, there are now 20,000 Escuela Nueva schools. About 20 other nations have started schools using the Escuela Nueva model, including Vietnam, Uganda, India, Brazil, and the Philippines.

Nearly five million children worldwide attend Escuela Nueva schools. Organizations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF as well as non-governmental groups and private investors help to finance and establish the schools.

**How Escuela Nueva Teaches**

In Escuela Nueva, students learn by doing rather than by listening to the teacher’sinstruction. Teachers are simply there to guide and encourage students. They are not the only holders of knowledge but rather facilitators: their purpose is to permit students to be the owners of their own learning.

The center of the learning method lies in the learning guide, which is a combination of a textbook and workbook. These learning guides combine math, science, reading, writing, and social studies.

**Benefits of Escuela Nueva**

When Colbert developed Escuela Nueva in the 1970s, there were many educational problems in Colombia. There were very few teachers. As a result, schools needed to quickly train new teachers, many of them with little education. The schools also needed to operate on small budgets. The minimal training and low cost of Escuela Nueva schools gave them an advantage.

Another advantage is that students do not fail a grade level due to absences. They can return to school at any time. As families in the poorest parts of the world struggle to survive, they often need their children to provide additional income. As a result, the world’s poorest students often leave school for work, starting from an early age.

Missing school for days, months, or even years is common for children in developing nations.

Many of the earliest Escuela Nueva schools taught the children of farm workers, including coffee growers in Colombia. These workers often had to move around for work. “Can you imagine a child who leaves and is forced to repeat a grade level every time he comes back?” Colbert told the New York Times newspaper.

Escuela Nueva students gain real-world skills they can use in their communities. For example, Colbert told NPR that "Instead of reading, 'Which is the longest river of Egypt?' students learn things such as how to help their brothers and sisters not die of deadly diseases."

Real-world skills have gained support from the United Nations and other international organizations. International education experts call many of these skills 21st century skills. These skills include collaboration, creativity, and critical thinkingas well as leadership.

**World Attention on Escuela Nueva**

Beginning in the late 1980s, the World Bank and UNESCO helped the Colombian government to finance Escuela Nueva schools. A few years later, a UNESCO report found that Escuela Nueva helped Colombia’s poor, rural schools perform better than wealthier city schools throughout Latin America.

In only one other Latin American country, Cuba, poor schools perform as well as schools with better resources.

Escuela Nueva’s success stories have helped Colbert win several awards, including the Wise Prize for Education Laureate and the Clinton Global Citizenship Award.

Rebecca Winthrop is an education expert at the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. The Center researches educational models and innovations.

Winthrop says Escuela Nueva offers an ideal method for an ever-changing world. She recently told NPR that Escuela Nueva’s focus on student leadership, teamwork, and community could make it an educational model for the future.

I’m John Russell.

And I’m Jill Robbins.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Words in This Story**

**lesson** – n. an activity that you do in order to learn something

**lecture** -a talk or speech given to a group of people to teach them about a particular subject

**challenges** - n. a difficult task or problem: something that is hard to do

**disadvantaged** - adj. not having the things (such as money and education) that are considered necessary for an equal position in society

**focus** – n. a subject that is being discussed or studied

**empathy** - n. the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions

**academic** – adj. of or relating to schools and education

**drop out** - v. to stop going to a school or university before finishing

**instruction** – n. the action or process of teaching

**encourage** – v. to make someone more likely to do something

**facilitator** - n. a person who helps something to run more smoothly and effectively

**advantage** - n. something that helps to make someone or something better or more likely to succeed than others

**collaboration** - n. working with another person or group in order to achieve or do something

**critical thinking** **-** n. a type of thinking that requires close and careful examination of an issue or topic in order to form a judgment.

**innovation** - n. a new idea, device, or method