Improving Teaching and Learning in Low-income Schools: Innovation and Implication from “Escuela Nueva”

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Introduction

The Escuela Nueva program (EN) that started in Colombia in the mid 1970s, is widely recognized as a successful model of educational delivery where the objective is to improve the quality of schooling. It is one of the longest bottom-up innovations of the developing world that has been sustained. In this paper, we present a description of the program and review its progress to date to inform policy makers in the Asia and Pacific Region where the model may have a great potential to increase both enrolment and quality of education in rural schools, boarding schools, or schools using the traditional teaching frontal model. As the quality of education of this region focuses on innovative approach to improve learning, teacher development, school efficacy, and targeting for unreached and marginalized children (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2012), we argue that the model is worth trying to better education in poor rural schools of the Region. However, although many studies today show the program to be successful, impact evaluation studies should be conducted to reach a more conclusive recommendation regarding the program’s success.

1 The project Escuela Nueva (“New School” in Spanish) won 2009 WISE Awards at World Innovation Summit for Education, as “Improving the quality of basic education in low income schools through an innovative educational model.” (http://www.wise-qatar.org/escuela-nueva-colombia); and mainly due to the great contribution of this project, the second author won the biggest education awards “Yi Dan Prize” in 2017.
EN was originally based on the Unitary School, a UNESCO project for rural teachers. The Unitary School was promoted globally to support teachers that had to work simultaneously with several grades in a single classroom. The EN model grew out of the Unitary School idea and sought the same objectives such as improving access, coverage and quality of primary education. However, it introduced and promoted a more systemic approach, going beyond the classroom, and emphasized the renovation of teacher’s practices and a new role of the teacher as a facilitator instead of a transmitter of instruction; it promoted an active learning and more child-centered approach. It also took into consideration from the outset that the intervention could impact national policy; it designed strategies that could be viable technically, politically and financially and easily replicable (AERA, 2013). Once it became a national policy within the Ministry of Education (MOE) with the support from IADB (Inter-American Development Bank), it then was adapted to specific vulnerable regions of the country such as the Pacific West Coast with the support of UNICEF. Finally it was selected as a strategy for the whole country to universalize primary education with support from the World Bank.

Although innovations can often be thwarted by political and administrative changes, the EN program has been sustained for almost 40 years, with the support from civil society. Specifically, with the creation of Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN), an NGO that has the role of promoting the quality of the model, and adapting it to new contexts and populations, and the existence of Public-Private Partnerships such as the Coffee Growers Federation and the Fundación para la Educación Superior (FES). They have played an important role in its sustainability and the introduction of new developments. With the support from different international organizations and working mainly through governments, it has been adopted by, at least 16 countries, as different as Brazil, Guatemala, East Timor, Zambia, and Vietnam, among others. It has reached over 5 million children, and helped improved access and quality of education among poor, and disadvantaged children, in remote rural areas, and in marginal urban areas as well, in particular to displaced populations (see Colbert, 2015; and Schiefelbein, 1993).

What is Escuela Nueva?

Program history

The Unitary School promoted by UNESCO in the 60s was originated from Recommendation No. 52 of the International Conference of Ministries of Education. This recommendation supported the establishment of Unitary Schools as a means of offering complete primary education in the poorest areas of developing countries. The main characteristics of the Unitary School were the presence of a single teacher (multigrade teaching), an automatic promotion system, a system of personalized learning that enables children to advance at their own pace, educational instructional cards for students designed by the teachers that permit the teacher to work with several groups at once, and a teacher trained to handle several grades simultaneously.

Under the UNESCO Project 1, the Instituto Superior de Educación Rural in Colombia in Pamplona, Norte de Santander, developed the program to train teachers for rural education under this school modality. The first Unitary School in Colombia began operating in 1962 as a laboratory for teachers trained under this program with technical support from UNESCO. By the middle of the 1960s the program had expanded to 150 schools in one province. However, when an effort was made to expand the program at a national level, it was realized that several factors would hinder its successful
implementation. Deficiencies existed in teacher training programs, the involvement of regional administrators, the application of the automatic promotion system, the relationship of the course content to the rural environment in which children lived, and in the definition of the role of teacher as a community promoter. In addition, the teachers had to design and develop the self-instructional cards. All these factors, among many others, limited the replicability of the program. In addition, many teachers rejected the Unitary School Program because they saw it as a mechanism to eliminate teachers in rural areas and not as a mechanism to rationalize interaction of students and teachers in low-density populations. All these obstacles were variables that the Escuela Nueva team and founders took into consideration to redesign the new intervention under the Escuela Nueva model. The program was consequently reorganized in 1975 and became an official program of the MOE. It went beyond the connotation of a single teacher managing several grades and introduced the innovation of teachers’ practices.

Since 1982, EN, funded partly by the World Bank (Credit 2192-CO), expanded to several provinces covering several thousand rural schools. By 1989, 17,948 schools were operating at the national level serving 800,000 students, and in the 1990s it practically covered all rural schools in the country (approximately 41,000). The World Bank selected EN as one of the three most successful experiences worldwide that had impacted national policies. By this year FEN was created and its main objective, with support from the Inter-American Foundation, was to adapt EN to urban areas. It started a pilot project Escuela Activa Urbana, which aimed to adapt to the educational needs of urban areas. The pilot project was successful and today some cities used the pedagogical model supported by EN in urban primary and secondary schools. Unfortunately, the massive expansion of EN coincided with the decentralization of the country in the 1990s and MOE spent most of its energy in its own reorganization, many important initiatives and programs such as EN became debilitated during this decade. Many of the EN trained teachers were transferred and new teachers without specific training were named in many rural schools (Colbert de Arboleda, 2006). Fortunately, there had been public private partnerships in place, as in the case of the Coffee Growers Federation and in the case of FEN, and the model has survived in good shape.

**The Escuela Nueva Model**

Key elements in the definition of the program were rethinking the classroom and the teaching–learning process in innovative ways, and it was expected to transform the conventional school and the way of learning, shifting educational paradigm from one centered on the teacher to one focused on the child, providing quality and relevant education for rural poor children. The essence of the innovation was improving quality teaching and learning, and in consequence paying more attention to teacher training and modifying teacher’s attitudes and behavior in the classroom. In addition, for the EN model to succeed it was necessary to change the mind frame of teachers educated under traditional teacher colleges.
**Program objectives**

EN seeks to develop at the student level: (a) active and reflective learning; (b) analytical and applied skills; (c) strong self-esteem; (d) attitudes favorable to cooperation and solidarity; (e) positive attitudes toward civic and democratic values; and (f) a good knowledge of the curriculum areas. At the teacher level, EN aims to develop: (a) a new disposition toward the role of teacher as a guide and facilitator rather than instructor; (b) positive attitudes toward the new teaching methods, working in rural areas, and administrative officials and supervisors; (c) an active role as a community leader; (d) overall satisfaction with the program; and (e) the capacity to manage EN components (see below). At the level of the administrative agents, EN seeks to: (a) develop the role of the education administration as an institution providing orientation and guidance rather than control; (b) improve the working relationship of administrators and teachers; (c) increase overall satisfaction with the program; and (d) improve the ability of administration to identify training needs and organize teacher training. Finally, at the community level, EN seeks to increase parental involvement in the school’s daily life and in the solution of its problems. The school should be a cohesive force in the community.

**Teacher training**

The in-service training strategy developed for EN was designed as a process, not an event. The guiding principles took shape as three operational strategies, with the first being the creation of demonstration schools. These permit direct observation of all the innovations of the EN approach. The second strategy called for a teacher’s training curriculum where teachers would learn to apply the model’s components and elements, articulating theory with practice in a series of workshops. A teacher training manual, organized in units and learning guides follow the same methodology similar to the children’s learning guides. This helps teachers experience the same methods they will use with their students. The third strategy outlined the formation of teacher’s learning circles or microcenters. These encourage teachers to come together to reflect on their work, interacting with other teachers and sharing common problems and solutions (see Colbert, 2002).

The training and follow-up components designed for teachers and administrators are conducted through a series of practical, experiential workshops where teachers learn how to apply the Escuela Nueva curriculum elements both in classroom and communities. They learn to apply the new education materials, student learning guides and organize the use of learning corners and the classroom library. The training and design of materials is done in a sequential way to allow teachers to gradually use what they learn. Teachers are trained with the same active, participatory methodology they will apply later with their students. Through visits to demonstration classrooms or schools, teachers directly observe the EN model in action and begin to change their attitudes towards their pedagogic practice, as they see change is possible.

**How the Model is implemented**

The basic assumption behind the systemic design of the EN concept was that in order to have changes and outcomes at the student level, it was necessary to introduce innovations in the teacher training strategies, and in the administrative structure, while also improving coordination between the school and the community. This assumption shaped the objectives of the program which are translated into activities in four specific areas: teacher training and follow-up, curriculum development, administrative strategies, and community liaison.
Through workshops that are practical rather than content focused, the teacher training focuses on assisting teachers in guiding, orienting and evaluating the learning process, while avoiding time spent in routine instructions. As said, active teaching is also an important part of the training. It is of vital importance for teachers to use active, participatory methodology for the success of the EN model.

As a follow up strategy, through periodic visits to microcenters of teacher learning circles, teachers get together to interact, discuss, exchange ideas and experiences and reflect on their practices, also socially constructing knowledge, as well as further their training and professional development. In this process, by reflecting and learning, teachers can summarize their useful methodologies and lead the change of teaching in class.

Curriculum development
The curriculum component includes learning guides for students that deliver the national syllabus, learning corners, classroom libraries, and school governments.

The student learning guides facilitate individual as well as group work, including basic information and practical activities based on the objectives of the curriculum. These learning guides are a hybrid between a conventional textbook, a workbook of activities and the guide for the teacher. They are reusable and are designed according to the approved national curriculum. The learning guides promote child centered, active, cooperative learning. They link learning experiences to the family and community and incorporate higher level thinking skills and since they are modularized, they facilitate flexibility, and different learning rhythms. They promote collective construction of knowledge mainly through dialogue and interaction and facilitate individual activities, in pairs and in groups and incorporate many child-to-child activities. They are organized in sequences and they develop and deliver the national syllabus However, they are locally open ended so that teachers can make local adaptations if necessary. They also serve as planning tools for teachers and help the teachers adapt the national curriculum to regional and local needs, and encourage the practical application of material learned to community life.

The curriculum also provides for the use of learning corners, and classroom libraries. Learning Corners set up areas for dynamic activities focusing on different learning topics, and the library provides support not only to students but also to the community as a whole; it becomes an information center for the community.

The school government is an organisation that cultivates leadership, competitiveness, and the ability of cooperation, and it is also one of the most innovative elements of EN. It organises all kinds of student committees and aims to initiate students in civic and democratic attitudes and behaviour. It focuses on fostering students’ self-management and decision making ability. Students, teachers and parents are actively encouraged to participate in school activities and children are organized in committees.

In addition, the promotion system was made more flexible by redefining the automatic promotion of the Unitary School. A self-monitoring mechanism was introduced so that students could monitor their own attendance record. Teachers revise students’ progress using a progress control instrument; once a student finishes an activity, s/he shows it to the teacher to get feedback in order to start a new activity. In this manner, formative evaluation during the process is strengthened.
**Administration strategies**

The third component refers to efforts to streamline program administration at the regional level, including technical assistance and orientation from supervisors. This component varies in each country and responds to the administrative structure in each educational sector. A main emphasis with this component is to ensure that administrators and supervisors assume a more supportive and advisory role than a vertical and controlling role.

**Community liaison**

The community component is designed to organize teachers, students, and parents to participate in school activities. Elements that are used to implement this component include a school surroundings map, family records, a county monograph, and an agricultural calendar, among others.

The EN model addresses four key components: teacher training, curricular, administration and community. Instead of tackling each in isolation, the model addresses them systemically.

Each component has strategies and elements that promote:

- Active, participatory, and cooperative learning that is focused on the student.
- A curriculum that is relevant to the daily lives of students.
- A calendar and evaluation system that allows for flexible promotion.
- A stronger and closer relationship between the school and the community.
- An emphasis on developing democratic values and encouraging civic participation.
- Effective and experiential training for teachers.
- A new role for the teacher; from transmitter of facts to facilitator of learning.
- A new "textbook" or learning guide that encourages permanent dialogue and interaction.

Through active and participatory learning, the EN model promotes, among others:

- The ability to apply knowledge to new situations.
- Cognitive skills, learning to think.
- Increased self-esteem.
- Democratic, cooperation and solidarity attitudes and behaviors.
- Teamwork and cooperation—students work in small groups actively dialoguing and interacting.
- Self-paced, self-directed learning.
- Equal opportunities for boys and girls to participate.
- Entrepreneurial and leadership skills

An important point related to training. The main objective of the training component of the EN model is to prepare teachers to guide, facilitate, give feedback and evaluate the learning process of their students, shifting his/her role from transmitter of facts to leader and manager of a process of social construction of knowledge (learning). As mentioned teachers are trained with the same methodology that they will use with children. Training teachers to become efficient users of active pedagogy is not easy because during their formation years at the teachers’ colleges the topic is not included in the curriculum. In practice it means to change their mind frames and convince them to move...
away from the frontal teaching method. The success of the EN model will depend heavily on the capacity of the teacher to manage the active pedagogy in a multigrade environment (see Mogollon and Mogollon 2011). This has been also the case when the pedagogy is used in complete schools (primary and secondary ones) in urban environments.

Results and Evaluations

The findings of EN not only show the impact of the program, but also present the importance of quality assurance, applicability, and sustainability needed to scale up the model. Different studies, from both national and international organizations since the 1980s demonstrated that Escuela Nueva improves significantly academic results in rural and urban primary schooling, as well as self-esteem and peaceful behavior of children.

Educational planners at the MOE in Colombia and in the Colombian National Science Foundation (Colciencias) in 1982 claimed that in rural areas, where only one or two teachers teach several grades, EN was effective since school dropout decreased (by about 7%) after its implementation. It seems that in many rural and marginal urban areas, rigid promotion policies discourage students and parents. According to these officials, the fact that Escuela Nueva’s learning guides help the students to organize their own work in a more personalized manner and permitted them to finish academic units at their own pace have been key in the improvement of school retention and reduction of dropouts. The continuing teacher training in multigrade pedagogy enhanced teachers’ professional development and student learning. The EN program has freed the teacher from giving routine instructions, and moved to assume a more effective role, giving more feedback during the learning process and helping more the slow learners. In addition, EN increased community participation in educational activities. EN made learning not only a personal but a community endeavor, increasing participation on education matters to important stakeholders like parents, elders, and community leaders both male and female.

Program evaluation

Is EN a cost-effective and scalable solution to improve teaching and learning in low-income schools? An evaluation of the model was conducted to determine the cognitive achievement of third and fifth grade students in mathematics and Spanish, and also non-cognitive achievement to assess improvements in self-esteem, creativity and civic behavior. This evaluation provided the best empirical analysis of the model's progress at the time (See Rojas and Castillo, 1988; and Psacharopoulos, Rojas, and Velez, 1993). The results show the average scores obtained by EN students were better than students in traditional schools. Although differences are not that large, EN third grade students performed significantly better in Math and language, and EN fifth graders
significantly better in language. Significant differences favoring EN students were also found in social self-esteem and civic behavior. However, no differences were found among students in terms of creativity, and among fifth graders, in mathematics. These results hold when standardizing for factors that typically affect education outcomes. When controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, the effects of EN are slightly reduced but hold. EN had a significant independent effect in terms of learning outcomes in mathematics and Spanish and civic behavior. It also had a positive effect on self-esteem and creativity.

In the same evaluation study it was observed that EN schools had a significantly higher level of participation measured by activities such as adult education (35.6% versus 28.1%), agricultural extension (35% versus 15.8%), athletic competitions (54.6% versus 42.5%), health campaigns (82.9% versus 56.7%), and community celebrations (88.5% versus 83.3%).² McEwan (1998) several years later using a more refined model by including the intensity of the implementation of EN, corroborates these findings with a different sample.

Other examples of support for the model come by international agencies. The World Bank (1989) identified EN as one of the three most outstanding educational reforms in developing countries worldwide that went to national scale. The United Nations’ Human Development Report (2000) selected EN as one of the country’s three main achievements. UNESCO (1998) comparing all Latin American countries, found that Colombian rural schools got among the best academic results. In fact, rural schools in Colombia outperformed urban ones (only case in Latin America), and this was due to EN’s role. The most relevant achievement in education is that the academic results of student from low-income families got better results than the traditional schools, so compensating for the socio-economic constraints of students, and this was due to EN’s role.

A study based on a sample of school using the Colombian national assessment results showed that EN students improve language by 40 percent and math by 69 percent after two years of implementation of the model by Escuela Nueva Foundation (see Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2000-2002). Similarly a study published by the Institute of Education of the University of London (Forero, Rodriguez and Molina, 2006) showed that students from EN had significantly better results in the formation of democratic behavior and peaceful social interaction than students from conventional schools. And the probability for parents to get involved in education practices at home increased with the level of EN implementation. Pitt (2003) finds EN to be effective for civic education.

Many studies using the national assessment results showed that EN produced better students when the modality is well applied (see for example ICFES, 2011). Similarly, using the Latin American study conducted by UNESCO in the Region (see UNESCO, 2005) when Escuela Nueva Learning Circles were applied, it helped teachers share best practices, collaborate, problem solve and promote positive attitude change. Students at the end of primary education had language and mathematics achievement between 13.9 and 17.3 points higher than their comparators in school that did not applied the model. Also students’ self-esteem increased 18.5 points.

In Guatemala students of the Escuelas Nuevas Unitarias (applying the EN model) gave more positive feedback among each other, had higher frequency

² School government had not been organized in about half of the schools in the sample so it was not included in the study.
of taking turns and leading processes than traditional schools. Girls also outperformed boys (see De Baessa, Chesterfield and Ramos, 2002).

Multigrade models of education in rural areas (see study in Nicaragua, Guatemala and the Phillipines, Juarez and Associates, Inc, 2003) have shown that girls benefit more than boys in terms of outcomes like improvement of completion rate and in improving leadership skills.

The Vietnam Escuela Nueva (VNEN) program incorporates and integrates several innovative and globally recognized EN practices including: (i) Participative and collaborative learning; (ii) Self-paced learning guides; (iii) Student government; (iv) Formative assessment; (v) Application or real-life oriented learning, with community integration; and (vi) Teacher professional networks. The combination of these elements is intended to spur a transformative and powerful learning experience that produces the kinds of new skills and competencies expected of children in the 21st century. A recent Impact Evaluation Study (see Parandekar et al, 2017) found that VNEN third and fifth grade students get significantly better results than students attending the regular education model in both non-cognitive and cognitive skills of the students.

In summary, a review of correlational studies and of the only randomized trial one, shows that EN has improved both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes (student academic achievement, self-esteem and civic behavior), and have fostered better students.

▶ Applicability

In spite of its achievements, it took more than 10 years for Escuela Nueva to become a formal MOE program. The initial activities were designing the learning materials for children and teachers, setting up a pilot project at the local and regional level, ensuring it had metrics and empirical results, creating, organizing and setting up the first national team of EN, convincing bureaucrats and people with decision making power within the MOE to support it, looking for political and financial support. All these previous activities related to the strengthening of the project helped shape political will, both at national and local level, and were critical to move from a project to a national program, and finally to the national strategy for universal primary education in the country.

The role of the National Planning Department and local administrations are important to scale EN up. As mentioned, when affected by decentralization, the implementation of EN no longer was a national responsibility. It became a regional implementation depending of the local governments. In addition, financial resources would depend of the local authorities. Today, even though many of the characteristics of EN have been institutionalized across the country, the support it receives in some of the regions still depends largely on the decision-making of the local government. Although the support received from local private organizations has proved essential for program development and implementation at pilot and local scale, for a massive implementation at the national level their role has been limited. In spite of the support from international agencies (USAID, IDB, UNICEF and The World Bank), the model has been debilitated in some regions and strengthened in others. Therefore, to improve coverage and quality, the leadership of the public sector is vital. In other countries, like in Vietnam, it is being strengthened by the support of public sector in the entire country.

Having the political commitment and financial support of the authorities are conditions that should be considered for any implementation of the model. There was mystique associated with the original project and it continued for several
years. It had good administrative support from the central and regional authorities. Information from Monitoring and Evaluation was used as a feedback mechanism to introduce corrections where needed. The scaling up was done gradually and supported by a learning process whereby knowledge building and action were clearly linked. The demonstration models worked well in the different regions across the country. At the time of its best implementation, the same National Coordinator led the process for almost a decade. Researchers, planners, administrators and rural teachers were part of a team. It was an interdisciplinary team. The core team remained together and moved to leadership positions during the expansion period. And finally supervision assumed the role of pedagogical guidance, legitimizing the innovations in classrooms (see Colbert, Arboleda and Chiappe, 1991).

When some of these characteristics disappeared, the model up to these days has been applied, with different levels of implementation, using a lighter version without producing the original strong results.

Internationally, FEN has designed and systematized an international strategy in order to build political will and capacity at country level and to facilitate the project’s implementation and applicability. It is dedicated to contribute to the quality, relevance and efficiency of education by rethinking the way we learn and promoting active, cooperative and personalized learning centered on the learner. With the development of EN at the international level, the EN strategy has laid out the description of several phases and activities that includes the implementation of pilot projects, their local and cultural adaptations, and their gradual expansion. It has designed an international prototype kit with samples of learning guides and teacher’s manuals in order to facilitate the different levels implementation in the respective country or region. It has adapted to meet the global needs of the underserved across various contexts and settings (i.e., rural multigrade, rural monograde, urban, new populations, non-formal settings, etc.).

**Implications for Rural Schools in China**

China has made significant achievements measured by any MDGs and EFA indicators. Although urbanization has progressed rapidly still 47 percent of the population remains in rural areas and disparities between rural and urban areas are increasing. There are around 60 million left-behind children, 26.6% rural primary and secondary students are in boarding schools. Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Programme for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) in China points out that the strategic mission for compulsory education is to promote equity and quality of education. The improvement of education quality in poor rural areas has been the bottleneck of the education in China.

In the past decades, rural schools have been transformed due to rapid urbanization and the merging of rural schools; and as a consequence the number of big schools and boarding schools increased. In 2011, the boarding rate for primary and middle school students in rural areas nationwide reached 26.6%. However, lately, with the adjustment of relevant policies, the number of big schools has been reduced in 40% (Chinese government website, 2016), while the number of the remote teaching sites and small schools, has increased in remote rural areas. The number of remote teaching sites has increased by 16,484, reaching 93,035 in 2015. In many small rural schools, multi-grade and multi-subject teaching are demanded to suit the need of establishing all the lessons required by national curricula. However, many schools cannot open a full curriculum, and it is hard to promote quality education in rural areas in China without an adequate pedagogical model. Teachers in rural areas are challenged to conduct multi-subject teaching and to take the advantages of teaching a small class.
It has been proposed that the strategy of taking targeted measures of poverty reduction through education should emphasize the capacity building of rural schools (China Rural Education Development Report, 2015). The Overall Strategy for Integrative Development of Urban and Rural Education indicates that small schools need to run well; that they need to train their teachers for multi-subject teaching; and to eliminate big classes (over 56 students) by 2020. The local governments in the Western and Eastern areas are going to keep the necessary small village schools. For example, the Fujian province is going to retain rural small schools and remote teaching sites that have less than 100 students. Through supporting policies that include fund allocation, teacher resources, and school facilities, they will try to change these schools to be “Small and Excellent”.

Both government and civil society are seeking institutional innovations and learning from best international practices. In this context, the EN model may provide a good alternative for poor rural schools in China. Among others, these are elements to be potentially considered:

**Innovation in teaching and learning**

The EN model has the potential to target current needs with low cost inputs and process to improve small class, multi-grade and multi-subject teaching among small village schools and remote teaching sites, and improve education support and supply. There is also an urgent need to use innovative learning process in traditional classroom for children in village schools. The active learning approach of EN promotes self-directed learning, cooperation, solidarity, contribution and entrepreneurial skills, which are also critical in the teaching and management of big county/township schools and boarding schools. It is critical for the improvement of the education quality, relevance and effectiveness among all type of schools.

**Rural teacher development**

Rural teachers in China lack the experience of transforming their pedagogies and using active study method, because they have been taught to follow the traditional frontal teaching method. For UNESCO and UNICEF, the EN model shall be the model to be followed to achieve the education needed for the 21st century. To conduct education reform based on solid education theories, to transform teacher from an instructor to a facilitator, and prepare village teachers with multi-grade and multi-subject teaching skills, are essential components of rural teacher training in China. It is also one of the specific goals for village teacher training in the Rural Teacher Support Plan (2015-2020). The emphasis on teacher training in the EN model could provide an approach to improve teaching practices and support teacher development through effective tested methods.

**Adaption to diversity**

There is a variety of education and cultural contexts, and sharp regional disparities in China, especially in the revolutionary rural areas, minority, poor and remote areas. The insufficient teaching and learning quality in needy schools is a weak point of national education development, and it is also a difficulty for the strategy taking targeted measures to reduce poverty. The EN model is regarded as one of the best practices handling diversity in age, grade, gender and culture to improve quality basic education in low-income schools. The adaption of the model with a proven cost-effective delivery method may help to accommodate different needs and circumstances in rural China.

**Mechanism of change**

Education must gather all social resources to focus on learning and development of students through a coordinated and innovative way. The EN framework reinforces systemic change and synergy between school, community and administration. Through both bottom-up and top-
down approaches, it impacts multi-stakeholders in education system and education policy as well, and eventually develops from an experimental project to a national and international education innovation. The rural small schools and remote teaching sites face similar barriers, affecting by various limitations from teachers, students, parents, school budget, community conditions, and local governments, therefore it requires such as systemic and innovative approach to improve student development.

To improve quality of learning, EN promotes students’ innovative ability, learning to learn, team work, equal participation, and self-management skills. The interactive modules are designed to promote dialogue, critical thinking and application of knowledge to family and community. The child-centered approach encourages students to advance at their own pace. Children use learning corners with local materials, and organize themselves by school governments with committees and instruments promoting participation. These practices have implications for the improvement of education processes and the promotion of student over-all development.

China’s educational reform is changing its focus areas. According to the Outline of the Reform of Basic Education Curriculums (2001), there are more student oriented approaches to improve student’s learning ability, including both cognitive and non-cognitive ability. New curriculum emphasize moral education incorporating the socialist core values, patriotic and collectivism education, in order to foster a new generation with aspiration, morality, knowledge and discipline. The Core Competencies and Values for Chinese Students’ Development (2016) developed by Ministry of Education in China identified 3 aspects: cultural foundation, independent development, and social participation, composed by six qualities: humanistic connotation, scientific spirit, learning to learn, healthy life, taking responsibility, as well as innovation and practice, for the overall development of Chinese student in the future.

To develop competencies such as innovation, cooperation and problem-solving, it demands cooperative, interactive and student-oriented teaching, a learning community participated by students, teachers and parents, active involvement of local communities, and teachers and schools be responsive to the needs of children in different socio-economic settings (Zhong, 2015; Khan, 2012). The EN model can provide for these needs. Education in rural and needy schools is facing multi-facet challenges, including increasing students’ learning interest and social participation, strengthening teachers’ teaching motivation and professional development, strengthening teachers training and teaching supervision, establishing platforms for teaching seminars and teachers’ continuing study, strengthening parents’ understanding of study results and teaching quality, motivating positive attitudes of schools and local government officials, gaining financial and administrative supports, improving education assessing system, and enhancing societal understanding of “Small and Excellent” schools.

There would be obstacles in many aspects while taking the EN model into practice, especially in teacher training and government support. Multi-grade and multi-subject teaching has high requirements for teachers, because subjects and tasks are many, yet teaching time is scarce. Hence, teaching preparation requirements for teaching organisation, distribution of teaching time, and classroom management have created a complicated situation for rural schools. Even for many professional teachers from normal universities, it would be difficult for them to master such skills, for teachers in rural areas it would be
much harder to meet the requirements in a short period of time. To develop a suitable model for local education development, it is necessary to coordinate education researchers, teachers, and policy makers to work for the potential problems.

In this note we have described the model of Escuela Nueva that could be an answer for poor rural schools and an opportunity for quality learning for rural students in China.

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Abstract

This paper presents a description of the Escuela Nueva program (EN) and reviews its progress to date specially to inform policy makers in the Asia Pacific Region where the model may have a great potential to increase both enrollment and quality of education in rural schools, boarding schools, or schools using the traditional teaching frontal model. EN is widely recognized as a successful model and innovation to improve the quality of schooling. The essence of the innovation is to improve quality teaching and learning, modify teacher’s attitudes and behavior in the classroom and promote active, cooperative and personalized learning centered on the learner. The paper describes how the model is implemented to bring systemic changes in teacher training, curriculum development, administrative strategies and community liaison. With the support from civil society, different international organizations, and by working with governments, it has reached over 5 million children in at least 16 countries in different regions. The applicability of the model is presented based on implementation experiences at different levels as well as international adaptations in various countries and contexts. As the quality of education of the Asia Pacific Region focuses on innovative approach to improve learning, teacher development, school efficacy, and targeting for unreachd and marginalized children, the model provides a good alternative to better education in rural areas of the Region. Implications for rural schools in China, particularly innovation in teaching and learning, rural teacher development, adaption to diversity and mechanism of change, for the quality of education of small village schools are discussed.
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