Peace Education in Escuela Nueva

Peace is not taught; it is learned together
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Peace Education in Escuela Nueva

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Presentation

The realities and necessities of today’s world that demand a coherent and steadfast commitment to peace education are constantly growing. The traditional way of conceiving peace as the absence of war or direct violence has been replaced by a much broader understanding of a positive peace which requires the elimination of all kinds of violence, including cultural or structural violence such as discrimination, exclusion or malnutrition. Positive peace, therefore, is understood as a conscious and proactive process that pursues peace by peaceful means and through the direct application of positive human values like justice, liberty, fairness, solidarity, inclusion, tolerance, cooperation, compassion and dignity.

In response to this globally shared necessity, several institutions, including UNESCO, have expressed the need of building Cultures of Peace that touch all aspects of human life and are generated, mainly, through education. This conviction developed into a broad consensus that led to the adoption of the United Nations Declaration and Action Program on a Culture of Peace in the year 1999. The promotion of a Culture of Peace by means of education is mentioned as the first of eight fields of action. Activities in the first field are intended to contribute to the fulfillment of the other seven fields of action, which include the advancement of sustainable development, full respect for and promotion of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as guaranteeing democratic participation and gender equity.

In spite of those high expectations, peace education still does not have the attention it deserves. Alicia Cabezudo, one of the most respected specialists in this area throughout Latin America and the world, describes the dilemma in the following words: “Educating for peace, viewed as the central educational axis in many international curricular designs, has been conceived of as a subsidiary theme. It is seen as necessary but random, important but not essential, present but “absent.” There is discourse which honors current curricula without modifying or conceiving of new alternatives for the development of ethics and citizenship skills that have become increasingly necessary for the world in which we live.” In other words, it is still necessary for peace education to find its own determination and assertiveness in order to contribute to a true transformation that will make our societies advance towards positive peace.

1. Resolution A/53/243, 1999
FEN views the Escuela Nueva model as a pedagogical reform in which education is considered not only a process of holistic formation of students, but also a means of achieving the social change necessary for a Culture of Peace.

Various national and international institutions have unveiled and underlined the potential of FEN, through the Escuela Nueva model, in the construction of a Culture of Peace. In its 1998 Working Paper on Peace Education, UNICEF states that by means of its holistic model for improving the quality of basic education, the Escuela Nueva program has succeeded in cultivating self-esteem, cooperation, community-building and civic behavior in students.

In addition, UNESCO publication Learning to Live Together integrates Escuela Nueva as a case study and mentions that it has been amply alluded to as best practice for citizenship and human rights education. On a national level, the article Peace Education in Colombia: the Promise of Citizenship Competencies by Enrique Chaux and Ana María Velazquez from the University of los Andes in Bogotá refers to Escuela Nueva as one of the greatest educational innovations in Colombia and emphasizes its impact on generating peaceful and democratic attitudes and behaviors. Because of these and other important achievements, Ashoka, the leading international organization for social entrepreneurship, awarded the Changemakers Peace Award to Fundación Escuela Nueva in 2008.


Establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war.

Maria Montessori

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.

John Dewey

These different recognitions are less of a surprise if we recall that the great thinkers of the New School movement (Movimiento Escuela Nueva in Spanish), which originated at the beginning of the 20th century and which includes important figures of the world of education such as Maria Montessori and John Dewey, are also frequently mentioned as precursors of peace education. For Xesús Jares, a Galician educator who is frequently quoted in the Spanish-American context, the New School movement served as the first of four important waves which marked the emergence of modern peace education. The close connection between these two educational conceptions is, therefore, neither recent nor fortuitous.

With this background, Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN) decided to undertake an exercise to define the concept of peace education inherent to the pedagogical model it promotes. This publication seeks to identify and analyze the existing links between peace education and the Escuela Nueva model, both in theory and practice and make them visible, explicit and tangible, in order to strengthen the model’s contribution to building a Culture of Peace and enhance its impact.

Therefore, the purpose of this publication is not only to provide a comprehensive conceptualization and understanding of the Escuela Nueva model’s contribution to peace education, but also to provide feedback to the model based on inputs from theoretical and practical aspects of the field of peace education in order to continue strengthening FEN’s work in this field.

To meet these objectives, we include a brief introduction to the general theory of peace education, which will establish the basis for the development of the study itself. In the first chapter, we present a look at FEN’s vision of the model in order to demonstrate that peace education, though implicit in many cases, constitutes a central and constant dimension of the EN model. The second chapter deals with Escuela Nueva’s approach to implementing peace education, while emphasizing its guiding principles and how they manifest themselves in practice. The third chapter describes Escuela Nueva’s results, emphasizing the diverse impacts the model achieves in the construction of a Culture of Peace. We conclude with a fourth chapter that illustrates some of the most significant experiences in peace education achieved through our implementation of the Escuela Nueva model in both peaceful and non-peaceful contexts.
Introduction to Peace Education

The field of peace education is young, vital, and offers many opportunities for the development of new programs, new approaches – indeed, whole new systems of pedagogy that can respond to the most urgent current need of human society: the need for the exercise of global responsibility in the ordering of a just, peaceful and viable global polity.

Betty Reardon
Professor at Teacher’s College at Colombia University

There is no universally accepted definition or conceptualization of peace education. Instead, there are diverse definitions, approaches, and conceptions which describe peace education from different perspectives and sub-themes such as human rights education or education for citizenship. Still, there is a wide consensus that all these approaches are complementary and point to the same vision of a more “peaceful” world. UNESCO, for example, gathers all these educational initiatives under the term “learning to live together,” which can be understood as synonym for peace education.

Not having a single, clearly defined concept has always been seen as a weakness and a strength at the same time (lack of conceptual unity and clarity on one hand, and diversity and richness of approaches and forms of application on the other).

In the present case, this circumstance enables us to choose a conceptual framework that adapts to the specific contributions in Escuela Nueva model to the building of a Culture of Peace.
The following analysis is strongly inspired by the works of Magnus Haavelsrud and Alicia Cabezudo, which provide the blueprint for such a framework. However, the analysis also draws on the research done by UNICEF, UNESCO and the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), as well as the diverse initiatives in the field of citizenship competencies of the Colombian Ministry of Education and the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, and other recognized institutions and researchers in the area of peace education.

Based on these sources, the document develops an analytic scheme that pays special attention to the different components of an educational system and the way they relate to one another. The four separate but interrelated components refer to: 1) the organizational structure, 2) the content of education, 3) the form of education and 4) action or application.

The organizational structure sets the framework for the development of the educational process. It explains how conditions “outside the classroom” can have a significant influence on the way education is carried out “inside the classroom,” such as teacher training or the physical structure of the school. Content refers to what is learned during the educational process, the different subject matters and the topics that are dealt with under them. Form describes how students learn during the educational activity and refers to pedagogy and methodology in general, including the relationships between the teacher and the students. Action generally describes what could develop from within the other three components. It deals with the application to both real life and school life of what students have learned. In other words, it is about putting into practice what emerged from the content and the form. Action, if it exists, is inherently transformational.

Any educational model contains these four components; they are not specific to peace education. Nonetheless, peace education is highly demanding with respect to the character of each one of these components and more importantly, also follows some guiding principles related to the interaction between these components. These key principles, which could be considered descriptive of peace education, can be summarized as follows:

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8. Publications that are quoted are listed on page 22.
1. **Each component strengthens peace**: The first principle states that each component fosters and strengthens the construction of a Culture of Peace due to its own character and nature. It answers the question “what is the proper structure (content, form, action) for fostering a Culture of Peace?” What is sought is not only a clear and precise intention but also an internal coherence that relates to the different aspects within each of these components.

2. **Coherence and integration among the components**: The second principle states that a high degree of coherence and integration among the different components is necessary, in particular between content and form. In other words, what is taught (content) has to be applied and practiced directly within the classroom (form), and what is experienced within the classroom (form) must be explicitly converted into a subject (transforming it into content).

3. **Possibility of a real transformation**: The third principle insists on the importance of the action component, and this action or application cannot be limited to mere appearance without having real life implications. The role of action, rather, is to transform conditions that carry a certain degree of direct, cultural, or structural violence in order to gradually approach a more peaceful reality. Imagining and managing change is, therefore, an essential part of the educational experience. Furthermore, application allows for the first three components to be validated and provides feedback to keep them pertinent.
Peace education can be regarded neither as separate subject matter nor as a project, but must be seen as an educational orientation that provides the objectives and the instructional framework for learning in schools.

Daniel Bar-Tal
Professor at Tel-Aviv University

These key principles show that peace education is much more than a new subject within the curriculum. It is a deliberate and conscious disposition which should permeate the entire educational system from its organizational structure and various educational materials to the daily interaction between those who form part of the educational institution, including the administration and the community.

The nature of these principles is conclusively recognized in the general philosophy of the Escuela Nueva model. We will engage in a detailed analysis that will compare the model with the demands of high quality peace education in order to highlight its contributions to the emergence of a Culture of Peace.
I. Our Vision
Building a Culture of Peace as a central dimension of the Escuela Nueva model

The Escuela Nueva model was designed in the mid-seventies to provide complete primary education in rural Colombian schools, as well as increase their effectiveness. Its main purpose was to improve the quality of education by systemically integrating innovative curricular, administrative, community and teacher training strategies and, thus, increase the coverage to guarantee education for all children.

In this respect, the model appears like any other initiative that seeks to provide quality education for all. However, Escuela Nueva stands out due to a series of significant methodological innovations which describe the nature and inherent strength of the model.

At its core we find the introduction of a cooperative, personalized and student-centered learning process, a new concept of interactive learning guides that allow for and encourage this cooperative learning, the promotion of democratic attitudes, values and behavior through the practice of student governments, as well as a new role for the teacher as a guide and facilitator.

Education throughout life is based on four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. Formal education systems tend to emphasize the acquisition of knowledge to the detriment of other types of learning; but it is vital now to conceive education in a more encompassing fashion. Such a vision should inform and guide future educational reforms and policy, in relation both to contents and to methods.

Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century
The character of these innovations indicates that, from its beginning, the Escuela Nueva model sought to not only improve but also humanize education and thus, humanize society at large. FEN defines the model as a pedagogical reform in which education is considered to be not only a holistic learning process for students but also a means for bringing about social change that will contribute to the generation of a Culture of Peace. Until recently this final objective was not mentioned explicitly. Nevertheless, FEN clearly identifies an all-embracing vision behind the diverse elements that make up the Escuela Nueva model.

From its initial success in the Colombian rural sector, Fundación Escuela Nueva sustained this educational innovation, and today it continues improving the pedagogical model in order to respond to present needs. One of these recent innovations is the integration and innovating and promotion of citizenship competencies as a fundamental, cross-cutting priority that permeates all different subject matters. The so called 21st century skills – learning to learn, learning to lead processes, learning to take initiative, to think critically, to collaborate and cooperate, to criticize as well as to accept criticism, etc. – have today become affirmed objectives after having worked them implicit in the curriculum for many years. They constitute one of the strengths that are characteristic of FEN’s approach.

Memorizing an abstract discourse about what it means to be a good citizen leads to the person just being able to repeat it. No more than that. And as a matter of fact, many students have the speech about this duty very well recorded in their minds, but their daily life differs considerably from it.

Enrique Chaux
Professor at the Universidad de los Andes, expert on citizenship competencies

All of these abilities and social skills form an essential part of peace education. Acquiring knowledge about topics related to peace and convivencia - the peaceful interaction and coexistence among members of a social group - is a first and highly important step. However, it will ultimately be the newly generated skills, values, attitudes and behaviors that allow us to transform – both in the short and long term – the various forms of direct, structural and cultural violence in order to replace them with interactions and structures based on widely shared human values to approach a holistic Culture of Peace.

In this respect, FEN conceives education as an empowerment geared towards social transformation which is always governed by the specific needs of each context; the model it develops is a pedagogical tool which approaches positive peace through its own practice. It offers a space for learning, applying and reflecting on peace in its most ordinary and day-to-day manifestations, serving as example and inspiration for society at large.
Peace education in Escuela Nueva is carried out by a consistent set of peace-enhancing tools, considerations and applications which can be categorized within the four aforementioned components: organizational structure, content, form, and action. These categories must be understood not so much as the logic of intervention in the educational process, but as an analytical tool that facilitates understanding. As will be shown in the forthcoming presentation, various tools of the Escuela Nueva model could fall within the fields of two, three or even four components, and their real contribution to building a Culture of Peace might be found precisely within their connecting and integrating function.

To begin the analysis of the first peace education principle, (each component strengthens peace), we are initially guided by the four components in order to give maximum emphasis to the different aspects offered by the Escuela Nueva model in putting peace education into practice. The second of the suggested principles (consistency and integration among the components) will be studied in order to demonstrate the contribution of the Escuela Nueva model as a coherent whole. The discussion of the third suggested principle (possibility of a real transformation) will be dealt with in both those steps.

### 2.1. Organizational Structure

In the area of the organizational structure the Escuela Nueva model has introduced various innovations and priorities which contribute to the promotion of peace. Among the most important ones, we highlight the following:

#### The Inclusion of the administration and the community

The Escuela Nueva model has an administrative component as well as a community component that seek the integration and active participation of all the stakeholders in the educational process. Assistance is given to directors and administrative personnel to help them being innovative in the management and the administrative structure.

Strategies such as the parents’ school or the parents’ government encourage the community to collaborate and get involved. The promotion of horizontal relationships among all stakeholders and throughout the educational institution is a priority in these different endeavors.

A democratic institutional climate allows all community members to feel they can get involved in projects and major decisions affecting the institution. Moreover, democratic climate in the institution may make it more likely that democratic climates thrive in the classroom.

Enrique Chaux
Professor at the Universidad de los Andes, expert on citizenship competencies
Peace education efforts that are solely focused on creating new textbooks and materials miss the critical aspect of the work, which is to prepare educators who themselves model the values of peace and can create a peaceful classroom. The most successful programs are where the mindset of the teacher and the relationships in the learning community are transformed.

United States Institute for Peace (USIP)

Innovative teacher training

The Escuela Nueva model was designed under a fundamental assumption: in order to introduce changes at the level of the child, it is necessary to innovate in the field of teacher training strategies. Therefore, training takes place in participatory workshops which replicate the methodology of the model itself. They also intend to bring about a change of attitude on the part of the teachers. An alternative understanding of the educational process is thus cultivated through the direct application of the new pedagogical strategy. Organized into regional micro-centers, and supported by FEN’s global Escuela Nueva Learning Community, teachers continue educating themselves and giving support to each other during their work at their practice.

A new organization of the classroom

The Escuela Nueva classroom organization is radically different. Instead of individual or double desks situated in straight lines which give priority to giving the students a direct view of the board and teacher, trapezoid tables that facilitate work in small groups are used. As a result, children work cooperatively dialoguing and interactive. Libraries and learning corners are also organized within the classroom. They contain educational material for observation, handling, classifying, comparing and experimenting activities. Through direct access and without the teacher’s intervention, students can help themselves to the different materials as well as organize themselves in their small groups.

An inherent flexibility and adaptability

The Escuela Nueva model offers great flexibility and adaptability in various domains in order to guarantee that each child will receive individual and specific attention according to his/her needs. Learning materials are modularized and make it possible to adapt the lesson to the pace of each child. Class schedules and breaks are handled flexibly and are subordinated to the real needs of the class. A flexible evaluation and promotion system is used that takes into account the existence of multiple forms of intelligence in order not to discriminate against anyone. Teaching materials are furthermore adapted to the cultural and linguistic characteristics of where they are used.

2.2. Content

The educational content of the Escuela Nueva model complies with all the standards, guidelines, orientations and competencies prescribed by the Ministry of Education. However, in order to specifically contribute to the building of a Culture for Peace, we highlight the following priorities of the model with respect to the educational content:

The central role of citizenship competencies

Citizenship skills and competencies constitute one of the cross-cutting themes of the FEN model. They are developed primarily within the subject of social sciences but also permeate all other subjects intentionally and consistently. Some of the most fundamental skills for peace and civic behaviors as well as for democratic participation and responsibility are anger management, empathy, taking perspective, creative generation of options, considering consequences, critical thinking, active listening, assertiveness, leadership and group work.10

FEN seeks to strengthen these skills while giving special priority to the development of empathy, respect for plurality, leadership and group work. All the learning materials give important emphasis to gender equity and multiculturalism.

Working on the development of citizenship competences equals making the decision to nurture democracy in the country, to form committed citizens who are respectful of differences and defenders of the common good. Citizens that from their homes, schools, high schools and universities extend bonds of solidarity, open room for participation, and generate rules of healthy and peaceful coexistence.

Cecilia Maria Velez White
Minister of Education (2002-2010)

Peace is living in harmony with one-self, society and nature. 

Pierre Weil 
Receiver of the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education

Protecting the environment as a universal value

Taking care of and protecting the environment is another cross-cutting issue which has been developed within FEN’s model. Starting from the natural sciences, it permeates all the other subjects in order to foster not only knowledge but also attitudes, values and behaviors that will contribute to preserving and valuing nature and its resources. Tools such as the Escuela Nueva Environment offers a collection of related learning materials. Many schools also have a garden which is taken care of by the children through the student government.

Entrepreneurship and leadership

A third cross-cutting priority includes topics related to entrepreneurship and leadership. Through the development of a life project each student focuses on acquiring self awareness, elaborating for example a personal inventory of their knowledge, skills and aptitudes, and analyzing their motivations and passions in order to find the personal energy that will lead them to action. The main purpose is to foster leadership skills which include the ability to reflect, communicate, plan, establish goals and objectives, and become aware of one’s own strengths and weaknesses, as well as being innovative and responsible.

Research supports the idea that cooperative and interactive learning methods promote values and behaviors that are conducive to peace. For example, cooperatively-structured small group work can build group cohesion and reduce biases between group members who differ in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and disability. Cooperative group work also improves understanding of complex concepts. It increases problem-solving skills, enabling participants to devise more solutions that demonstrate greater creativity and practicality. All of these outcomes are consistent with the aims of peace education.

UNICEF

11. www.escuelanueva.org/ambiental
2.3. Form

The specific educational form –pedagogy and methodology– is the innovation and strength that is characteristic of the Escuela Nueva model. It is also its major contribution to the building of a Culture of Peace. From the various aspects that mutually reinforce each other, we would like to emphasize the following:

Cooperative learning and active construction of knowledge

Active, personalized and cooperative learning in small groups is the centerpiece of the Escuela Nueva model. Learning guides have been specifically designed for group work to facilitate the children’s study of the different subject areas. They focus on developing processes that guarantee that the knowledge constructed by students is the result of the mental reflection occurring while working on various group activities. This approach allows the students to participate actively in the acquisition of knowledge, express their own points of view, listen to and respect those of the others, make decisions, develop autonomy, and discuss and share their knowledge. All members of the small groups take part in the classwork equally, and roles of leadership and responsibility are encouraged among all students. The model also encourages mutual support from peers and tutoring done by older students.

The teacher’s new role as guide and facilitator

The main methodology of teamwork in small groups implies a new role for the teachers. They are no longer “the source of knowledge” as is the case in conventional schools. Instead, they assume the role of guides and facilitators. They seek to foster active reflection and children’s own responsibility and agency by, for example, offering them options on how they can find the information they need instead of giving final answers. The teacher thinks about the nature and development of his/her students, as well as their interests, needs, and motivations with respect to what they must learn and how to learn it, and attends to their individual differences.

This change of role relies on the organization of the classroom into small groups and the methodological structure of the learning guides. They build knowledge based on previous knowledge, foster a learning process based on dialogue and interaction, practice and application, and offer a constant switch between individual work, work in pairs, group work and feedback from the teacher. This makes it possible for the student to really be in the center of the educational process and fosters horizontal relationships between the teacher and the students. By seeing and understanding the child as a whole person, the recognition of the social-affective dimension becomes a fundamental element, especially in the teacher–pupil relationship, but also in the pupils’ relationships with each other.
Although the content of instructional resources is critical, practitioners believe that format is equally important and often requires a fundamental change in the way teachers perceive and define their role, their instructional approach, and their relationship with the students. The instructional designs of many peace education programs therefore strive to go beyond basic lesson plans and supplementary teaching materials by helping to transform the process of teaching itself.

United States Institute for Peace (USIP)

Student government as democracy in practice

Together with cooperative learning and the teacher’s new role, the introduction of a student government (which differs from the school government as decreed by the Ministry of Education) is one of the fundamental innovations of the Escuela Nueva model. Interested students present themselves as candidates, express their plans of action to deal with the school’s needs and look for the support of other students in the elections, which are organized through a transparent democratic process. Once the student government has been formed, it is organized into different committees that engage themselves in the management of different domains of common interest (sports, the use of free time, library, computer room, democracy and values, environment, preventive medicine, etc.). Work is done in the form of projects with the teachers and the educational community advising and supporting the students.

If learning is limited to acquiring and memorizing information, that information is not going to make a lot of sense to the students. It will also be rather difficult to translate it into making them more active and participatory citizens who engage in more constructive relationships with others and with society in general.

Enrique Chaux
Professor at the Universidad de los Andes, expert on citizenship competencies

12. The student government is an Escuela Nueva innovation dating from the 70s. The same idea was included in the 1994 General Colombian Education Act which regulated that it was to be implemented in all the schools around the country. This has led to a type of practice that is more administrative, corporative and nominally representative in character instead of being a formative and participatory practice as in Escuela Nueva.
The student government is not merely a representative body for the students; on the contrary, it is a curricular strategy which encourages the students’ emotional, social, and moral development by means of experiential group activities. It is also an organization which guarantees that the students will be able to proactively exercise their rights within a participating democracy. Therefore, proposals and decisions are made and thereafter put into practice. This strategy of social, personal and holistic formation prepares the students to adopt a lifestyle of responsible citizens with everything this implies: participation, tolerance, solidarity, cooperation, mutual help, responsible decisions, leadership, autonomy and the exercise of their rights, while respecting the rights of the others.

### 2.4. Action

The action component describes elements which put the content and form into practice in order to consciously transform the current realities of direct, structural or cultural violence, both within the school and in the community. Among others, the Escuela Nueva model proposes and favors the following direct application and transformation elements:

**The proactive action of the student government**

The student government, which is organized into various committees and carries out different projects, is much more than just a simple representation of the students. It carries a lot of responsibility in the management of the daily tasks at school. Solutions to many of the problems, challenges, and difficulties encountered in school life are pursued by the committees and other student government tools such as the suggestion box or friendship mail. Some schools also create specific committees such as the conflict resolution committee. In general, the students themselves make decisions and carry out activities they propose. In this respect, the student government constitutes a tool for real transformation of school life in the constant search for an ever growing and more sustainable peace and harmony.

**Application activities in the learning guides**

The learning guides for the different subject areas follow a determined structure which puts the content into a sequence of basic activities, practice activities and application activities. Application activities are intended for the student to apply the acquired learning to a situation in his/her daily life, and stimulate students to deepen their knowledge by turning to other sources of information. The ultimate objective, however, is to enable every student to solve the problems and necessities of daily life. With respect to curricular topics such as the promotion of democracy or the preservation of the environment, this methodology implies a direct practice and application of their citizenship competencies and, through them, a transformation of the violent or unjust realities. Those application activities also often involve the families, communities and the children’s general surroundings, thus widening the scope of the transformation.

Peace Education would be as well a liberating process in which people—not as recipients but as knowing subjects—achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality.

Magnus Haavelsrud and Alicia Cabezudo
Professors in Peace Education
Social and environmental projects in the community

Depending on the necessities of the community and motivated by a proactive attitude on the part of the students and teachers, the Escuela Nueva model initiates and promotes social and environmental projects which, stemming from the school, are directed towards the entire community. Starting from a topic addressed in the curriculum, students and teachers identify needs and they develop common activities to deal with them constructively. Escuela Nueva emphasizes both the transformation of challenges as well as the promotion and application of values and behaviors which will guarantee the sustainability of the efforts that have been deployed.

2.5. Consistency and Integration among the Components

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the real contribution of FEN to the construction of a Culture of Peace is not to be found in the isolated elements and tools as we have just presented them, but rather in the consistency and integration which exists among them. It is a large set of structural, organizational, curricular, methodological, pedagogical and didactical aspects and considerations which, when applied properly and consistently, will profoundly transform school life in general and the educational process in particular.

An organizational structure consistent with the content and form of peace education

An unfortunate deficiency in some peace education initiatives is the omission of the problems posed by the organizational structure and how this can contribute to the atmosphere in the classroom and the implicit learning of the students. While teachers prepare content for topics related to citizenship and human rights and integrate them into the class through participatory and inclusive methodologies, students continue receiving authoritative, exclusionary and discriminatory signals from the principal’s office, the administration or the school system as such (for example through highly rigid promotion systems). Escuela Nueva counterweighs this danger by fully including the administration in applying the model. The educational institution is conceived as a collectivity where everybody participates under the understanding of horizontal relationships and without prejudice towards the different roles and functions that are carried out. The school buildings, with their varied spaces and furniture, also support the form and content as far as possible. For example, they facilitate cooperative learning (as in the case of the assembled group tables) or foster concern for the environment (school gardens).
Our point of departure is to reflect on the culture of violence that has always been woven into many of the educational policies and practices. There is a “systemic violence in education” that has its roots in the power structures themselves and in the people in positions of institutional authority.

Anaida Pascual Moran and Anita Zudkin Suliveres
UNESCO Chair for Peace Education

A complete integration between content and form

The essence of the Escuela Nueva model is found in its innovative form that is characterized by active, personalized and cooperative learning in small groups, complemented by the new orienting role of the teacher and the project work of the student government. This set of innovations grants a substantial amount of participation and responsibility to the students, who take maximum control of their own learning process. In this respect, the form directly models and integrates the teachings of the content, especially with respect to the cross-cutting theme of citizenship competencies. These are not taught as an abstract theory in a lecture by the teacher, but are practiced in daily life of the school community, for example through the work of the various student government committees. The concrete experiences that are made within and through the student government, and all their related “lessons learned”, are part of the curriculum. It can therefore be said that it is the form which, through its direct expression, is converted into content. This consistency and integration between form and content contributes to generate a highly positive and supportive classroom climate.
Structure, content and form allow for real transformation

Another deficiency which might occur in peace education initiatives is the limited attention paid to a direct and real life application. The students learn participation and conflict resolution skills in fictitious situations, but they do not have an opportunity to apply this knowledge and these skills to their personal life.

In contrast, the Escuela Nueva model seeks that the explicit and implicit teachings which emerge from the organizational structure, the content and the form, develop a direct and tangible impact both inside as well as outside the classroom.

If the lesson collides with non-peaceful realities encountered, then, as far as possible, a transformation of the latter is pursued through school and/or community projects which also integrate the families and the community members. The action component has, therefore, a triple benefit: it facilitates change in non-peaceful contexts and conditions; it deepens and diversifies learning through application; and it gives feedback on the first three components, thus validating the relevance of their teachings.  

FEN’s learning guides integrate structure, content, form and action

FEN’s learning guides demonstrate how a single tool can incorporate, connect and respond to the requirements of peace education according to the different components. In terms of organizational structure, the learning guides provide coherence with the ideals of a Culture of Peace by being based on the individual needs of every student, allowing progressive advancement that is adapted to the pace of each child and without discrimination. They offer pertinent content through their cross-cutting themes of citizenship competencies, environment conservation and entrepreneurship-leadership.

They apply a suitable methodology to build a Culture of Peace by enabling and promoting active and cooperative learning, which can allow for the integration and practical application of the students’ citizenship skills.

Finally, the learning guides propose application activities and other forms of action that contribute to the construction of a Culture of Peace by transforming the way they interact and apply problem-solving in the lives of the students and their families.

The effects and results of FEN’s work in fostering peace and citizenship manifest themselves at various levels. In order to show the richness of its achievements, we have compiled the observations and conclusions of different scientific studies and offer some testimonies of individuals involved in our projects. The purpose of this section is to give a general overview of the most important impacts of the Escuela Nueva model in the area of building a Culture of Peace, without reproducing the various research projects in their totality.13

3.1. On individuals

In the student

“The methodology of Escuela Nueva encourages those behaviors associated with direct democracy, participatory democracy, representative democracy and peaceful coexistence to a greater degree than the conventional school. The children at these schools are better-prepared to open up space for participation in their school and at home. They are able to analyze and contribute to group processes, are more self-confident and also trust more in others. They are more inclined to establish links of solidarity as well as to invent and follow norms.”

Julieta Mejía and Catalina Estrada, Escuela Nueva y democracia infantil, Universidad de los Andes, 2006.

In the teacher

“Talking about the work of a teacher with Escuela Nueva means defining a world full of aptitudes and attitudes, as well as devotion, dedication and charisma. Escuela Nueva teachers are not teachers that exercise authority and repress the students’ thinking. Instead, he/she is a guide for the class who sits at the tables just like any other student. The teacher stops being that important person that no one can approach and instead becomes the students’ friend who sits with them to have a snack, spend time with their families, laugh at bad jokes, and enjoy life together.

In Escuela Nueva the teacher is one of us; he/she is not just the instructor for math, social sciences, biology, etc., but an individual who is part of our moral and spiritual development. It is common for some educational organizations to not have a psychologist, so it is the teachers who turn into our advisers, who listen to us and, at times, open up their own lives to give an example of personal development... believe me, there is still a lot more to say about teachers from the perspective of a student who has graduated...”

Deibi Yuliana Lopez Tamayo, graduate from an Escuela Nueva school in Caldas, 2010
3.2. In classroom interactions

“Democratic behaviors such as taking turns, assisting others, expressing opinions, choosing among options, directing fellow students and participating in the student government, were observed with over 80% of the children participating in the Nueva Escuela Unitaria* (NEU) program, compared to only about 50% of the children in traditional schools. For NEU children, the frequency of occurrence was about one observation of democratic behavior for every two hours of observation, compared to one observation every five hours in traditional schools.

Democratic behaviors were not only more frequent in the NEU schools but they were qualitatively different from those observed in comparison schools. For example, in NEU, the observed instances of assisting others generally involved a student explaining something, such as instructions for an assignment or the operations necessary to resolve a problem, to a classmate. In traditional schools, assistance often meant that a child completed an assignment for another student, rather than helping the student to learn how to do it him/herself.”

*Name given to the Escuela Nueva program in Guatemala.
Yetilú de Baessa, Ray Chesterfield and al, Active Learning and Democratic Behavior in Guatemalan Rural Primary Schools, Compare, Vol. 32. No. 2, 2002.

“Overall, children were significantly more likely to receive positive feedback in the Nueva Escuela Unitaria (NEU) program, with negative feedback occurring in consistently higher frequency in traditional schools. It is important to point out that the relative frequency of negative feedback was extremely high among girls in the traditional schools, making up 79% of all observed occurrences when compared to their female counterparts in NEU schools.”

Ray Chesterfield, Indicators of Democratic Behavior in Nueva Escuela Unitaria Schools, USAID Guatemala, 1994
In classroom climate

“As was shown in the research by Jennifer Pitt (1999), the classroom climate resulting from Escuela Nueva is significantly better than the one at the control schools. It should be emphasized that the classroom climate turns out to be a very important variable in children’s behavior, especially in the behavior related to participatory democracy, peaceful coexistence and communicative action. The classroom climate constitutes a very positive influence on all these kinds of behavior. These findings reflect the fact that the children’s personal relationship with the teacher, with their classmates, and even with the principal of the school is far more important than the materials or the infrastructure the school is providing. In the study, the quality of the school’s infrastructure was never a meaningful variable in contrast with the classroom climate and the degree to which Escuela Nueva had been implemented (which reflects this pedagogical system).


In school administration

“As the school director, I was able to feel the same enthusiasm that was generated when, in past decades, the Jesuit Society implemented a project of personalized education in their schools in Colombia. The proposal from Fundación Escuela Nueva about to adapt Escuela Nueva to urban settings makes holistic education possible with the participation of the entire educational community.

It is governed by the conviction that teachers and students can exchange learning experiences and build educational processes together with their families and their environment in a participatory atmosphere and one of harmonious growth.”

Alberto Múnera, Principal at Colegio San Bartolomé in Bogotá, 2010.

In families

“Due to the work the school does with parents, there are positive and conclusive changes in three aspects of the family environment: a reduction in the use of violence as a way to punish or reprimand children; an agreement through dialogue between parents and children for permissions they give to children, and the increase in parents’ respect for children’s free time when parents let them play or do homework assignments instead of making them do housework. Changes in these three behaviors have contributed to an improvement in the families’ peaceful coexistence as they use dialogue instead of violence to solve their problems and as they learn to respect each other’s space and opinions.”

Julieta Mejía and Catalina Estrada, Escuela Nueva y democracia infantil, Universidad de los Andes, 2006.
In the community

“It is observed that the collaboration between parents and the school causes them to become more and more involved in the decisions that affect their community. It enables them to participate more actively in preparing for and following up on the Municipal Educational Plan and in setting up committees and associations to solve problems that affect them. Furthermore, parents and teachers realize that trust, respect, and solidarity within the families have improved due to school activities.”

Julieta Mejía and Catalina Estrada, Escuela Nueva y democracia infantil, Universidad de los Andes, 2006.

The impact on alumni

“Our study shows that alumni participating in a larger number of voluntary organizations have a higher probability of being alumni that studied with the Escuela Nueva model. While conventional school alumni have a higher probability of acknowledging that the mayor of the town has asked them to vote for a certain initiative, Escuela Nueva alumni are more likely to present an initiative of their own to the mayor of the town. Furthermore, Escuela Nueva alumni collaborate more with local authorities, show more respect for ideas proposed by women and are more disposed to expect discussions to end with an agreement.”

On equity and social mobility

“The most relevant outcome in education is that the achievements of Escuela Nueva on socio-economic level 1 are greater than those of traditional schools, including for socio-economic level 2. Escuela Nueva offsets the children’s initial limitations caused by their low socio-economic level.”

National Planning Department of Colombia, Planning and Development, Volume No. XXVIII, Misión Social, National Planning Department, Bogotá, 1997.

On the right to education

“The impact of Escuela Nueva can be determined by the extremely high academic achievements of its students compared to students from traditional schools. Coverage has increased, while drop-out rates and repetition of grades have gone down. As far as rights are concerned, Escuela Nueva fulfills every student’s right in rural areas to get a good quality education.”

IV. Our Success Stories
Projects in peaceful and non-peaceful contexts

The Escuela Nueva model was designed in the 70s in response to the needs of multi-grade schools in rural areas of Colombia. However, FEN has made evident that deep educational innovations would also be valid, relevant and pertinent in other contexts and settings, developing several adaptations of the model for specific populations and special contexts. Among them are the Escuela Nueva Learning Circles® which offer a tailor-made response to the needs of children who were displaced due to violence and other social emergencies, as well as the adaptation of Escuela Nueva to urban settings called Escuela Activa Urbana®.

This adaptation was originally conceived of as an answer to marginalized urban schools, and later, as a strategy to improve the quality in urban educational institutions. Several educational projects were also developed from the same principles and methodology with the purpose of strengthening the social fabric of communities in areas of conflict, or to implement community projects that deal with common needs such as water shortage.

All these adaptations are nourished by the nature of the Escuela Nueva model and reinforce the emphasis on building a Culture of Peace. Here we present four examples of projects developed by FEN—the first two pertaining to a context mainly recognized as peaceful, and the last two pertaining to contexts that are mainly recognized as non-peaceful.

4.1. Escuela Activa Urbana – Education for Citizenship

After having taught for 24 years, Leonor Argote, teacher at Heladia Mejia School in Bogotá, started to practice the principles of the Escuela Activa Urbana. Following the suggestion of a colleague who had worked with this model for several years, she decided to take on the challenge of this change to meet her students’ needs.

“Last year I was worried because I had a very difficult course with children of different ages. They were between 8 and 15, and old for their grade level due to displacement and discipline problems,” says Leonor. “They were children who had been turned down by other institutions, but with this model they were able to move forward. They stopped being intolerant and learned to work as a team and share things. They became inquisitive and responsible. First, they learned to appreciate themselves and then their classmates. Today, they are leaders and that is important because Colombia needs leadership.”
These days, Leonor’s students are preparing a talk to raise awareness in their community about the importance of conserving and taking care of the environment by means of recycling. They will talk before their parents and the adults who work in the mechanic workshops located near the school in the northern part of Bogota.

The kids seem enthusiastic about this task and say that the learning guides, the learning resource center and the dialogues and interactions they have with their classmates and teacher are their source of inspiration. They are motivated to look for new subjects to research. What stands out in Leonor’s students, and in those of other teachers at the institution, is their spontaneity, their ability to express themselves and their self-esteem. These qualities of leadership, taking initiative and responsibility are an integral part of citizenship competencies and, therefore, an essential condition for fostering a Culture of Peace both inside and outside of the school.

I like Escuela Activa Urbana because we work in teams and that way we can help other people. We are all equal but with different thoughts.

María Fernanda Student at Heladia Mejia School

4.2. Escuela Nueva & Water - Community Development Project

The districts of Barbosa and Barichara (Department of Santander) suffer from drastic water shortage, deforestation, pollution and poverty. In addition, there is high risk of social tension due to the possibility of a fight over water resources. In this context, Fundación Escuela Nueva set up an environmental project based on its participatory methodology. The main objective was to consolidate a series of smaller environmental projects in Escuela Nueva schools that would encourage behavioral changes, strengthen human values and promote positive, equitable attitudes towards a rational use of water by children, teachers, and the community.

In the words of Guillermo Bautista, mayor of Barichara: “It is a very important program for our region, because Escuela Nueva is creativity, imagination, reality. It is the spontaneity of the kids to express themselves about how they feel, what worries them, and what motivates them once more to keep on living. Unfortunately, water has been wasted little by little in Barichara; we have been using up this important resource. Thanks to the support of Fundación Escuela Nueva and especially to the enthusiasm our children have put into the project, water has started to emerge again for the development of our rural areas.”

There was a strong focus on establishing lasting links to the community, and the project specifically sought to foster parents’ motivation to participate in their children’s education by helping them get ahead with their homework and supervising specific activities like planting trees or identifying water springs. The great success of the project had caused 20 schools to take an interest in implementing the Escuela Nueva model, and 5 districts in the region asked to be linked to the project.

It is true that parents participate, and also necessary that they participate, because they can help us, for example to clean the well. We kids would not have been able to fix it alone. Without our parents’ help it would not have been possible.

Manuel Student at Santa Helena School
The fact that children were significant promoters of changes in behavior and attitudes, especially within the family, was one of the main lessons and conclusions of the project. It was confirmed that the Escuela Nueva pedagogical model not only improves the quality of education for children and teenagers, but that it is also applicable in the search for solutions to community problems like water shortage. If not attended to, these problems could result in social tensions and conflict leading to violence that could impede the building of a Culture of Peace. Besides that, taking care of the environment and living in harmony with nature is in itself part of a holistic vision of peace.

4.3. Escuela Nueva Learning Circles – Education in Emergencies

In 2003 Fundación Escuela Nueva created, developed, implemented and successfully evaluated the Escuela Nueva Learning Circles® program, which deals with the needs of children who have been displaced as a result of violence and other social emergencies. Many of them are in very difficult situations where the poverty of their families is augmented with psychological problems, malnutrition, abuse, abandonment, drug addiction, mistreatment and domestic violence. Moreover, many have never gone to school before.

Through the Escuela Nueva methodology, the Learning Circles respond to this set of discouraging circumstances. Students work together in groups of 12 to 16 along with the help of a young tutor who, supported by suitable pedagogical strategies, learning materials and the help of pedagogical and community advisors, provides them with a new opportunity. The children belong to different grades and age groups, but share the same room: communal classrooms, family homes, churches or any place that will open its doors to them, even official schools. Each Circle depends on a “mother school” where students are registered. They share academic and sports events with that school, and once they are prepared and up to the level they should be at, they are transferred. Thus, the Learning Circles turn into a sort of bridge that helps them get over the high obstacles of entering a formal school.

The Circle is like an oasis for me. I learn to do homework assignments and to appreciate all my classmates.

Fabian
Student at a Circle in Soacha

14. Esa adaptación del modelo fue financiada por USAID y en su implementación contó con el apoyo de la OIM, el Consejo Noruego para Refugiados, ACNUR y el Ministerio de Educación.
The district of La Macarena (Department of Meta) has been part of the so-called Distension Zone—or Neutral Territory—set up during the government of President Pastrana (1998-2002) to facilitate negotiations for a peace process with the FARC guerilla. That territory was under the command of the guerrilla group with an almost total absence of the Colombian state. After the zone was revoked, the regular presence of different illegal armed groups, as well as fights between the guerrilla, paramilitary groups and the public armed forces, became widespread. To regain territorial control and eradicate the illicit crops that had thrived during the dominance of the FARC, the government of President Uribe (2002-2010) implemented the Comprehensive Consolidation Plan for La Macarena in 2007.

4.4. Escuela Nueva in Conflict Zones – Strengthening the Social Fabric

The program seeks to create the basic conditions for a process that is intended to be part of an “education for life” that strengthens citizenship and encourages living in peace and harmony, especially in sectors where there is high vulnerability and displacement. “We wanted to learn more about the children, give them some kind of recognition, so we decided to visit them in their homes. It was an emotional shock because we wanted to solve everything for them, but we finally understood that providing them with affection and showing them a different path was important to them,” says Luz Dary Rojas, one of the first tutors for the Learning Circles in Soacha.

Between 70 and 80% of the boys and girls who attended the Learning Circles in Soacha succeeded in integrating into their “mother schools” or into equivalent programs that were suitable for their situation. This demonstrated the success of the program and led the Ministry of Education to make it a national policy. In 2010, the program was working in about 70 districts in Colombia, where 11,000 displaced students in highly vulnerable situations were studying in 700 Circles. By means of empowering and reintegrating those children who often do not enjoy their basic human rights, the Learning Circles are contributing to reduce the structural violence encountered by those communities and thus respond to an important peace-building need.
In this area with a high level of conflict, Fundación Escuela Nueva implemented an educational project in 2008 – 2009 to improve the coverage, quality, equity and efficiency of basic elementary education. Priority was given to strengthening student governments, a pedagogical strategy that succeeds in empowering students in their self-esteem, leadership and participatory competencies.

The same concept was adapted for adults to build “parent schools” and “parent governments” which strengthened social ties within the community. These meetings with families also made it possible to work on the construction and promotion of human values and to improve the conditions for peaceful coexistence both inside the families and the community as a whole.

“As president of the Community Board, I have never seen the parents so highly motivated and willing to participate at this school. That makes you think that this school does good things and that we have to work more hand in hand with the teacher,” says the president of the local Community Action Council of Caño Blanco Village in Puerto Rico, La Macarena.

Through the Escuela Nueva methodology, the schools facilitated greater access to the community. Students shared their learning experiences with their families in their everyday lives, which strongly encouraged motivation and involvement in community issues on the part of their parents. Seeing their children get organized and participating in student governments made them change perspectives.

Before FEN’s involvement the very notion of “government” had been taboo due to the lasting control that the guerilla had exercised in the region. However, inspired by the example of their own children, community members organized themselves in parental governments to contribute again to the common good of the village. This development towards an acceptance of community organization, the ongoing dialogue that is necessary to set up a parent government as well as the resulting practice and direct involvement in it, are all important steps towards building a Culture of Peace.
Conclusions

The Escuela Nueva model and the various adaptations and projects that FEN has pioneered provide a consistent framework for peace education and assure committed implementation. They pursue an inclusive vision that seeks to improve and humanize the educational process from its very essence in order to foster and practice the conditions that are part of a Culture of Peace.

FEN’s vision and development of the Escuela Nueva model distinguishes itself from many other initiatives on the global level by considering peace education not merely as “one more subject” at the periphery of the conventional curriculum. Rather, it promotes peaceful coexistence and an approach to positive peace through its own nature. Basing itself on active, personalized and cooperative learning, the teacher’s new role as a guide, and the efforts of the students in the student government, the model fully transforms the educational process. It distances itself from the conventional school which is based on memorization, authoritarianism, and the transmission of information to focus on child-centered learning. This new conception permeates all different elements of Escuela Nueva and is the key to the development of knowledge, competences, skills, values, attitudes and behaviors that are truly peace-enhancing.

The generation and application of citizenship competencies are a cross-cutting priority in all FEN’s learning materials. It is one of the central themes that show the strong consistency and interaction between curriculum and methodology, between content and form. The curriculum does not “talk” about citizenship. Rather, the methodology applies and practices it directly. Students do not just hear about the values of participation, responsibility, equality, tolerance or justice, but rather, they see them applied and therefore live and reproduce them in their daily lives at school. It is this difference that makes it possible for the students to really internalize and integrate those values.

We also highlight the efforts of the Escuela Nueva model to be conscious of the organizational structure and its impact on children’s learning. It is a priority to promote an institutional atmosphere that is favorable to and consistent with the values and principles of peace. In the end, it is the organizational structure combined with the curriculum and methodology that provides the necessary conditions for real transformation in the lives of the children and their community.

More often than not, peace education is presented as a separate, add-on subject alongside the core subjects taught in schools and higher education academic establishments. As a result, peace education may tend to stay on the margins rather than be integrated as an essential or important complementary component of what students learn.

United States Institute for Peace (USIP)
Peace Education in Escuela Nueva

A school or educational community that fosters human rights is one where there is consistency between the goals, content, organization and educational practice.

Anaida Pascual Moran and Anita Zudkin Suliveres
UNESCO Chair for Peace Education

The impact of FEN’s work in building a Culture of Peace is comprehensive and extremely varied in its manifestations. It has been demonstrated by various national and international studies, and praised by many institutions that are recognized in the field, including UNICEF and UNESCO. One of its most outstanding achievements mentioned is the creation of a peaceful classroom climate that is consistent with the life skills that peace education seeks to develop.

These important achievements do not mean that the Escuela Nueva model is perfect in all aspects related to peace education. There are weaknesses and gaps that have made themselves evident through this process of conceptualization and self-awareness. One point refers precisely to the clarification of the dimensions of peace education, which is a long process within which this publication is only a first step. For example, it became evident that although the majority of the Escuela Nueva teachers practice peace education by means of the model, many of them are not explicitly aware of the topic. Including the dimension of peace education into teacher trainings would therefore be one of various potential responses.

Another general point could be including in the curriculum more extensive and explicit sections with peace related content such as conflict transformation or human rights. These topics are already part of the learning methodology, but including additional aspects from a theoretical perspective could contribute to deepening conscious understanding as well as offer inspiration for new ways of applying it.

In face of the achievements and the challenges that have been discovered, Fundación Escuela Nueva is committed to continued innovation in the educational domain and contributing to the construction of a Culture of Peace for all the children in Colombia and the world.


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*The translation into English of quotes from Spanish publications was done by the author of this publication.*
Peace is not taught; it is learned together.