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SundayReview | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Make School a Democracy

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ARMENIA, Colombia — IN a one-room rural schoolhouse an hour's drive from this city in a coffee-growing region of Colombia, 30 youngsters ages 5 to 13 are engrossed in study. In most schools, students sit in rows facing the teacher, who does most of the talking. But these students are grouped at tables, each corresponding to a grade level. The hum of conversation fills the room. After tackling an assignment on their own, the students review one another's work. If a child is struggling, the others pitch in to help.

During my visit to one of these schools, second graders were writing short stories, and fifth graders were testing whether the color of light affects its brightness when seen through water. The teacher moved among the groups, leaning over shoulders, reading and commenting on their work. In one corner of the classroom were items, brought to school by the kids, that will be incorporated in their lessons. The students have planted a sizable garden, and the vegetables and fruits they raise are used as staples at mealtime, often prepared according to their parents' recipes.

During the past four decades, this school — and thousands like it — have adopted what's called the Escuela Nueva (New School) model.

A 1992 World Bank evaluation of Colombia's schools concluded that poor youngsters educated this way — learning by doing, rather than being endlessly

drilled for national exams — generally outperformed their better-off peers in traditional schools. A 2000 Unesco study found that, next to Cuba, Colombia did the best job in Latin America of educating children in rural areas, where most of the schools operate with this model. It was also the only country in which rural schools generally outperformed urban schools. Poor children in developing nations often drop out after a year or two because their families don't see the relevance of the education they're getting. These youngsters are more likely to stay in school than their counterparts in conventional schools.

Escuela Nueva is almost unknown in the United States, even though it has won numerous international awards — the hyper-energetic Vicky Colbert, who founded the program in 1975 and still runs it, received the first Clinton Global Citizenship prize. That should change, for this is how children — not just poor children — ought to be educated.

It's boilerplate economics that universal education is the path to prosperity for developing nations; the Nobel-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz calls it “the global public good.” But while the number of primary school-age children not in class worldwide fell to 57.2 million in 2012 from 99.8 million in 2000, the quality of their education is another matter. Escuela Nueva offers a widely adaptable model, as Unesco has described it.

“Unesco reported the successful diffusion of Escuela Nueva in 20,000 Colombian schools with poorly trained teachers,” Ernesto Schiefelbein, rector of the Autonomous University of Chile, who has evaluated the program, told me. “As far as I know, there is no other example of massive educational improvement in a democratic developing country.”

Another Nobel-winning economist, Amartya Sen, posits that political repression impedes economic growth — that prosperity requires that social and economic well-being be tethered to democratic values. Escuela Nueva turns the schoolhouse into a laboratory for democracy. Rather than being run as a mini-dictatorship, with the principal as its unquestioned leader, the school operates as a self-governing community, where teachers, parents and students have a real say in how it is run. When teachers unfamiliar with this approach are assigned to these schools, it's often the students themselves who

teach them how to apply the method. “In these schools, citizenship isn’t abstract theory,” Ms. Colbert told me. “It’s daily practice.”

In the schools, students elected by their peers shoulder a host of responsibilities. In a school I visited in a poor neighborhood here in the city of Armenia, the student council meticulously planned a day set aside to promote peace; operated a radio station; and turned an empty classroom into a quiet space for reading and recharging. I was there last Halloween, when students put on a costume contest for their pets.

PARENTS become involved in the day-to-day life of these schools, and the educational philosophy influences their out-of-school lives. Research shows that the parents of Escuela Nueva students are less prone to use corporal punishment; more likely to let their youngsters spend time at play or on homework, rather than making them work when they’re not in school; and more likely, along with their children, to become engaged in their communities.

Decades ago, John Dewey, America’s foremost education philosopher, asserted that students learned best through experience and that democracy “cannot go forward unless the intelligence of the mass of people is educated to understand the social realities of their own time.” Escuela Nueva puts that belief into practice. I’ve witnessed the demise of many ballyhooed attempts to reform education on a mass scale. But I’ve tabled my jaded skepticism after visiting Escuela Nueva schools, reviewing the research and marveling at the sheer number of youngsters who, over 40 years, have been educated this way.

I’m convinced that the model can have a global impact on the lives of tens of millions of children — not just in the developing world but in the United States as well.

There’s solid evidence that American students do well when they are encouraged to think for themselves and expected to collaborate with one another. In a report last year, the American Institutes for Research concluded that students who attended so-called deeper learning high schools — which emphasize understanding, not just memorizing, academic content; applying that understanding to novel problems and situations; and developing

interpersonal skills and self-control — recorded higher test scores, were more likely to enroll in college and were more adept at collaboration than their peers in conventional schools.

But these schools are far from the mainstream. “It’s really different and quite impressive,” David K. Cohen, an education professor at the University of Michigan, told me. “I know of no similar system in the U.S.”

Rachel Lotan, a professor emeritus at Stanford, added, “Doing well on the high-stakes test scores is what drives the public schools, and administrators fear that giving students more control of their own education will bring down those scores.” Officials, and those who set the policies they follow, would do well to visit Colombia, where Escuela Nueva has much to teach us about how best to educate our children.

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