

# LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES

## *Q&A with Vicky Colbert*

*The 2014 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “The Power of Education Research for Innovation in Practice and Policy” What do you see as the most promising educational change innovations and what role does/should research play in relation to such innovations?*

I think the most promising educational innovations are those that not only have demonstrated positive results, but are also replicable and scalable. There are many great educational innovations on the ground, some academically interesting, but not many have the potential to scale up. It is one thing to have good innovative ideas and another to know how to lead change and transform education systems.

To make good innovations replicable and scalable we have to think of feasibility –technically, politically and financially – from the outset. By a technically feasible innovation I mean that all teachers can do it, without needing to have a Ph.D. In this sense, Escuela Nueva [discussed in more detail below] promoted small effective changes in the

classroom. These innovations and small changes in the daily work and routines of teachers gave a real meaning to change at the bottom level. Innovations have to be politically feasible - in Latin America, we have strong unions, so we have to consider this important issue. We need to make sure that teachers are the actors of change. Since Escuela Nueva incorporates parents and communities in the learning process, this aspect also introduced a base for support to the innovation. Also, innovations have to be financially feasible. An innovation may be really interesting, but if it is not cost effective, you won't impact national policy, especially in a developing country.

I value those innovations that have challenged doing business the same way, those that have challenged conventional thinking. Good innovations include those that go beyond teacher-centered pedagogy, emphasizing instead student-centered learning. Promising innovations are those that are tackling a new role of the teacher for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Education systems are evolving less rapidly than the rest of society. There have been many

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#### ABOUT THE SERIES

Lead the Change series, featuring renowned educational change experts from around the globe, serves to highlight promising research and practice, to offer expert insight on small- and large-scale educational change, and to spark collaboration within our SIG.

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changes, especially the way we access information. Systemic educational innovations that are advancing a new role of the teacher as a facilitator, a catalyzer, a role model in skills, values, and attitudes, a leader, are moving in the right direction.

We have to think about the role of research as well. I think that if Escuela Nueva did not have research behind it, sustainability would have never been achieved. A strong research base and evidence is one of the main reasons Escuela Nueva impacted national policy and was sustained. The issue is not coverage or impact. The issue is quality and sustainability. At Escuela Nueva, we had to demonstrate impact in reducing dropout rates, reducing repetition, ensuring retention rates, and demonstrating better learning outcomes, as well as attitudinal change in teachers. Attitudinal change was crucial. You need to have evidence on this, not only on learning outcomes of children, but on positive attitudinal change of teachers. I think that is crucial because the teachers are key to reform and key to empowering students and impacting peaceful democratic behavior.

*Escuela Nueva started in the seventies as a small-scale initiative to create a new model of teaching and learning for multi-grade schools in rural Colombia. Two decades later, it had become the model of rural education in the country. Can you describe the Escuela Nueva model and explain how it expanded so rapidly across Colombia?*

Escuela Nueva grew out of the Unitary School approach promoted by UNESCO in the 60s. In many Latin American countries and worldwide, this program aimed to offer primary education in schools with only one teacher working with all the grades. However, there were other experiences in the country with different approaches and methodologies. The Unitary School Program had difficulties in expanding and the unions were against it because it demanded too much additional time in designing self-

instructional learning materials and they felt a threat in the reduction of the number of teachers. There was not much information on the concept of multigrade schooling in the country and what existed was not scalable.

As the first national coordinator of Escuela Unitaria in the Ministry of Education, I sought to build on the different existing experiences in the country and promoting a national consensus among them. The biggest challenge was how to design and introduce a scalable intervention that was technically, politically, and financially feasible. I met Oscar Mongollón, who was the teacher in the demonstrative school of the UNESCO Project in Pamplona, in the State of Norte de Santander. Oscar, a charismatic and creative leader, was not only applying the techniques of Escuela Unitaria, but also creating his own innovations in the school. I started by asking, "How can we do what Oscar is doing in this school in the 34,000 rural schools of Colombia?"

In collaboration with the Department of Planning at the Ministry Education and USAID, we initiated an innovation project in three regions of Colombia and expanded the experience Oscar was leading, but introducing a more systemic approach, and going beyond just classroom organization and innovation. If we wanted to impact a national policy we had to start thinking systemically and introduce strategies to facilitate replication and scalability, working with teachers, administrators and the communities. Under this transition from Escuela Unitaria to Escuela Nueva, our first challenge was to design the new intervention. As a team, Beryl Levinger – USAID education officer -, Oscar and I designed and coauthored the first manual of Escuela Nueva, where all the underpinnings of the model were made explicit and systematized to facilitate replication.<sup>1</sup> The manual used the same methodology we wanted teachers to use with their students. In this manner, through a very experiential, practice-focused approach, we started leading change in the country.

By 1976 I was appointed the first National Coordinator of Escuela Nueva in the Ministry of Education. My challenge was to build a national team composed of the wonderful rural teachers I had met. They were the persons that really knew the context we would be working with. It was not easy to bring and appoint rural teachers into the national Ministry. Convincing the high level decision makers that this was the best choice was one of the most important and crucial decisions that I battled with. Fortunately, they supported my proposal and we managed to appoint a mixed and small national team with the best teachers from the rural Unitary School and some good researchers and planners. The biggest challenge was working and “battling” within the bureaucracy and protecting the innovation and the team.

Another strategic step was to initiate a bottom up approach, organizing a team of rural teachers. Our strategy was to have demonstration schools in action, provide empirical results, and establishing alliances with regional entities. We managed to get Oscar appointed as the head of an important teacher's college in Pamplona where he could lead demonstration schools for the future training of teachers. We started bringing high level policy makers to demonstration schools and influencing high level decision makers from the Ministry. What happened at the bottom level served to define policy recommendations.

Escuela Nueva managed to translate complexity into manageable action so that any teacher could transform their learning environment without too much theory or difficulties. Many teachers appreciated what we were offering, demonstrating that the model was feasible and a good fit for its beneficiaries. Demonstrating effectiveness was crucial to start influencing national policy and to generate a demand-driven approach from teachers themselves.

A key dimension was an evaluation and

monitoring component to ensure empirical and scientific evidence of positive impact of the program. We established important links with research institutions in the country. Demonstrating effectiveness was crucial to start influencing national policy.

Once we had disseminated Escuela Nueva to different regions of the country, I became Vice-Minister of Education. This was an opportunity to give it full support and place my team in strategic positions in the Ministry. This facilitated the universalization of Escuela Nueva in Colombia.

Under a World Bank loan we took Escuela Nueva to scale. This was possible because we had already demonstrated effectiveness and efficiency. While I was the National Coordinator and then Vice-Minister we made sure that there were financial, technical and political conditions. The demonstration schools in several regions were made possible by funding from USAID and the Interamerican Development Bank. When innovations were in place, the World Bank loan allowed the expansion of Escuela Nueva to 20,000 schools nation-wide. Leading change is not only having innovations in place or learning how to disseminate them, but also being strategic of how to lead change at a higher level!

*In 1989, Escuela Nueva was recognized by the World Bank as one of the three most successful public policy reforms in developing countries around the world. According to an international comparative study conducted by UNESCO in 1998, other than Cuba, Colombia provided the best primary education in all of Latin America to children living in rural areas. Also, with the exception of some major cities, Colombia became the only country where rural schools outperformed urban schools. How do you explain these remarkable successes?*

Nine key factors help explain the successes of Escuela Nueva. First, funds and political commitment were in place. Second, the

demonstration model worked well in various regions simultaneously. Third, the mystique associated with the original project continued as the program grew, thanks to an expansion of the charismatic leadership of all the members of the team. Fourth, the appropriate administrative procedures were in place. Fifth, information about the results of the pilot project was timely and appropriate for key stakeholders. Sixth, the transition from project to program was associated with a learning process whereby knowledge building and action were clearly linked. Seventh, the roles of researchers, planners and administrators were combined in a team. Eighth, the core team remained together and moved to positions of leadership during the expansion period. And ninth, supervisors assumed the role of trainers of teachers, thus legitimizing the innovations in classrooms and their surrounding institutional environments.<sup>2</sup>

*What is the status of Escuela Nueva these days, and what – if anything – makes it different from what it was in the eighties and nineties?*

By the late 1980s, Escuela Nueva had been adopted as a universal strategy in rural areas and had become one of the 5 pillars of the national plan to eradicate severe poverty. However, its expansion coincided with the Colombia's nationwide decentralization policy, a central aspect of a new Constitution enacted in 1991 that devolved services, resources, and authority to local governments. Decentralization in that particular moment derailed the national central plan: instead of dealing with one national education authority we now had to deal with 1,000 municipalities. In other words, the massive scaling-up process started at the wrong moment. Escuela Nueva had inspired the New Law of Education and many other flexible education models in Colombia. But the Ministry decided to dedicate all its energy to its own reorganization. Many problems emerged such as massive transfers of trained teachers, the appointment of

new teachers with no adequate training, improvisation in the training process, and poor coordination between training services and the delivery of materials. Many schools labeled as Escuela Nueva were not implementing the strategies and all the components of the reform. This led to the weakening of rural schools and the Escuela Nueva program. The usual problems of uneven implementation and local opposition due to weak implementation arose.<sup>3</sup>

At this point, some of us left the Ministry of Education. Aware that innovations fade within bureaucracies and are very vulnerable to political and administrative changes, in 1987 with several ex-Ministers of Education we created Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN). This organization has adapted the model to new populations and contexts, such as urban regions, and migrant and displaced populations.<sup>4</sup>

I became UNICEF's Regional Education Adviser for Latin America and the Caribbean. From that position, I promoted the Escuela Nueva model in different countries, giving it different names but maintaining its core principles and methodology. With this very strategic platform, Escuela Nueva inspired aspects of the Child Friendly School framework developed in UNICEF.

Delegations from other countries came to Colombia to study Escuela Nueva. Many organizations strongly supported the internationalization of Escuela Nueva, including the World Bank Institute, UNICEF, IADB, AID through AED, Plan Internacional, and Save the Children. We organized missions to advance Escuela Nueva in other countries and to inspire many educational reforms worldwide. Giving teachers visibility and international leadership was our way to continue empowering teachers and expand their influence in other countries in Latin America and abroad.

All these wonderful committed teachers demonstrated once again that they were the key

actors to introduce change, not only in Colombia but across the Latin America and Caribbean region.

Because Escuela Nueva started to be adopted by other countries but was becoming debilitated in Colombia, I decided to leave my international position and became the Director of Fundación Escuela Nueva, to re-launch Escuela Nueva in my country. We organized the First Escuela Nueva International Congress to mobilize political will, to put Escuela Nueva back in the national political scenario, and to share important research findings. Fifteen countries and 1000 participants attended. In 2006 we organized the Second International Congress, with 1500 participants from 18 countries. With these two International Congresses we realized Escuela Nueva was more alive at the bottom than in the offices of the Ministry of Education; it had taken the form of a movement, where the main actors were teachers themselves. We saw the potential this movement had to become an important learning network. In 2006 a new network named RENUOVA was launched.

Currently, Escuela Nueva is strong in some regions and weak in others. Our NGO works with some regions more than with others, although our challenge is to continue revitalizing it in the entire country. At the same time, we are working with other countries, such as Mexico, Zambia, Vietnam and East Timor.

*What are some key lessons from Escuela Nueva to the larger educational change field?*

The first lesson relates to social participation. A manual from the World Bank<sup>5</sup> defines social participation as the process through which people share the control over the decisions on the activities, projects, programs, and institutions that affect their lives. The evidence of studies on participation has demonstrated that it enhances quality, sustainability and impact. Escuela Nueva started from the bottom

up. Children, teachers and communities were the actors of change. All our training strategies, learning materials, and school community relationships are based on interaction and social participation. This makes a difference for sustainability.

Another lesson learned is that we have to work with governments to have far-reaching impact and coverage, but we also need public-private partnerships and involvement of civil society for quality and sustainability. In this case, the non-governmental sector was brought into the picture through the creation of Fundación Escuela Nueva to promote Escuela Nueva, ensure its quality, and develop innovation. We developed important partnerships with the Coffee Grower's Federation, with Fundación para la Educación Superior (FES), and now with many others.

A third lesson relates to feasibility. As I mentioned earlier, we wanted something that was easily replicable and that could translate complexity into really manageable action. From the outset we had to think of something that was feasible technically, politically, and financially. If you do not think about all these dimensions from the outset, it is not easy to impact national policy.

A fourth lesson is the importance of systematization. We had manuals, learning materials, and algorithms to facilitate the replication of processes, not only content. Our manuals in the hands of other trainers of trainers ensured that the model and the methodology would continue to expand and replicate with certain quality control. It was not an expansion through discourse or lectures, but through rigorously systematized processes and materials.

A fifth lesson is the need to turn organizations into "learning organizations." Public entities often lose their institutional memory, and since they rarely use accumulated knowledge, they reinvent the wheel all the time

at a very high cost. In Fundacion Escuela Nueva we have continued to innovate and develop new knowledge. Some developments include Escuela Activa Urbana, an adaptation of Escuela Nueva to urban schools, and the Escuela Nueva Learning Circles Program, which adapts the model for displaced children living in the slums of Bogotá, many of them with deep scars from conflict. Conceptually, we have enriched the model, linking it with peace education, citizenship development and democratic behaviors based on the research findings we have obtained.<sup>6</sup> We have also developed new interventions for secondary education, both rural and urban, and have developed virtual resources to complement our learning materials. We are also starting to use the Escuela Nueva model for entrepreneurship and financial education. This is taking us to move beyond formal schools and start working more with non-formal settings such as women's organizations.

A sixth lesson is that we have to think systemically from the outset if we want to have impact on a large scale. This, in turn, contributes to sustainability.

A seventh lesson has to do with the importance of having constant evaluation and research. This has maintained the interest and

the recognition and contributes to its sustainability and to policy formulation.

Last but not least, there has to be continuous effort and persistence. Changes in education take time, they have results on the long run and they do not necessarily coincide with the political momentums. This highlights again the importance of the role of civil society!

## NOTES

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