

*This unpublished essay, which was written by **Ian Leggett** (a student at the Institute of Education in 2000-2001), presents an interesting critique of the Escuela Nueva literature. Ian has given his permission to publish the essay on this site.*

Introduction

One of the most profound problems of education policy makers and practitioners in low and middle income countries is how to create an education system that meets multiple objectives within the context of high expectations but chronic financial and human resource constraints. Whether the objectives of educational development are conceived narrowly in accordance with human capital theory (Harbison 1973; World Bank 1995) or more broadly as a mechanism to promote poverty reduction and human development (Dfid 2000) governments and practitioners will face two principal challenges. One is to expand the availability of education, the other to ensure that the kind of education provided is responsive and relevant to the priorities and interests of children and the communities in which they live (Molteno et al 2000).

The first of these, quantitative expansion, is relatively difficult and expensive in rural areas where population density is low and where schooling does not easily fit with the patterns of rural livelihoods and lifestyles. These circumstances may encourage the adoption of different ways of providing schooling. One strategy, promoted in the 1960`s and currently enjoying something of a renaissance, is to use multigrade schools. In contrast to the dominant model of monograde teaching the defining feature of multigrade schools is the "teaching of students of different ages, grades and abilities in the same group" (Little 1995: 1). The second challenge that of quality and relevance, has tended to attract less attention. Governments, educational organisations and donors alike have prioritised expansion - an emphasis reflected in the calls for universal primary education since the early 1960`s (Little et al 1994) - rather than what goes on in the classroom.

Despite success in increasing school enrolment in Latin America the hopes that education would act as a catalyst for progressive economic and social transformation were largely unfulfilled. This apparent 'failure' of education (globally, not just in Latin America) led to serious reflection on systemic issues (Coombs 1968) and on the relationship between education and development (Dore 1976; Simmons 1979). At the heart of these reflections were issues of the purpose and quality of education and the relevance and appropriateness of conventional paradigms of curriculum and pedagogy. It was in this historical context that the Escuela Nueva programme was conceived and it is this beginning, with its inherent tensions between quantitative expansion and qualitative reform that helps to explain the diverse interpretations that have characterised the programme.

This essay will examine four papers written specifically on the Escuela Nueva programme in Colombia as one example of primary education reform. They were selected to reflect a variety of perspectives and to represent contemporary thinking. All of them were written in the 1990`s in English. The papers are:

- Resistance to good ideas: Escuela Nueva in Colombia by McGinn
- Constraints to implementing Educational Innovations: The case of multigrade schools by Benveniste and McEwan
- Alternatives in formal education: Colombia`s Escuela Nueva by Torres
- Achievement Evaluation of Colombia`s Escuela Nueva: Is multigrade the answer? by Psacharopoulos, Rojas and Velez.

Full bibliographic details of these papers are given in the references. In the text I will tend to refer to the principal author, with page numbers as necessary.

Escuela Nueva: Origins and Objectives

The global trends referred to above have been reflected in Colombia`s educational strategies. The rural population was identified as being the most neglected by the primary system in terms of access to and completion of school (Colbert and Arboleda 1990). A specific strategy to increase the number and improve the quality of primary schools was needed. Influenced by Unesco, Colombia adopted in 1967 a policy of unitary schools (small, one teacher schools, thus multigrade in character) but opposition to it from teachers and inconsistency in its application led to a major re-design in the mid-1970`s (Colbert and Arboleda 1990). By then the key problems were not so much quantitative as qualitative. Schiefelbein (1992) stresses the issues of low achievement and repetition, whilst Colbert and Arboleda (1990) emphasise deficiencies with the curriculum, teaching methods and materials and poor integration into the community. With these weaknesses in mind, the Escuela Nueva (EN) programme was launched in 1975. During the last 25 years it has acquired an international reputation as a model of good practice, an innovative success story in a field in which failure is all too common. So, what is 'the secret', the reasons for its success?

A review of the published literature suggests the answers are not as obvious as the question. It is perhaps inevitable, given the origins of the programme and the competing influences operating on it, and given the fact that it has been in existence for so long, that there are a multitude of starting points for research. Nevertheless, there appears to be two broadly defined positions. Adapting Fuller and Clarke`s (1994) distinction between 'policy mechanics' and 'classroom culturalists' these can perhaps be described as mechanics and transformationists. The mechanics are interested in achievement evaluation, cost-effectiveness and, in the traditions of school effectiveness studies, seek to identify the most important ingredients in explaining its success. The transformationists, on the other hand, are interested in EN because of their belief in its capacity to be more relevant to the lives and aspirations of students and parents, and to alter teacher/student relations.

Applying this categorisation to the texts under review Psacharopoulos et al and Benveniste/McEwan are mechanics who understand EN primarily through its adoption of

multigrade teaching as the means of delivery. From this perspective, EN is little more than a cost-effective way of expanding access and improving student attainments, one component of a strategy to achieve universal primary education. For McGinn and Torres, however, EN is much more than a means to boost numbers in school or the use of a multigrade teaching system. For these authors, Escuela Nueva is about structural reform of primary education since

"universalising it without changing it amounts to delivering more of the same in terms of drop-out, repetition, academic under-achievement, wastage of resources, a decline in professional standards, demoralisation and inefficiency" (Torres, 519)

According to educationalists who were closely associated with EN from its inception, its pedagogy and school organisation were based on a commitment to creating a system that would support "active instruction, a stronger relationship between the school and the community and a flexible promotion mechanism adapted to the lifestyle of the rural child" (Colbert and Arboleda 1990: 5). Representing a programme of comprehensive and systematic reform, this is a perspective much more in accordance with that of Torres and McGinn. To interpret the EN primarily as a multigrade teaching programme is to adopt an unduly narrow perspective, one that is in danger of confusing the means with the ends. But that such an interpretation is possible, and barely challenged in the literature, also suggests that the original philosophy has been discarded or diluted. Opposition and resistance to the programme from booksellers (fearing they would lose book sales) to civil servants and teachers (uncertain of the benefits of multigrade teaching and anticipating increased workloads) is acknowledged by both Torres and McGinn, and explored in more depth by the latter. In the face of these powerful internal forces the EN programme, by choice or necessity, became dependent on external and private support - initially from USAID, then the World Bank and Unicef. These funders are presented by Torres (herself an occasional staff member of Unicef) as 'saviours' of the programme but their potential role in diverting the programme from its original conception to a more mechanistic exercise in school expansion and teacher training in multigrade techniques is not explored in any of the texts.

Escuela Nueva: The ideal and the reality

For Psacharopoulos Escuela Nueva is characterised by a string of distinguishing features. These include the form of the teaching provided, flexible promotion and the use of specially-designed instructional materials for both students and teachers, as well as the benefit of additional facilities such as study corners and a small library. EN promotes the closer integration of the students, the school and the community by the use of a variety of devices (such as a student council) intended to promote civic skills and behaviours. These characteristics, written clearly into the model, are simply assumed by Psacharopoulos to exist. It amounts to a portrayal of Escuela Nueva as "a homogeneous entity, (in which) one Escuela Nueva is assumed to resemble others both in form and function" (Benveniste and McEwan: 35) and enables them to be contrasted as the binary opposites of traditional schools. It is a simple dichotomy which all of the other authors challenge.

Whilst Benveniste/McEwan share with Psacharopoulos a focus on multigrade teaching they base their analysis not on an idealised understanding of an EN school, but on a detailed scrutiny of implementation. Their basic objective is to assess the extent to which teaching and learning practices have, in reality, been adapted as required by the model. At the beginning they distinguish between macro- and micro-level variables. Macro level variables include issues such as the coherence of the policy, the political environment in which it is formulated, resource constraints etc. These macro-level variables are, broadly speaking, consistent with the three categories of conditions - technical, political and financial - identified by Colbert and Arboleda (1990). The satisfaction of these conditions, they assert, enables effective implementation to occur. Benveniste and McEwan, however, argue that macro variables have to be complemented by micro-level variables, defined as "the perceptions, attitudes and incentives of teachers, students and parents, and the 'fit' between local culture and educational innovation." (Benveniste and McEwan, 35).

Their view that micro-level changes are the "lynchpin in the final success or failure of an educational program" (ibid.34) is a view shared with McGinn, "critical support is that which comes from below, not from powerful patrons and sponsors but from those responsible for implementation" (McGinn: 29).

To assess the consistency between the model and the reality, and to identify the nature of the constraints to comprehensive change, Benveniste/McEwan focus their research on two specific micro-level variables. These variables, capacity and will, are assessed for their influence on bringing about changes to 'core educational practice' (Elmore 1996). This 'core practice' is described in familiar terms - a teacher-centred classroom in which knowledge is transmitted from an (ill-trained and under-skilled) all-knowing figure of authority to students who passively learn through copying, memorizing and testing. Participation is minimal, obedience is essential and hierarchy reproduced.

The gap between rhetoric and reality also underpins McGinn's work. The focus, however, is not on multigrade teaching - indeed, the word 'multigrade' is barely mentioned - but on understanding "what holds good reforms back" (McGinn: 30). He does this by drawing a theoretical distinction between 'reforms as designed' and 'reforms as what happens'. In the first case, "the 'good ideas' of a reform are those in the mind of the designer (and) success is measured by the adoption of the design" (ibid: 31). Training is given to provide the requisite sense of ownership and motivation as well as the appropriate level of skills and understanding. There is much in this interpretation of reform that is consistent with the approach of Benveniste and McEwan with its emphasis on capacity and will as key determinants of successful reforms. In McGinn's second case, reform as what happens, the purpose is quite different. It is "not to get someone else to agree with and carry out the 'reform', but rather to get others to have ideas of their own (with) success measured as continuous adaptation" (31).

McGinn argues that in its early days Escuela Nueva was a small-scale, tightly-managed initiative driven by innovative and charismatic individuals. Expanding gradually, with no overall master plan to guide it, the reforms they introduced reflected the shared analysis

and experiences of teachers. These reforms were about exchanging good ideas and stimulating innovation amongst others, rather than about defining good practice, setting standards and supervising practitioners. Put another way, the EN reforms began as a grass roots response, contextualised and relevant, to a nation-wide problem. But initial success created pressure to scale up the programme and this, in turn, meant "'freezing' the organic process, writing its 'code', capturing its essential elements and delivering them to many teachers." (ibid: 33) In so doing the reforms were converted from their original form, one consistent with the second of McGinn's perspectives, and packaged for dissemination to a mass audience in accordance with the 'reform as designed' model. In so doing, the reforms become something else - a top down idea disseminated according to instructions, rather than an initiative driven by the personal experiences and commitment of practitioners.

With the scaling up of EN, the programme experienced a qualitative change. Standardised training sessions replaced dynamic, multi-level teacher exchanges. Production of the instructional guides, originally assembled by teachers in response to their 'felt needs', were centralised with the result that "the programme became defined by the guides (rather than the organic process that had been used to develop them)" (ibid: 49). Teachers were now expected to adopt, in accordance with the concept of 'reform as designed', tools and practices which may not meet their particular needs or priorities. For McGinn, this is a cheap copy of the real Escuela Nueva, not the real thing. The form is preserved, but the substance which was as much process as product, has been lost in the name of going to scale.

In seeking to distinguish between the idealised form of EN and the reality, the picture that emerges may seem blurred and a little unclear. At one extreme, Psacharopoulos et al are content to accept at face value the notion that EN are fundamentally different to other rural schools in Colombia. At the other extreme stands McGinn, head in the clouds, rejecting the contemporary version of EN on the grounds that they are artificial look-a-likes. For McGinn the 'real' Escuela Nueva exists only in a pure form. Between these two are the analyses of Benveniste/McEwan, narrow in focus but investigative in spirit, and Torres. In adopting a format of strengths and weaknesses, Torres offers an analysis based neither on questionable assumptions nor on an attachment to a perfect model. Despite explaining the principal ingredients of the EN programme in a relatively uncritical way, she avoids the easy assumptions of Psacharopoulos by describing its weaknesses in terms which echo McGinn. But recognising that "there is nothing to be gained from idealising these programmes" (Torres: 515), she is particularly critical of the way in which "EN principles and strategies....are accepted in theory while the teaching practices questioned by (them) may be kept intact (ibid: 516). The result is the co-existence of "progressive educational philosophy alongside outmoded educational practice" (ibid: 516).

The achievements of Escuela Nueva

The principal theme of Torres' paper is the contribution of Escuela Nueva to the transformation of basic, formal education. From this perspective she introduces

dimensions overlooked, or taken for granted, by the others. It is an approach which contrasts with the focus on student achievement that underpins Psacharopoulos et al, and with the focus on core educational practice which lies at the centre of Benveniste/McEwan`s writing.

For Torres, Escuela Nueva`s greatest achievement is one which is so 'macro' it is not perceived by the other authors "perhaps its greatest merit.... is that it is not an alternative to formal or state education but an alternative within the formal and public education system" (Torres, 510 -11, italics in original).

At a time when publically-funded and government-run primary education is subject to relentless criticism for its inefficiency, inequity and poor quality (World Bank, 1995), the adoption and expansion of Escuela Nueva demonstrates the formal sector`s ability to make significant and positive changes. Torres commends EN, too, for its ability to survive the rigours of national level policy-making, as well as the tides of fashion amongst international donors. Whilst most pilot projects quickly lose their appeal or simply run into the sand, Escuela Nueva is an outstanding exception. Starting life as a small project in one 'department' of the country EN has flourished to become not only a national policy but a model with a global reputation.

Acknowledging the breadth of EN`s systemic and comprehensive reform, Torres highlights its pedagogical dimensions. Based on the objective of providing a complete cycle of primary education, and on educational principles such as active learning, its pedagogy "focuses on learning by doing, linking theory and practice, individual and group work, study and play, guidance and self-instruction" (Torres:514). These innovations have been guided by a philosophical commitment to transform conventional teaching and learning practices. Whilst recognising that numerous problems remain Torres nevertheless concludes that EN has

"changed the face of rural education in Colombia. (Escuela Nueva) is proving that it is possible not only to take schooling into rural areas and substantially improve its quality, but also to design an educational model specifically tailored to the rural context, without forfeiting quality and efficiency" (Torres: 515)

These are sweeping claims, barely supported by any evidence other than an account of how the EN is supposed to work, which sit uneasily with her subsequent criticisms of the programme`s weaknesses. But it is in the light of this kind of passionate support that the Escuela Nueva programme seems able to generate that others have looked in more detail at its specific achievements. Not surprisingly, the results are much more equivocal.

Psacharopoulos et al concentrate on cognitive achievement tests of students in Spanish and Maths and in three areas of non-cognitive development - creativity, civic behaviour and self-esteem. The inclusion of these non-cognitive areas implies recognition that the EN programme was designed with broader objectives in mind, rather than being a simple expansion of the prevailing system. Outlining in suitably objective language the

source of the data and the nature of the sample, Psacharopoulos describes a complex design to measure the comparative performance of students in traditional schools and Escuela Nueva. This design, however, was based on a critical assumption, namely that the labelling of a school as either traditional or not implied differences in access to and use of resources, in school structures and in staffing by teachers trained in and using pedagogical practices appropriate to multigrade teaching. It is precisely this kind of assumption that Benveniste and McEwan's research was designed to test.

Psacharopoulos' overall conclusion is positive - controlling for variables such as student or family characteristics, EN are judged to have had "a significant independent effect on student outcomes" (Psacharopoulos: 274). The results are sufficiently respected to be quoted, largely uncritically, in all of the other articles being reviewed in this essay and in other relevant texts (Schiefelbein, 1992; McEwan 1998). Little (1995), however, is more questioning, both in terms of some of the variables used (repeating, for example, in a system that is supposed to be based on flexible promotion) and the status of the comparator schools. Apart from these important methodological ambiguities the results recorded in the paper are not so categorically positive as the accompanying text implies. At grade 5 (the end of the primary cycle when students will have experienced maximum exposure to the pedagogy of Escuela Nueva) it is only in Spanish that there seems to be a significant and positive difference. In the non-cognitive areas, where one would have expected a marked divergence of results, differences are small and subject to interpretation.

McGinn's over-riding concern is to know whether EN 'works'. His overall conclusion - that "Escuela Nueva is better than the traditional rural school" (McGinn: 43) - is positive, but lacks Torres' enthusiasm. Detailed research has shown weaknesses in terms of facilities, structures and teaching methodologies. For example, some schools don't have a library, and more don't have an active pupil council. But when none of the traditional schools have these resources/facilities and when their links to the community are demonstrably weaker, McGinn makes the point that the EN represents achievement not failure.

Whereas the focus of Psacharopoulos is on the students, the focus for Benveniste/McEwan is on the teachers, and whether they have changed their core educational practice. Given the way in which the EN programme has been described as a model in redefining basic education (Schiefelbein 1992) there is a remarkable absence of information about the extent to which the teaching in a EN classroom is different to that in a traditional classroom. Drawing on earlier work by McEwan (1998) the evidence is notable for its ambiguity. Yes, there is evidence that Escuela Nueva teachers make more use of group work and library research. But perhaps a more consistent feature of the research is that there is considerable variation between all schools. The divide is not a clear-cut Escuela Nueva v. traditional school, since there are also variations within the EN 'sector'. In concluding that "many Escuela Nueva teachers teach like traditional school teachers, and vice versa" (Benveniste and McEwan: 37) the assumption of difference that underpinned Psacharopoulos' research is exposed. But Benveniste and McEwan go on to make their own rather questionable assumption.

Their finding of similarities in teaching practices is generally interpreted negatively to mean that EN teachers are continuing to rely on techniques typically associated with traditional pedagogies. There is, however, some prima facie evidence to suggest that the similarities may be the result of two-way influences, and not just due to the retention of conventional practices. It appears, for example, that traditional school teachers are also using techniques derived from an active learning approach such as free composition, group work and student presentations (McEwan 1998). And McGinn, although concurring with the view that there is little difference between the two types of school, makes the point that some teachers from traditional schools are using the EN instructional guides and visiting the micro centres (designated, local centres where teachers can meet to exchange ideas, hopes and anxieties). Such evidence would support the notion that the similarities between schools may partly be explained by a two-way exchange between different teaching traditions, with congruence the outcome. If there has been some voluntary application of EN techniques and resources irrespective of whether a school is formally labelled 'Escuela Nueva', EN may have been more influential than might first appear. For it would mean that the pedagogy which underpins it has been adapted (to apply McGinn's terminology) by teachers and is now being used to a greater or lesser extent irrespective of the school's formal categorisation. Such a development would represent informal, or 'organic', replication within the country (whilst in the texts replication is understood only in relation to the 'export' of EN to other countries) and would begin to justify Torres' claim that EN has 'changed the face' of primary education.

The weaknesses of Escuela Nueva

In terms of weaknesses, the common theme which runs through the texts is based not on a critique of the educational principles which provide the foundation of EN but on the extent to which these principles and associated practices have been applied. Even the marginally higher costs of EN schools, referred to by Psacharopoulos, are regarded as reasonable and offset by other savings rather than being the object of criticism.

A distinctive feature of Escuela Nueva has been the investment in training and supporting teachers, providing supervision as well as producing specific teaching and learning materials. These instructional guides have been designed to enable teachers to become facilitators of active learning, rather than relying solely on didactic methods unable to meet the varied learning needs of a wide range of children. Recent research, referred to by both McGinn and by Benveniste/ McEwan, into the use of these guides suggest that less than half of year 5 EN classes use them and less than one-third of grade 3. Even in schools using the guides, more than half did so only once a week. Yet the guides are supposed to represent both the accumulated wisdom of EN practitioners and embody the pedagogical distinctiveness of the programme. Torres makes no bones about their quality suggesting the need for a major revision to make them more relevant and more user-friendly. The absence of an instructional guide for reading and writing for the first grade after so many years of the programmes existence is singled out for criticism, not least because it means teachers have little option but to use conventional teaching methods. And once begun with these methods there are few incentives to change later,

explaining perhaps the low utilisation rates of the guides and the similarities of teaching styles between EN and other schools. It is this contradiction between a progressive educational philosophy and the persistence within it of traditional teacher practices and roles which both Benveniste/McEwan and McGinn seek to explain.

The kernel of Benveniste and McEwan's criticisms has already been anticipated. They argue that EN is seen as a model of multigrade teaching on the assumption that it "has largely succeeded in altering the core of educational practice" (Benveniste: 35). Testing this assumption by using a research design set squarely in the production-function tradition (Fuller and Clarke 1994) they conclude that there are no significant differences between schools, and that core educational practices remain unaltered. They then explore whether this is because of a failure in training to deliver enhanced capacity or because of a lack of interest and motivation amongst teachers in applying new skills or using new materials. Statistical methods are used to demonstrate that the provision of training is of little consequence, and that the critical issue is the will to change. There follows a rather extensive discussion, based on references to the literature rather than their own research to explain "the generalised lack of will to implement multigrade instruction" (Benveniste: 41). This discussion contains some useful learning from other experiences but it points to a significant weakness not only of their own work but also of the other texts under review. For despite the fact that both McGinn and Benveniste stress the over-riding importance of "micro-level actors" neither of them (nor any of the other published literature in English so far as I am aware) have incorporated this dimension into their own work. There is a remarkable absence in the writing on EN. The voices of teachers, of pupils, of parents and of community members are missing. Our understanding of so many of the issues addressed in the papers under review, as well as others that are not (such as whether pupils and parents think that an EN is better than a traditional school or one that offers a second class education) would have been enhanced by the use of methodologies to ensure that the perspectives of 'the missing' were presented. As it is we are left with the understanding, for example, that teachers generally have clung on to age-old teaching practices but are offered no authentic explanations for why this should be the case.

McGinn is alert to the unfulfilled potential of EN, but rather than laying the responsibility primarily at the door of the teachers he sees it as the inevitable consequence of programme expansion. The 'real' EN was a diffuse but dynamic process of reform which harnessed the energies and the potential of teachers to contribute to the development of teaching materials for self-regulated learning. The distinctiveness of EN was to be found in the way it worked, the way it involved the very people who would implement the changes. When the programme was scaled up, this way of working was lost. Reforms which had developed 'organically' were replaced with ones that conformed to a template, a prescribed model of practice which were disseminated through highly structured workshops. The form is preserved and reproduced, but the 'packaging' of the innovation means that "organic development stops. Over time, the innovation decays until finally it is no longer recognisable" (McGinn: 49). Despite the fact that the EN programme was designed to be able to go to scale (Colbert and Arboleda 1990), McGinn's analysis spotlights a fundamental weakness of EN methodology. It is inherently incapable of

addressing the shortcomings of the prevailing education system in anything other than an ad hoc way, depending on the motivation and circumstances of individual practitioners. The emphasis on the inclusion and participation of those who will be responsible for implementation may sound like a clarion call to 'people power', but the proposition that progressive reforms are bound to become trapped by their own internal contradictions is ultimately a disempowering analysis.

Conclusion

Any major programme of education reform can be viewed from quite different standpoints and EN is no exception. At a quantitative level, for example, its success is significant. When the programme began in 1975 it was implemented in 500 schools, in just three departments. A decade later, in 1985, there were 8,000 EN schools and the government formally adopted EN as a strategy to achieve UPE. By the early 1990's over 20,000 schools were involved (Torres: 511). These are impressive figures and help to explain EN's status as "one of the most successful multigrade schooling programmes" (Benveniste and McEwan: 44 italics in original). As a element of Colombia's strategy for the achievement of UPE, EN has doubtless contributed significantly to the progress that has been made in the last 20 years or so.

But to understand EN as a simple programme of primary school expansion in remote areas is to misunderstand the ambitious objectives of its principal architects. They were concerned with the broader issues of the quality and purpose of education, its relevance to individual pupils and the communities in which they lived. It is these dimensions of the EN programme that have contributed to its reputation as a pioneering model and have attracted the kind of analysis which runs through the papers of McGinn and Torres in particular. The verdict on EN from this qualitative perspective is more ambiguous. Whilst the ideal EN represented a clear and comprehensive alternative to traditional schools and methods - but not to the formal sector itself, as Torres reminds us - the reality is more confusing and patchy. There is a consensus of opinion in the texts that there is no sharp distinction between the EN sector and the traditional sector. To those who looked to the EN model for inspiration, and as a model of structural reform, there will be disappointment. 'Core educational practice' has not been altered to the extent that was implicit in a model that put so much emphasis on pedagogical change through the centrality of its instructional guides and its training and on-going support for teachers. Nevertheless, even the most idealistic of commentators concede that EN schools are an improvement, and one that has not only survived but been extended over the years.

Debates as to whether the unfulfilled promise of EN is due primarily to the conservatism of teachers, resistance from a broader panoply of powerful vested interest groups or the inevitable consequence of a profound contradiction inherent in its (expanded) design constitute the heart of the different perspectives represented in these texts.

At the same time as reflecting on the perspectives that have been presented, it is equally important to identify those that have not. Some of these have already been highlighted. There is, for example, no critical discussion of the role of the international

donors and private sponsors who have provided long-term and substantial financial support to the EN programme. In the light of their organisational policies, what were their reasons for supporting EN, and what influence did they exercise at critical moments in the programme's development? Missing entirely from the story of EN are the voices of the 'micro-actors' - the teachers, the pupils, the parents and community organisations active in the same villages. That their perspective is absent is all the more ironic given the emphasis by McGinn and Benveniste/McEwan on their importance in making reforms work. Another perspective that is missing is one which locates the school and student achievements in a broader social, economic and political context. Since the 1960's there has been an accumulating body of evidence in North America and Europe to show that material school inputs, of the kind included in Psacharopoulos' research, affect achievement only slightly compared to family background (Fuller and Clarke, citing Coleman 1966). There is some doubt about the transferability of these conclusions across cultures and societies at different levels of economic development, but their validity in the context of EN are unknown because the focus has been almost entirely on school-based variables and practices.

The absence from the literature of a gender-based perspective on the EN programme is particularly notable. Given the emphasis within EN on the production of new teaching and learning materials and on training teachers in the use of different methodologies, there would appear to have been an excellent opportunity to introduce practices, concepts and materials designed to challenge gender subordination. Such a perspective would have been entirely consistent with the transformatory objectives of qualitative reform but we simply do not know if such work has begun.

The primary research reported in this review, as well as other work by McEwan (1998), provide us with a snapshot of selected elements of EN implementation. But limited cognitive testing is of little help in understanding whether EN has made progress towards providing an education which is more relevant and which enables students to become more resourceful, productive and responsible in later life. The more extensive use of active learning methods, of group exercises and peer support as well as the integration, albeit imperfect, of learning into other aspects of a child's life are all aspects of the EN programme which may have important long-term benefits. But they are ill-suited to the use of achievement evaluation techniques which give a 'snapshot' of performance. Longitudinal studies of the kind which have played such an important role in demonstrating the effectiveness of pre-schools (Schweinhart and Weikart 1992; Sylva and Wiltshire 1993) would have provided a very different perspective on the impact of the EN reforms.

This list of missing perspectives is long and may well reflect my own inability to access a significant part of the literature on EN because it is written in Spanish. Nevertheless, references to such evidence is missing even from the more substantial texts (such as Schiefelbein (1992)) intended to make the EN experience available to a larger audience. If there is the dearth of analysis suggested by this list it is a measure of the work that needs to be done to better understand an unusual and important example of primary education reform. There are relatively few programmes of the scale and duration of EN

and in this sense it offers a rare opportunity for learning. As more and more countries move closer to UPE the emphasis will inevitably move away from quantitative expansion towards the kind of issues which EN has tried, however imperfectly, to address. The EN programme is perhaps best seen not as a model to be copied, but as a rich source of learning and experience - unless we follow McGinn's thinking and conclude that the only way to achieve real reform is to construct it anew in different places and at different times.

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