

'Escuela Nueva (New School)' in Colombia: a successful example of primary educational innovation in developing countries.

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One of the reasons why the goal of primary education for all has not been achieved in developing countries is the difficulty to reach in rural areas. In rural areas in developing countries, there are various factors to prevent from enrollment and high academic achievement of the students. Some of the factors are (1) the number of school age children in the remote areas is low, (2) difficulty to recruit high quality teachers, (3) urban-centred curriculum which does not relate to the rural life and environment, (4) the difficulty of textbooks and materials distribution, (5) long term absence of the students during agriculturally busy seasons, (6) apathy toward education of parents and community, (7) malnutrition of children especially in poor community, (8) ethnic minority groups whose first language is not the official language.

Incomplete schools for the lower grades

In geographical condition where residents are scattered in rural remote areas, the size of schools has to be small (the average number of students in a rural school in South America is 62). Based on teacher/student ratio, only one or two teachers are allocated for such a school. As a result the number of teachers is less than the number of grades. Rural small schools in developing countries often provide only lower grade classes instead of providing all grades of primary level. These schools are called incomplete schools. The students of higher grades can continue their study in bigger villages, but to commute from their home to the bigger town is often difficult. In many cases, they stop their study when they complete the lower grades in an incomplete school.

In order to provide complete primary education in small schools, multigrade teaching, which means that one teacher teaches several grades at the same time, also introduced since years ago. However, the special training for multigrade teaching in the teachers' college is hardly available. Most teachers struggle to adjust traditional frontal teaching strategies to multigrade classes, and the time for graded lessons is dispersed to several classes. As a result, academic achievement of the students in multigrade schools is much lower than urban schools.

'Escuela Nueva (New School)' in Colombia obtained global attention as a successful example of rural primary educational innovation. 'Escuela Nueva' accepts multigrade teaching as unavoidable condition in small schools of rural areas. It encourages to develop special materials and teaching methods for multigrade teaching. The academic achievement of the students in 'Escuela

Nueva' is even higher than in urban schools. This article introduces the detailed programme of 'Escuela Nueva.'

Self learning and small group work

The educational gap between urban and rural areas has been obvious in Colombia. Enrolment rate of primary schools in rural areas is 20% lower than urban areas. Repetition and dropout rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas. The number of 'single-teacher schools' is also high in rural areas. It was 1975 when Colombia started to develop the new educational model for rural schools named 'New school.'

The largest remarkable point is introduction of self learning instead of forcing traditional frontal teaching in multigrade reality. Detailed and systematic 'learning guide' for self learning was developed in order that the students can learn individually or in small groups. This is a remarkable innovation because the students are expected to shift from traditional and passive learners given the knowledge by the teacher to active self learners.

The role of the teachers is also transferred from a lecturer who provides knowledge and information to students of several grades at a same time, to a facilitator to support the students who are learning by themselves.

This theory and method would not be opposed. However, the feasibility of this kind of innovation is doubted. Can the students of rural primary schools learn themselves with the learning guide? Isn't it too much expectation to the ability of the children? Is it possible to develop the self learning guide which can lead the effective learning? Will the teachers who are familiar with the traditional teaching strategies accept the change of their role? How will the parents and community evaluate 'New School' which is different from the traditional schools they know?

However, 'New School' has been successful though an introduction by pilot projects, several revision of the learning guide and development of training manual since 1975 when the first plot was presented. Looking at quantitative expansion of the new method, the 500 pilot schools in 1976 expanded to 3,000 schools in 1986. In the beginning of 1990s, the number of the new schools was 17,000 in the nation, and the number of the students learning at the new schools was more than 900,000. In other words, more than a half of rural schools adopted the new method. 'New School' was no longer just an experimental pilot project but became the nationwide educational system.

Instruments of 'New School'

Self learning method is not possible to introduce the students in Grade 1 because they are still illiterate. Therefore, traditional teaching method is used for

Grade 1. 'New School' method is used for Grade 2, 3, 4 and 5 (primary levels in Colombia are Grade 1 to 5).

Grade wise learning guide for four subjects (language, mathematics, science and social studies) and a book for self evaluation for the students are developed. The learning guide consists of several units. Each unit consists of goals, A (basic activities), B (case studies), C (experiments) and D (free activities). Each student follow the four activities with own pace. Following the instruction, occasionally 4-6 children make a small group and work together.

The students, at first individually and then in a group, are required to observe, think and write. Then they compare their own notebooks and the examples in the learning guide to correct their answers for self evaluation. If it is necessary, they ask for advice from the teacher. The learning guide is based on national curriculum, but introduction of local contents which relate to the life of the students is recommended.

In order to supplement, the following facilities are considered the standard facilities for 'New School:' (1) school library with about 100 books including dictionaries, reference books, children's literature, books on rural development and health, (2) learning corner in the four corners of the classroom demonstrating local products and materials which the students made or collected from the community, (3) special order made desks to work with a group easily. In order to foster social attitude, democratic behavior, and corroboration, activities in student government such as library management, cleaning of the school, sport activities, wall newspaper, school newsletters, are encouraged.

The teachers were trained mainly through three one-week workshops during a year in order to get the necessary theory and skills for 'New School.' The teacher training is practice-centred rather than knowledge focused. The training manual edited in the same format with 'learning guide' for the students was used for the teacher training.

Coordination with parents and the community

Another key element of 'New School' is strong relation between the school and the community. The school asks for the support and understanding of the community. At the same time the school promotes rural development through the following activities: (1) making a community map around the school by students, (2) making family information cards including family structure, occupation and qualification of the parents by teachers, (3) making cultural and social monographs including environment, hygienic condition and employment of the community, and (4) making agricultural calendar for different crops.

This information is useful for the teachers to understand the local condition. They can use this information to introduce local contents in the lessons and adjust

school activities with agricultural activities. The information is also able to access to the residents of the community. The school is expected to be an information centre of the community. The students are expected to help to improve health, nutrition and life condition of the community. Local legends, folktales, folksongs and traditional recipes are included in the learning guide.

On the other hand, the parents and community also required to contribute in kind for improvement of the school environment and to participate school activities.

Evaluation of 'New School'

Introduction of 'New School' reduced the number of incomplete schools. Because of its flexible promotion system, dropout rate decreased. This helps to improve completion rate of primary education. The impact is revealed through statistical analysis. Compared with traditional schools, the students of 'New School' achieved higher scores in mathematics and language of Grade 3, language of Grade 5, and non-cognitive field such as self esteem, creativity and civil behavior. About 90 % of 'New School' teachers answered 'New School' is superior to traditional schools.

For development of 'Escuela Nueva,' US\$15,000,000 was invested from 1970 to 1985. In order to develop and distribute the programme, international agencies such as UNICEF, World Bank, and NGOs invested. However, after establishment of the system, the cost of the learning guide for four subjects per student is estimated US\$15, the cost of teacher training per teacher is US\$82, and the cost of the library is US\$150.

The cost of 'New School' per student is said to be just 5-10% more than a traditional school. This is affordable for other developing countries. This is one of the reasons why educational developers are interested in 'New School.' Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Guatemala and other Central and South American countries have already adopted this system entirely or partly.