

# Escuela nueva in Colombia goes urban

Bogota (Colombia) - Jonathan knew that the school where he was going to start primary Grade 5 was different. He had heard people talk about it in his neighbourhood and his mother had said the same thing when she came home from enrolment day. So he was looking forward to his first day at his new school, the Colegio Distrital San Vicente.

It took him just a few days to learn the ropes. He had never seen a classroom like that before. The desks were not arranged in rows and the teacher's desk was not at the front. The teacher did not stand by the blackboard to take the lessons, which was what usually happened at his previous school. There were no textbooks either, the children had handbooks that they filled in together.

Books were kept on a small shelf for everyone to use. "It was pretty hard at first," Jonathan recalls, "because all the children were already divided into groups and knew how to use the handbooks, but I went up to them all, one by one, and became friends with everyone. They told me how to use the handbooks."

Jonathan Flórez spent this school year in one of the 15 schools in Bogotá which have been using the Escuela Nueva (new school) approach for the past two-and-a-half years. This approach was devised in 1975 for rural schools in the coffee-producing region of Colombia, then extended to almost all the country's rural areas, and a slightly adapted version is now being tried out in schools in poor urban areas in Cali (Valle) and Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. Escuela Nueva began as a pilot project to increase the number of primary grades offered in rural areas, to prevent children from dropping out of school in regions with specific problems or conditions and, above all, to improve the quality of rural education.

"It started in multi-grade schools," explains Vicky Colbert, director of the *Volvamos a La Gente* Foundation. "Teachers had to be more innovative because of the huge range of abilities and speeds of learning. These schools needed a broader range of personalised strategies for co-operative learning, as children started school later and repeated grades more often." The results surpassed expectations and the Escuela Nueva approach has now been in existence for some twenty-two years, picking up countless awards along the way.

In 1988, it was chosen by the World Bank as one of three most outstanding projects undertaken in developing countries, having made good at national level after starting as a local venture.

International Organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, OAS and IDB have hailed it as one of the most important educational innovations in recent years. The education departments in Cali and Bogotá decided to try out the Escuela Nueva approach in schools in their poorer areas, where they had the same problems as those who had first adopted it in rural schools.

In Jonathan's school, for example, the teachers made changes to the assessment processes and the handbooks children use to learn the different subjects. Julia Díaz, Jonathan's

class teacher, recalls that there was initially some resistance to change from a conventional school to a "new school", particularly from parents who did not understand why the teacher did not teach from the front of the class any more and why children had to work in groups and solve problems in a book the parents thought looked like a collection of forms.

This is the case of Olga Leguizamón, the mother of a Grade 4 pupil. She is not quite sure how this educational approach works, but she likes the idea of children working in groups and helping each other. Sometimes she even goes to the school to help the pupils. "This is quite common," says María Lilia Canón, a teacher. "Parents help their children with their homework and come to lessons too." The lessons are indeed very different at San Vicente. Pupils are divided into groups of four or six. They all follow the instructions in the handbook and help each other, ask each other questions and listen to one another. But this was not always the case. According to Julia Díaz, it took teachers and pupils six months to understand how the Escuela Nueva worked. They started with the changes that had to be made in the organization of the classroom. The teachers identified leaders among pupils and made them group monitors, library monitors and helpers. Then they taught both them and the other pupils that working in groups meant listening to others, respecting their opinions, being tolerant, keeping their voices down, etc. "At the same time as learning how to work in groups, they were learning values such



as responsibility, honesty, autonomy and comradeship. We are still teaching them these values," explains María Lilia Canón. Each time the children finish a work unit in their handbook they have to assess their performance as an individual and as a group. The other members of their group and the teacher then make their assessments. "This puts the values they have learned to test," says Lilia Alayón, a teacher. "At first they were generous with their self-assessment, but now they are very hard on themselves. Their self-assessments are stricter than any others." Progress in reading and in democracy The children have learned how to follow instructions, conduct research and consult dictionaries and texts on all kinds of subjects, and have consequently improved their reading and comprehension skills. They have also learned about civil and democratic processes thanks to the system of school government whereby pupils, parents and teachers are all represented on the three committees governing the school: the teaching methods committee, the sport and leisure committee, and the health committee.

## The Right to Education

### Going Beyond Slogans

(The author of this column, Katrien Beeckman, is an Associate with the UNESCO Regional Office in Dakar. Her opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the organisation).

Ten years ago, the World Declaration on Education for All, adopted at Jomtien, reminded us that basic education is both a fundamental right for all human beings and a necessary condition for the development of individuals and society. Although the international community currently seems assured that every individual has the right to education and proclaims it left and right, we ought to stop and reflect, even if just for a moment, about the precise content of that right and especially the binding obligations that emanate from it.

For, one cannot talk about a right without addressing its corresponding

duties. This also holds for the right to education. In fact, states have subscribed to stringent international agreements, protecting the right to education and forcing them to implement it, such as the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960), the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). As a result, they can be held responsible for not fulfilling their commitments. Let us take a closer look at the right to education as it is defined in these instruments and the concrete obligations ensuing from it.

#### Prohibiting All Forms of Discrimination

A general cardinal principle, which should be respected by every state, is the principle of non-discrimination. This principle not only prohibits active discrimination or differential treatment based on subjective criteria such as sex, race and religion, it also demands the eradication of educational disparities between boys and girls, urban and rural areas, healthy and handicapped children, etc., in order to achieve de facto equality. However, laws about equal opportunity and equal treatment for all children do not guarantee, for instance, that a disabled child will be able to go to school. To embody the principle of non-discrimination, the Convention on Women asks the states to take so-called "affirmative action" measures, such as quotas or transportation facilities for girls. When socio-cultural schemas, postulating the inferiority of certain groups, obstruct their access to education, the state should first and foremost raise the awareness of the local population to the importance of education as an empowerment right.

#### Education: A Freedom and a Duty to Act

As for the right to basic education as such, it can be described as having a "freedom component" and a "social component". The first, which is part of the structure of all democratic societies, requires the state to respect parents' freedom to choose between private and public education, and the freedom of individuals to establish private schools. *continued on page 4*

## Programme for Thursday, 27 April

### 9:00-10:30 Plenary Session

- ◆ Address by, Mrs Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of UNFPA
- ◆ Panel discussion: Theme II - Making effective use of resources for education

#### Invited speakers:

- H.E. Mr. Yoweri Museveni, President of Uganda;
- H.E. Mrs. Eveline Herfkens, Minister of Development Cooperation, the Netherlands,
- H.E. Ms Clare Short, Secretary of State UK
- Mr. Jean-Claude President of the aid Committee of OECD.
- Chairperson: H.E. M.A.S.K. Sadique, Minister of Education of Bangladesh
- Rapporteur: Mr. Klaus Huefner, Professor at the University of Berlin, Germany

### 11:00-12:30 Parallel strategy sessions relating to theme II:

- ◆ Sub-plenary C - Overcoming the effects of HIV/AIDS on basic education
- ◆ Utilizing debt relief for education
- ◆ Working with the business community to strengthen basic education
- ◆ Strategic choices in the development and use of teaching and learning materials
- ◆ Providing basic education in situations of emergency and crisis
- ◆ Monitoring the provision and outcomes of basic education
- ◆ Mobilizing new resources for basic education
- ◆ Building effective partnerships with funding agencies

### 13:00 Lunch at the Centre

- ◆ Address by Mr James Woffensohn, the President of the World Bank

### 14:30-16:00 Plenary session

- ◆ Address by Mrs. Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF
- ◆ Panel discussion: Theme III - "Cooperating with civil society to achieve social goals through education"

#### Invited speakers:

- Mr. Thomas fox, Administrator, USAID
- H.E. Jose Weinstein Cayuela, Vice Minister of Education, Chile
- Mr.s Nitya Rao, ASPBAE, India
- Chairperson: H.E. Charles Josselin, Deputy Minister of Cooperation of France and Francophonie
- Rapporteur: Ms Feny de los Angeles Bautista, Philippines

### 16:30-18:00 Parallel strategy sessions relating to theme III:

- ◆ Sub-plenary D - Fighting poverty and marginalisation through basic education
- ◆ Promoting population and reproductive health, especially among young people, through basic education
- ◆ Building social integration through bilingual and mother tongue education
- ◆ A FRESH start to school health : improving learning and educational outcomes by improving health, hygiene and nutrition
- ◆ Promoting basic education and democracy: the role of the media
- ◆ Including the excluded : enhancing educational access and quality
- ◆ Meeting basic learning needs of youth and adults
- ◆ After primary education, what?

### 16:15-18:00 Meeting of Ministers

- ◆ 19:30: Reception offered by the five Conveners of the EFA Forum