Colombia’s Learning Circles provide one model for an innovative approach to supporting the academic success of youth whose traditional education has been interrupted for a variety of reasons.

By Thomas F. Luschei and Laura Vega

Where can the United States turn for strategies to educate disadvantaged children? Although Americans often look toward education successes in Finland and South Korea, these countries have relatively small populations of children living in extreme disadvantage: In 2012, only 8.8% of Finnish children and 13.4% of Korean children lived in poverty, compared to nearly one in three children in the United States (UNICEF Office of Research, 2014). To identify solutions to our most intractable educational challenges, we must look to nations that have coped with these challenges for years and identify those that have developed innovative and successful solutions. The South American nation of Colombia provides a good example. Over 38% of Colombian children live in poverty, and 15.6% live in extreme poverty (UNICEF, 2010). As a result of years of civil conflict and violence, an estimated 3.3 to 4.9 million Colombians have been displaced, approximately

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Colombia’s “Escuela Nueva” (New School) is one such program that has achieved remarkable successes in addressing the educational needs of Colombia’s most marginalized children. Escuela Nueva’s Círculos de Aprendizaje (Learning Circles) program, designed to address the educational and social-emotional needs of Colombian children displaced by civil conflict, uses an accelerated, student-centered, flexible approach to support displaced children socially and academically until they are ready to transition to the formal school system.

The Escuela Nueva model

Colombia’s Escuela Nueva model was created in 1975 to confront difficult schooling conditions in remote, rural schools lacking sufficient resources or students to provide one teacher per grade. Escuela Nueva addressed the conditions of these multigrade schools with a systemic, flexible, and child-centered approach in which students learn cooperatively with self-study learning materials while teachers work individually with students or small groups. The model integrates active and cooperative learning with authentic student governance and involvement of the community, as well as strong teacher professional development that operates through local teacher networks (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000; McEwan, 2008).

Evaluations suggest that Escuela Nueva has had a positive effect on numerous student outcomes, including mathematics and reading achievement, self-esteem, participation of girls, and peaceful social interaction among children (Forero-Pineda, Escobar-Rodriguez, & Molina, 2006). Due to its success in Colombia, Escuela Nueva has been adopted in 16 countries, reaching more than 5 million children worldwide (FEN, 2014). Escuela Nueva also has been adapted to meet the considerable educational challenges faced by children displaced by violence and civil conflict in Colombia.

Created in 2001 by the Fundación Escuela Nueva Volvamos a la Gente (FEN), a Colombian organization that supports and promotes Escuela Nueva, Learning Circles operate informally to accelerate instruction and transition displaced children into formal schools, known as mother schools (MEN, 2006a). Tutors working with groups of 16 to 20 students run Learning Circles using interactive learning methods.

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materials and the student-centered, cooperative, and flexible Escuela Nueva methodology (MEN 2011, 2012). The Circles’ relatively small size, flexibility, and emphasis on student well-being allow tutors to provide personalized attention and adapt to the needs of children, as well as provide a safe environment for youth to build social and academic skills. The Circles also promote family and community involvement, and they build skills related to conflict management, peaceful interaction, and social integration. The flexible and supportive methodology of the Learning Circles lets children transition much more quickly to formal schooling than they would if enrolled directly in mother schools (Colbert, 2009).

Following the model’s learner-centered approach, Escuela Nueva teachers offer guidance and an appropriate learning environment for students. They respond appropriately to student needs, whether academic or social-emotional, so that students receive personalized education. Escuela Nueva learning guides allow students to work by themselves, in pairs, and in groups, fostering dialogue among peers and between students and teachers. A senior member of FEN observed, “These classrooms are not silent, they shouldn’t be, they have a pedagogical noise, which means that everybody is working and interacting with each other.” Learning guides also encourage direct interaction between students and their communities through collaborative activities. For example, learning guides instruct students to collect stories about their neighborhoods through interviews with community elders. With the guidance of the Escuela Nueva learning guides, students also work at home with their families on projects like building homemade flashlights.

The student-centered principles of Escuela Nueva have carried over to the Learning Circles, resulting in substantial differences between the circles and traditional classrooms. A Learning Circles tutor said, “Learning Circles is fun, it pushes your creativity, it demands the best of you, demands all your effort all the time; by comparison, a traditional classroom is boring” (Vega, 2013, p. 160). Students also perceived the circles as fun, reporting that they enjoyed learning new things (like writing their names and math concepts), as well as entertaining activities like coloring, singing, or playing (Vega, 2013). Some students also recognize the difference between their teachers at previous traditional schools and their Learning Circles tutors. A Learning Circles student recalled, “the tutor is really kind and doesn’t punish us like a teacher I used to have. She grabbed me and pulled me by the ear [saying to me] go to your chair” (Vega, 2013, p. 171). Like Escuela Nueva, Learning Circles involves families and communities through activities and communication. For example, the Learning Circles use a “traveling notebook” that helps students share stories about their difficult past or expectations for the future. The notebook goes from home to home; each temporary keeper writes something about a specific topic like “my family” or “where I come from.” At each home, families come together to narrate their stories in the notebook. After the notebook returns to the classroom, students share the stories they wrote with their families (Vega, 2013).

In 2003, the U.S. Agency for International Development funded a pilot study of 19 Learning Circles serving 210 children in Soacha, a working-class municipality south of the capital of Bogotá with one of the largest populations of displaced persons in Colombia. The pilot study found increases in formal school enrollment, higher test scores, and increased self-esteem of children participating in Learning Circles. After two years, 54% of children participating in the pilot transitioned to their mother schools; by 2005, the pilot expanded to 50 Learning Circles serving 600 children. A UNESCO study comparing test scores of 3rd and 5th graders in Learning Circles to scores of a control group of students in conventional schools found that students in Learning Circles had greater improvement in language and math tests over a one-year period. Fifth graders in Learning Circles scored 17.3 percentage points over the national average in math and 13.9 points in language. A study by the Catholic University of Chile found an increase of 18.5 percentage points in self-esteem levels of children in Learning Circles from May to November 2004 (Bakhshi, 2008; Colbert, 2009; FEN, 2005a). In 2006, the Learning Circles program was adopted as official national policy for integrating displaced migrant children in Colombia’s schools (Colbert, 2009; FEN, 2015). As of 2012, the program had served more than 37,000 children in 30 of Colombia’s 32 departments (states).

Learning Circles students

Learning Circles are in marginalized neighborhoods where displaced children live, usually in a rented house where each room functions as a multi-grade classroom. Students, who may be in 1st to 5th
The most important determinant of the Learning Circles’ success are the tutors, who are trained and experienced teachers. Tutors are recruited from the local communities where the Circles are located, so they often share similar backgrounds with students. A student interviewed in a recent study of Learning Circles said the tutors “have known poverty themselves” (Vega, 2013, p. 158). Students also clearly cared for and respected their tutors for their teaching skills and personal qualities. Tutors’ capacity to establish caring relationships was critical for students’ personal and academic process; tutors became mentors, friends, and even parental figures to participating children (Vega, 2013; FEN, 2005b). In fact, students who had transitioned to mother schools recalled that what they missed most from the Learning Circles were their tutors, specifically “that [they] spent time explaining the activities to them and helping them understand what the topic or the task was all about . . . and were good and caring people” (Vega, 2013, p. 172).

Learning Circles are much more likely to be successful if they can guarantee the quality of tutors’ selection and initial training, as well as the continuous pedagogical and psychosocial support that they need to be successful. It is also crucial for tutors to focus on support, instead of supervision, and to avoid getting lost in excessive bureaucracy. Finally, although Learning Circles is a flexible program, it is also a highly structured process that includes routines, agreements, and accountability (Vega, 2013).

Supporting foster children

Foster youth and displaced children share at least three experiences: trauma, dislocation, and mobility. Foster youth and displaced children share at least three experiences: trauma, dislocation, and mobility. In both cases, formal education systems are ill-equipped to tailor instruction and social-emotional support for these children, so they lag their peers in terms of educational enrollment and attainment (Ferris & Winthrop, 2010; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Summarizing research on the school’s role in improving academic achievement of foster children, Vacca (2008) writes, “The only way for the foster child to have a fighting chance . . . is for researchers and educators to be given incentives by the federal, state, and local governments to develop and implement innovative programs and interventions that help these students succeed” (p. 1082). Recent policy changes in California, for example, have provided one such incentive by passing legislation that will provide supplemental funds to districts with large populations of disadvantaged children, including low-income, English language learners, and foster youth. Yet there’s little evidence that California dis-

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Learning conditions in the Circles are supported by curricular materials, flexibility, and support staff. The program has its own learning materials — which are adapted from Escuela Nueva learning guides — that seek to facilitate students’ reintegration into school. Many participating children have multiple responsibilities outside of school such as work and caring for siblings. These students can continue their academic progress at home, attending class when they are able. Or they can take their learning guides home and receive personalized attention from their tutors. Psychosocial advisers help tutors and students with topics and situations from sex education to domestic violence, and pedagogical advisers offer support for tutors to improve teaching and learning in the classroom (Vega, 2013; MEN, 2006a, 2012; FEN, 2005b).

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districts have developed innovative interventions for foster youth. Colombia’s Learning Circles provide one model for an innovative approach to supporting the academic success of foster youth.

Whether housed in district headquarters or county offices of education, or as before- or after-school programs in highly affected schools, Learning Circles could support foster youth through accelerated and flexible instruction that provides a smaller and safer environment than a formal school. Learning Circles tutors, who may be credentialed teachers or social workers, can provide foster youth with the social and psychological support required to cope with the trauma of family dislocation and conflict. These tutors also have the ability to act as children’s advocates and as liaisons across multiple organizations and individuals, assisting in the transfer of academic records to formal schools. The Learning Circles’ flexible and child-centered pedagogical model can be particularly effective in helping foster youth to cover instruction and curriculum they miss during schooling gaps caused by transitions to new homes.

Translating Learning Circles to the U.S. context would require substantial adaptation to local context and rules, so it is difficult to envision exactly what a U.S. model would look like. But one thing is clear: School districts will increasingly feel pressure to address the needs of foster youth and other displaced youth. As education officials and educators search for promising educational approaches to support these children, a look to Colombia will serve them well.

References


