



The reproduction of ‘best practice’: Following *Escuela Nueva* to the Philippines and Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Escuela Nueva is a renowned educational innovation from Colombia that to date has been successfully transferred to 14 countries around the world. In this paper, I follow this ‘traveling’ policy and examine the local enactment of *Escuela Nueva* in two of these countries, the Philippines and Vietnam. This study reveals the various ways through which this policy model has been reframed and mediated at different stages of policy-making and local enactment. Despite local mediation, however, each attempt to transfer *Escuela Nueva* still contributes to the reproduction of *Escuela Nueva* as a universally-applicable ‘best practice.’

1. Introduction

Escuela Nueva is a low-cost rural schooling model that has been hailed as one of the most promising educational innovations for developing countries where rural access to education is still a pressing concern (Arnové et al., 2013; Levin, 1991; Lockheed and Verspoor, 1991).¹ Emerging as a teacher-led grassroots movement in Colombia in 1975 to improve access and quality in rural multigrade schools, *Escuela Nueva* quickly expanded its national reach to approximately 20,000 out of 29,896 rural public schools in Colombia (Forero-Pineda et al., 2006; Nee, 2008). Notably, the program has also successfully expanded to many countries around the world. To date, it has reached over 5 million children in 14 countries in wide-ranging regions, from Latin America to Southeast Asia (Colbert and Arboleda, 2016).

In other words, *Escuela Nueva* is a ‘traveling reform’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006a) that aligns with the broader phenomenon of global educational convergence. Most policy-makers and international development practitioners are interested in *Escuela Nueva* as an evidence-based educational innovation ‘kit’ that can be easily transferred to other rural contexts around the world (Colbert and Arboleda, 2016; McEwan and Benveniste, 2003). Yet as many studies of educational policy transfer have shown, globally-traveling policies are often subjected to complex processes of re-interpretation and mediation at the local level (see for example Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2009). Consequently, it must be questioned whether these numerous versions of *Escuela Nueva* are similar enough to the original model to justify the claim of successful global transfer, or whether this ‘traveling reform’ has been so fundamentally changed in different local contexts of

implementation to become something new.

In this paper, I ‘follow’ *Escuela Nueva* as it moves through the Philippines and Vietnam in order to see how this policy model has changed through the course of its global travel, and how the idea of *Escuela Nueva* itself flows back to global and national sites of educational policy-making. The Philippines and Vietnam are interesting cases to examine because these two countries are relatively at a distance from the original model, whether in a geographical, temporal or socio-political sense. Notably, the Philippines is the first country outside of Latin America to adopt this schooling model (Lopez, 1999), and Vietnam is the latest country to do so but on a much larger scale compared to most other countries. I approached this project with the following research questions:

- How has *Escuela Nueva* been reframed and enacted in the local contexts of Philippines and Vietnam?
- What are the successes and challenges that have arisen in the process of enacting this South-South traveling reform?
- Through the process of enactment, how is *Escuela Nueva* as a global idea transformed and/or reconstituted?

In general, *Escuela Nueva* was adopted in both the Philippines and Vietnam in order to introduce active pedagogy into traditional rural classrooms. These two countries faced very similar problems during implementation, such as infrastructural constraints and powerful traditional assumptions about the nature of learning and teaching. However, closer examination reveals that while the project in the Philippines focused on introducing quality active learning in multigrade

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¹ A note on citation in this paper: All Vietnamese proper names are cited in full in last name – middle name – first name order.

rural schools, the project in Vietnam emphasized the fostering of soft-skills like communication, leadership, and self-entrepreneurship for success in the global knowledge economy. Different rationales for adopting *Escuela Nueva* understandably resulted in significant differences in the everyday enactment of *Escuela Nueva* in the classroom. Even so, the fact that these policy transfer attempts occurred in the first place is often drawn upon by transnational actors to legitimize the success of *Escuela Nueva* as a global brand. Even as *Escuela Nueva* becomes multiple *Escuela Nuevas* at the local level, it is also through the ongoing struggle to implement it at the local levels that this educational innovation is reproduced as a global ‘best practice,’ further fueling its global journey as a traveling policy.

2. *Escuela Nueva*: origin and key principles

Escuela Nueva emerged as a grassroots teacher-driven educational innovation meant to address the severe lack of access to primary schools in rural Colombia in the 1960s and 70s (Colbert and Arboleda, 2016). Most rural schools at the time had trouble offering the full five years of instruction, and only 18.3 percent of rural school-aged children were able to complete primary education (Kline, 2002). Multigrade teaching was prevalent in these schools, meaning that one teacher would be responsible for teaching multiple curriculum grades within the same timetable period (Little, 2001). Previously, UNESCO had supported a reform encouraging teachers in multigrade rural schools to design their own curricula, but this initiative largely failed due to a lack of teacher training and support. In response, a group of teachers in the state of Norte de Santander decided to collaborate and create common instructional guides with self-learning activities for all five grade levels. These self-instructional guides allowed students to teach themselves and learn at their own pace which was particularly helpful in a multigrade teaching context. The ready-made guides thus boosted the appeal of multigrade schools and they eventually became the key component of the *Escuela Nueva* model.

The teachers involved also had in mind a broader challenge to the traditional teaching and learning process in rural classrooms. Active learning and school-community integration became the key guiding principles of *Escuela Nueva* (Colbert and Arboleda, 2016; Forero-Pineda et al., 2006; Mogollón and Solano, 2011). In terms of active learning, *Escuela Nueva* students were encouraged to take ownership of their learning process and engage in active self-discovery of knowledge, often through collaboration and experimentation in small groups or through peer teaching. To support this, teachers adopted new student-centered pedagogies and moved away from the traditional methods of lecturing to the whole class. In addition, *Escuela Nueva* also emphasized making learning relevant to community needs through adapting the common instructional guides to each context and encouraging local community members to participate in school activities. In so doing, the model sought to break down the traditional barrier between the school and the community.

In a study on students’ learning outcomes based on standardized test scores, Psacharopoulos et al. (1993) found that third-grade students in *Escuela Nueva* schools obtained higher scores in both Spanish and Mathematics compared to those in traditional rural schools. Students in *Escuela Nueva* schools also displayed higher self-confidence, a greater willingness to engage in democratic problem-solving and social interaction, and higher chances of participating in local community-building activities (Forero-Pineda et al., 2006). Notably, these positive changes occurred without a significant increase in the unit cost per student. Given these strong results, the Colombian Ministry of Education decided to expand the model to the rest of the country. By the 1990s, approximately 20,000 out of 29,896 rural public schools in Colombia had adopted the *Escuela Nueva* model (Forero-Pineda et al., 2006, pp. 289–290).

Even at the initial piloting stage, however, *Escuela Nueva* was already attracting the attention of foreign educational actors as a

promising educational innovation that could be easily packaged and transferred to other low-income countries. As mentioned above, the precursor to *Escuela Nueva* was supported by UNESCO, and USAID provided most of the funding for the initial stage of grassroots development. In 1989, the World Bank called *Escuela Nueva* one of the three most promising primary school innovations in the world and recommended that its lessons be widely disseminated to other countries (Lopez, 1999). In truth, the active learning principle at the heart of *Escuela Nueva* aligned with the dominant norm of a ‘good’ education in the Western education world established through the work of key figures such as John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky. Furthermore, because *Escuela Nueva* was a low-cost educational intervention at the primary level, this model aligned with the World Bank’s main objectives of reducing cost and increasing internal efficiency (Torres, 2003). As a result, the *Escuela Nueva* model was quickly exported to most of Latin America and other countries outside the region (see for example Luschei, 2004).

Most interestingly, even at the height of the global transfer of *Escuela Nueva* to other countries in Latin America and beyond, the project at home was running into many difficulties (Nee, 2008). McEwan and Benveniste (2003) found that in 1992, only 33 percent and 29 percent of third graders in *Escuela Nueva* classrooms had self-instructional textbooks in Spanish and mathematics, respectively, and only 64 percent of fifth-grade mathematics teachers had completed all of the required training workshops (p. 103). McGinn (1996) found no differences in teaching practices between *Escuela Nueva* teachers and those who taught in traditional rural schools. It is important to uncover the mechanisms through which the *Escuela Nueva* model was able to continue gaining global popularity, as well as to examine whether implementation abroad would confront similar troubles as in its country of origin.

3. Conceptual framework: policy in motion

Escuela Nueva is a ‘traveling reform’ typical of the contemporary era of increasing global educational convergence (Arnové, 2013; Steiner-Khamsi, 2006a; Verger et al., 2012). In most instances, this convergence occurs as the result of explicit policy transfer rather than coincidental concurrent development of education policies in different countries. While educational policy transfer used to predominantly follow a North-South direction, there has been a recent explosion of South-South educational cooperation. Of course, South-South cooperation has existed as an attempt to resist the political and economic dominance of the Global North since the days of independence movements worldwide (de Sá e Silva, 2009). However, according to de Sá e Silva (2009), the current movement has shifted from the goal of Southern resistance to the transfer of ‘best practices.’ Based on the apparently neutral rationale that developing countries have similar conditions and can thus learn from one another, “international organizations emphasize lesson-drawing, that is, learning from ‘good practices’ or ‘best-practices’ that they have already funded [emphasis added] in the global South, to influence national reform more effectively” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2009, p. 244). The rhetoric of South-South policy transfer of ‘best practices’ erases past political concerns about global inequality and subsumes the entire policy-making process under a technical, rational, and apolitical bubble.

The techno-rational approach to policy orientation assumes that not only can definitive solutions to educational problems be found, “this knowledge can be mobilized, transferred, sold, exchanged, and indeed, travelled through policy” (Webb, 2014, p. 365). The focus of policy-makers on problems and results often lead to an input-output model of policy analysis, without an in-depth consideration of the ‘black box’ that is the processes whereby policies are translated into practice in the classroom. In many policy analyses, teachers become one of the input variables and are “written out of the policy process or rendered simply as ciphers who ‘implement’” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 2). For the politicians

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