EDUCATION REFORM IN ANTIOQUIA: A RELEVANT EXPERIENCE FOR COLOMBIA

Martha Laverde

Quality through Decentralization

Antioquia is a heterogeneous Department located in the west of Colombia. While consisting principally of rural communities and villages isolated by high wooded mountains, it is a diverse region, with a rich Afro-Colombian culture in the municipalities of the Pacific Coast and an area of coffee production in the central zone. Some communities are surrounded by violence, notably those in Uraba and Middle Magdalena. These contrasts aside, the people are renowned as hard workers and Antioquia is one of the most productive areas in Colombia.

Education data collected for Antioquia in the 1990s showed that only 59% of the children who started school completed the primary cycle, and only 35% finished without repeating a grade. 74% of high school graduates had lower than average scores in the national achievement test, and only 12% achieved high scores. These results astonished not only the educational community but Antioquia’s society at large, since this Department and the nation’s capital have traditionally had the highest education indicators.

Faced with these alarming results, the then Governor of Antioquia – and currently President of the Republic, Alvaro Uribe Velez, oversaw the preparation of the Quality Improvement for Basic Education Project by the Secretariat of Education and Culture. Together with the Pasto project launched around the same time, this World Bank Project, which covered the 90 neediest municipalities out of the Department’s 125, was among the first decentralized education loan in the country and, indeed, in the Latin America region.

The project encouraged the decentralization of educational services and closer coordination between the Department and the mayors and members of the municipal councils. This was particularly impressive considering that these changes were introduced prior to the enactment of the new decentralization law (Law 715 of 2001). The positive results obtained have allowed the Department of Antioquia to share some useful lessons with the rest of the country, notably that decentralization can work when there is sufficient support to facilitate the management of the education system and investment in its development at the level of the department and municipalities.

The main goals of the five-year Project (see Figure 1) were to improve the quality of education and to increase access to schools and retention, especially in poor rural and urban communities. Improvements in management and teaching processes in the schools were combined with the active participation of the local communities, while the capacities of the municipalities and the department were also strengthened. The project also included activities aiming at the construction of a culture of peace and the prevention of violence. Guillermo Gaviria, the former Governor of Antioquia who was murdered in 2003 by his kidnappers, the FARC guerrillas during a rescue attempt by the Colombian army, was a strong supporter of this culture of peace.

Education development is a complex challenge, especially in countries like Colombia surrounded by so much adversity. Despite the difficult circumstances, Antioquia has obtained remarkable advances (See Table 1):

A Technical Assistance Model for the Municipalities

To facilitate the replication of the Antioquia experience in other parts of the country, the project team designed and applied a Participative-Collaborative Technical Assistance model. This model uses a Participatory Assessment in-
involving the different educational and cultural actors who work on improving their own practices. At the heart of the approach is the formation of “Change Leading Teams”, with members drawn from the school principals, students, teachers and parents and empowered to make the decisions necessary to improve the delivery of education services in their environment.

No less important was the shift which took place in the Secretariat of Education, which transformed its traditional controlling role into one focussing on capacity building and technical assistance. This transformation has undoubtedly facilitated improvements in the delivery of education services in terms of quality, coverage and equity:

- 1,856 Change Leading Teams in participating schools
- 90 municipalities trained in integral processes for the implementation of the educational service
- 450 municipal employees trained in the use of planning tools
- Monitoring and Evaluation System operating in 90 municipalities
- 270 employees in the Secretariat of Education for Culture in Antioquia trained in the use of the Participative-Collaborative Consultancy model
- Strategic partnerships with NGOs for technical assistance in 17 municipalities
- 114 municipalities with Internet connectivity (new technologies program).

### Partnerships to Increase Coverage

Some innovative approaches were also adopted to address the low coverage rates prevailing in Antioquia during this period. These included “hiring” school places from private, non-profit schools run by NGOs and rationalizing teacher deployment and student-teacher ratios.

This strategy has paid off. Using the project resources, the Secretary of Education managed to increase coverage by placing students in private schools in 113 of the department’s 125 municipalities, creating 150,000 new school places. In the majority of cases (81%), the program relied on a pedagogical innovation called the Tutorial Learning System (SAT in Spanish) that focused on the rural young and adult population. The SAT was effective in reducing both opportunity and direct costs to the students. The SAT makes it possible for students to work and study at the same time, receive free instructional materials and minimize transportation costs by meeting in studying groups close to their homes. Increasing the teacher – student ratio also created another 27,000 school places every year between 1998 and 2002.

To achieve these positive results, the Secretary of Education combined the following resources: transfers from the national government to the Department, the Department’s own resources together with the Project resources (that were only used in 2000 and in 2001) and the municipalities’ own resources (see Figure 2 below).

### Table 1 - Project Beneficiaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Planned coverage</th>
<th>Coverage obtained</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>1,874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipalities</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>201,600</td>
<td>238,487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>5,120</td>
<td>8,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>12,800</td>
<td>18,457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Government employees</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directores de Núcleo</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Secretary of Education Employees</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The evaluation of the project revealed that the private sector schools contracted by the Department were able to continue offering quality educational services. The results speak for themselves: the promotion, dropout and repetition rates are equal if not better than in the public sector.
achievements at the primary and secondary levels, as measured by the national SABER tests, are similar to those in public schools.

Sub-contracting student places in different types of schools for over six years has undoubtedly generated a new education culture, now supported by Law 715. The allocation of financial resources has also shifted towards investment in the quality dimensions rather than exclusively on the recruitment of additional teachers and civil works as in the past.

Quality with Autonomy

Focussing on increasing transparency and the efficient use of resources, the Project improved school management by transforming the role of principals and school councils. The latter are now responsible for encouraging participation in the development of Institutional Strengthening Plans. The councils are supported in this by Change Leading Teams and a participatory process which brings together the State, the private sector and civil society.

The Institutional Strengthening Plans include all important aspects of the educational environment, including the supply of instructional materials, community commitment, in-service training for teachers and school principals, as well as improvement in the physical environment for a better learning experience. Indeed, each school, together with its principal and the school council, manages resources through the teaching services funds, organizes providers according to technical criteria, establishes the technical specifications for required equipment and materials, and produces relevant information for accountability purposes. An important feature of the Institutional Strengthening Plan is that it allows for regular changes to adjust to evolving challenges. These achievements have permitted a better integration of the schools, in both rural and urban areas, according to the spirit of the Decentralization Law (Law 715).

Evaluation as a tool for pedagogical improvement

Project funds supported the Secretary of Education in the application of the SABER learning achievement tests. The baseline was established in 1998 through a series of tests administered to a representative sample of students in four disciplines: mathematics, Spanish language, social sciences and natural sciences. The students tested were in third, fifth, seventh and ninth grades. The first test results were fairly unsatisfactory, but did help to establish important strategies aimed at reforming teaching and learning practices, notably in terms of pedagogical approaches and the use of instructional material.

In October 2002 the SABER tests were applied for a second time, this time restricted to mathematics and Spanish language proficiency. The results were considerably better at all levels: for the Department as a whole, by municipality, education district and at the level of individual schools and for different categories of schools (traditional school, multi-grade, schools for adults, SAT, etc.). By administering the tests, the entire community also became aware of the necessity to break away from the old teaching and learning paradigm. The results of the tests were widely disseminated through workshops with all concerned groups, leading to the recognition of the need to use assessment as a critical tool for the continuous improvement of the education system. The availability of the achievement tests has also helped the Department increase competition among the various providers of education services, including public and private schools.

Learning in Peace

It is no secret that the high levels of violence which Colombia has suffered from in the last four decades has had a tremendous impact on the social and human development of its population. Education has not been an exception. There is clear evidence that there is a pervasive tendency to solve differences of opinion through the use of force and that many teachers in the conflict-ridden regions have been affected by threats, by displacement and in some cases, have become victims. A good illustration is the case of a group of students in Cocorná who waited patiently for the return of their “prof” of 25 years, Ana Cecilia Duque, who had been kidnapped, only to find out that she had been killed. Decision-makers are not immune to this situation. The Government of Antioquia has established a space called Antioquia cada Escuela una Zona Franca de Paz (Antioquia: each school a War-Free Zone for Peace). Values circulate freely in these schools, like goods in tax-free ports. Today this project is part of the Program for Permanent Formation of Coexistence, Peace and Non-Violence.

The Department has reoriented its educational practices, strengthening municipal and institutional educational projects, integrating topics associated with co-existence, peaceful conflict resolution as well as the improvement of administrative, pedagogical, interpersonal and school-community relationships. In support of these efforts, the Project has been working in three complementary ways:
first, by building positive values, attitudes and images to develop a culture of peace; second through teachers to establish practices based on mutual respect and peaceful conflict resolution; and third through school management practices and pedagogical instruments such as the Manual of Peaceful Coexistence.

Despite the numerous administrative and political problems caused by the violent conflict, the Project has functioned without interruption. It has made important advances in its process of institutionalization, has instilled positive attitudes among the managers of the education system, and perhaps even more importantly, has fostered a different culture in the education community in the Department of Antioquia.

One, two, three … successful cases

The Andes municipality lies at 1700 meters above sea level in the southeastern economic region of Antioquia; it is there, in the San Martín de Porres school, that the project undertook its first activity. The project was instrumental in empowering all actors in the education community, including the school councils and municipal employees, and ensuring the smooth implementation of the quality improvement actions. Five years later, attitudes towards education have changed, the management of educational services has been modernized, and the education community has organized itself, and is rooted in the community. Andes has become a laboratory, and is frequently visited by teachers, principals, public officials, parents and students from other parts of the Department who want to know more about their experience.

Peque is a hidden municipality located in the Uraba region of Antioquia. It is embedded in a canyon in the western Andes and is surrounded by three ravines. It takes at least three hours to ride by mule from one district to the other. Each district has a school, with a minimum of 13 children and a maximum of 65. It is a rural municipality that faces serious challenges in terms of infrastructure and high levels of violence, while being noted for its resilience. On a sunny Saturday in the May of 1999, 33 peasants responded to an official tender announced by the Secretary of Education to purchase 43 mules to be used for the transportation of teachers, students and textbooks. On this occasion there were no technical specifications or comparative price quotes from international suppliers, neither was there an evaluation committee with procurement specialists, because “Don” Arnulfo Mazo, like many others, believes that mule driving is hereditary; not surprising given that he and his family have been experts in donkeys, horses and mules for well over a hundred years.

The Sabaneta municipality easily offers one of the most beautiful cases of partnership between the public and private sectors based on a new kind of barter. The mayor decided, based on a detailed analysis of the schooling challenge in his municipality, to make private schools pay their property tax in the form of school places for disadvantaged children. This approach resulted in increased coverage and management autonomy in all the schools of the municipality.

These three municipalities represent encouraging experiences as part of the Quality Improvement Project. The popular saying “hunger and the desire to eat go together” clearly applies as the communities involved have responded with a high level of enthusiasm and technical competence. In all three cases, the progress in SABER test achievements confirm the positive impact of the project: the results in mathematics for 5th grade was 43% in Andes, 49% in Sabaneta and 47% in Peque, which is equivalent or higher to the Department average in the urban areas (43%). Peque shows the most impressive progress, rising from 29% in 1998 to 47% in 2002. In 9th grade, Andes and Sabaneta had the same results (45%) and Peque had 35%.

Achieving long-term impact

After five years of implementation, the Project team managed the effective engagement of non-governmental organizations in the development of partnerships with the public school system and strengthened information and communications systems involving the commitment of both the educational community and citizens in general. Access to both preschool and secondary education increased in the municipalities and the Peace and Non-Violence Program was created and institutionalized in the context of the War-Free Schools, along with the implementation of a participative/collaborative technical assistance model. Even though the project is approaching completion, municipalities now consider education as a priority. Most of them have included sufficient financial resources in their budgets to guarantee the sustainability of the activities launched by the project, with continuing technical assistance from the Department. Antioquia has also become an active and important member of two partnerships led by the World Bank, the first is the Education, Equity and Competitiveness Partnership, and the second one is the Education for Peace Partnership.

The education culture has been affected positively in Antioquia; the entire society has become aware that investment and public attention in this area is the best way to achieve important social and economic progress and so face the challenges of a changing and globally competitive world.

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