Reconsidering the school

Community education

Rural education

Calling into question the assumptions of traditional schooling, from the perspective of two alternate educational approaches: the international Montessori movement and the Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial, first developed in Colombia.

Despite efforts to transform teaching and learning practices around the world in search of improved learning outcomes, many of the basic features of the traditional school seem to be unquestioned. In the vast majority of schools, learning happens within school walls, not as part of community life. Classrooms are separated by age, with a crowd of students facing a single teacher. Students follow a program decided by education authorities and teachers, not necessarily reflecting what sparks their own interest and curiosity. Learning is usually seen as separate from work and productive activities, and it rarely responds directly to local needs and aspirations.

Current efforts to improve the quality of education strive to make these schools function better, for more students. But is this the right approach to take? Or would students be better served by a fundamental reconsideration of schooling itself? The IIEP Learning Portal’s Catherine Honeyman raised these questions with two guests: André Roberfroid, former President of the Association Montessori Internationale, and Bita Correa, discussing the alternative secondary school-level programme Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial.

Following is an edited transcript of the discussion, or click here to listen to the audio recording.

Thank you both for joining the IIEP Learning Portal for this discussion. What are some fundamental assumptions about schooling that you think should be reconsidered?

André Roberfroid: What needs to be reconsidered is a true perception of who and what the child is. Traditional education so far has been acting as if the child is an empty barrel that needs to be filled with knowledge and practices. What Maria Montessori observed more than one hundred years ago, is that actually the child has a brain that is ready to start educating itself. And by reacting and interacting with the environment, the child is progressively building its own development. That has also been confirmed more recently by the development of the neurosciences. This calls for the teacher to be not the master, but the guide. Not the one who knows, but the one who helps the child
to discover the environment, in which the children will find stimulating elements that will allow them to progress at their own pace and in their own interests.

Bita Correa: FUNDAEC, from the beginning, has been trying to reconceptualize certain things. And at the very basic level, one of the first questions that it tried to answer was: ‘What is the purpose of education?’ And I think that’s one of those fundamental assumptions [that needs to be reconsidered]. FUNDAEC has defined its purpose for education as really helping the individual transform themselves, develop their capacities, but not only thinking about themselves—also thinking about how that education and how that individual can impact their society. So, in a way, education then has this purpose to really help the person, the individual, advance—but then also to help them become agents of change or promoters of something different that they want to see in their community. In that way, by really re-defining the purpose of education, then the structure, the method of delivery, the curriculum of the programme [must] reflect the understanding of that purpose.

Could we make this a little bit more concrete? Bita, could you tell us—what does a typical day or week in this education system look like, and how is it different from a traditional school?

BC: This programme was originally designed for rural areas in Colombia. And it was trying to, on the one hand, get quality education to these areas of the country, but then ensuring that that education met the reality of that population. So, for example, we don’t have the role of a teacher in the same sense as a traditional school, but rather a “tutor”. Now a tutor, ideally, is a person from that same community, so that they are part of that reality—but they also do receive training.

The programme requires a minimum of 15 to 20 hours a week of study, but students actually decide what those 15 to 20 hours a week will look like. So it might be that they choose to meet three times a week for five hours each day, or maybe there is a question in terms of harvesting seasons or planting seasons, and there are times when people really are needed in their family household chores—so in that sense, the methodology, in terms of the hours, is flexible.

And then in terms of the space, a SAT group as they are called, can really meet in any place. And there is also a great amount of time given to practices, to investigations, and to service to the community. So there is a lot of going outside of the classroom to be able to do these things. Whether it is to go to talk to community members, or talk to farmers, or do practices regarding health, or working with small children—or whatever it is that the books at that given moment are asking—a lot of those 15-20 hours a week are not going to be spent just studying, but also doing these sorts of activities.

André, can you also give us a brief profile in the Montessori system, what a typical day might look like?

AR: The main difference that one could see in a Montessori class—actually there are two. The first one is what people call the “freedom of choice”. Meaning, the children do what they are interested in. Meaning, the environment in the school is made in such a way that all the elements that could be conducive to the transfer of knowledge, to the acquisition of capacities, are available in the classroom—but it is for the child to decide which one to use at what time. That’s one element that makes it very different from any other school environment.

The second one is that we insist in having children at different ages in the school. Traditionally and basically, in three year periods—3 to 6 year olds, 6 to 9, and so on—to be together in the class, so as to create a social environment in which children of different ages will relate to each other, will help
each other, will seek others’ support or collaboration. That also creates in the school an element of education for living together, for relating to others.

So, a typical school day in a Montessori class is: you enter in a room where children are all very busy, but each doing something different. Where the teacher or, as we like to call it, ‘guide’, is observing very carefully every one of them, discovering which one is ready to use the material that he is willing to use, or maybe he needs some support and presentation before doing it. It requires from the teacher a level of attention that is much, much more demanding than in the traditional class. And you see a class where the relationship is not based on discipline, but on mutual interest.

Of course, one of the questions that many people wonder about is whether such a model could really be offered on a large scale, as a feasible replacement for traditional schooling. What do you think of that question, André?

AR: I think the answer is yes. I think that we now have enough experiences to demonstrate that it is possible to offer—I won’t call it Montessori, but a child-centred approach—to all parts of the world. Now, the main question that is often raised by the Ministries of Education is that they couldn’t afford it. There are examples, though, and I just want to name one.

It’s in Southern India, in the state of Tamil Nadu. The local Ministry of Education decided that they had to do something to improve the quality of their education system. They decided to use—mostly inspired by Montessori, but not naming it—something they called ABL, ‘Activity Based Learning’, which is practicing the three main elements of the Montessori method: that is child-centred, teacher in the middle of the class, freedom of choice, as well as multiple age groups. They have done it for 47,000 schools, without increasing their budget, but using quite clever ways to deal with the materials, which have essentially been made in the workshops of the Ministries. I don’t want to enter into details, but just to prove that it is possible; it can be done.

And Bita, with the Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial, can this be offered on a large scale with the general population, not just in a few places?

BC: Definitely. In Colombia, at one point the SAT programme had over 70,000 students that were in the programme within the country, and it’s also a programme that has been adapted and taken to different parts of the world. There was the recent study done by the Brookings Institute, which looked at this question of a large-scale expansion of the programme, and they were looking specifically at the programme in Honduras.

So, to answer the question: yes, it is very possible. But of course, it depends on different factors that we can’t ignore. We don’t see the programme as a product that can be packaged and sold, but really somehow trying to respond to the characteristics of different places. Another thing that we try to do, is that we try not to begin the programme with a lot of groups at the same time, but allow the process to begin slowly—allow a couple of groups to have pilot projects, to see whether the programme adapts, and also to understand the needs or the realities of a particular place, and then slowly the programme will grow.

And another question which has to be considered, has to do with the training of the tutors. To really ensure the proper training of tutors is going to be necessary for the programme to actually work. If you don’t do that, then no matter what else you do, the programme won’t work. I mean, it will work in the sense that the books are there, the curriculum is there, but time has to be paid and attention has to be paid to the training of those tutors.
You have both mentioned some very interesting innovations and alternate perspectives that we could take on schooling, but what would you both say to the people who argue that we should just go “back to the basics” and focus on teaching the fundamental subjects in the traditional way that they have always been taught?

BR: What’s important is to remember again the purpose of education. One of the things that FUNDAEC has done is to think about the concept of a “capability”. What does it mean to think about capabilities and to think about human beings in their entirety? That’s a way that we’ve tried to go beyond the dichotomies of either “this is traditional learning”, or “innovative learning”. Really trying to think of: as a human being, what are the different capabilities that we need to develop in order to participate effectively in a world in which we are also not alone—we are part of something greater, something that’s larger.

AR: Over the last ten years, I have visited a large number of countries, talking to educationalists. There is one thing I have heard everywhere: “education is in crisis; it doesn’t work”. At the same time, I also observe that globally, most of the teachers are competent and dedicated people, and they are willing to see it working, and yet it doesn’t work. So, if you have a system like that, would it make any sense to simply say: “I’ll use the same system, but do a little less of it”? It doesn’t make sense!

Clearly, the problem is the wrong basic concept of the process of learning, the process of development. Yes, a fundamental change in the system is very difficult. It requires a very serious change in the perception of the relationship between adults and children. And that touches on issues of power, of the reproduction of social powers—it’s very difficult. But unless we do it, the contradiction of the current situation will become overwhelming.

Thank you both very much, I think you’ve offered some really interesting new perspectives on schooling and education. Thank you for sharing those with the IIEP Learning Portal.

BC: Thank you for the opportunity to participate, and for opening this space of dialogue as well.

AR: Thank you very much. I think we need more of the same—more opportunities to get the problem on the table. Thank you for doing that.