

The Role of Escuelas Nuevas and Social Capital in Colombia in Peace Psychology and Conflict Resolution

Judith Van Hoorn

University of the Pacific, California, United States of America

Upegui-Hernandez contributes to work on social capital and peace-building by situating Colombian national educational policy discussions within the larger social, political and economic context of globalisation and global politics of today. Questions regarding the roles of schools, particularly the role of schools in maintaining the status quo and thus furthering structural violence are most frequently asked by those who work in school settings (Brown, & Quinn, 2001; Kahne, O'Brien, & Quinn, 2001). Recently, we find this topic addressed by others from a wider range of professions and places (Lipman, 2005; McCarthy, Borgoiakova, Gilmore, Lomawaima, & Romero, 2005; Schwebel, 2003). Through her own background and work as a Columbian peace psychologist, Upegui-Hernandez draws upon a wide range of theoretical traditions and both a specific national as well as international context. Consequently, she raises critical questions about the role that Escuelas Nuevas play in Colombia's national processes of peace-building (Christie, 2006). She underscores her conclusion that although the existence of social capital in a community is important, it should not stand in the place of state and international programs for social justice.

Upegui-Hernandez provides us with an emic perspective of myriad complex national social historical issues that led to the development of the rural *Escuelas Nuevas*. Their characteristics are those widely identified as basic to successful educational reform: strong relationships between educational institutions and the broader society; community-initiated, bottom-up changes; small schools with strong parent/community — school communication; child and family-centered; and levels of strong trust between teachers and children. Upegui-Hernandez contributes to the literature on educational reform by describing ways in which such general characteristics of reform emerged in Colombia during a particular time and place, that is, how the rural *Escuelas Nuevas* instituted successful educational reforms in ways that are specific to local place and culture.

In her discussion of education and social capital, Upegui-Hernandez makes the key point that the term 'social capital' has been used for different purposes by different global political, economic, and educational

institutions as well as by scholars from different fields. By situating the success of the rural *Escuelas Nuevas* in context, I think that Upegui-Hernandez shows not only the important roles that schools might play in the development of social capital and the promotion of social justice, but, conversely and importantly, that communities with social capital have the power to develop schools that meet the needs of that community. Although there are many examples from more affluent urban communities, there are fewer examples from poorer rural communities.

What happens when a model developed and implemented in particular rural communities is transplanted to large cities with large schools and city-drawn school boundaries? In her month-long investigation, Upegui-Hernandez used various methods to collect data and analyse some of the dynamics at one school in one urban community. Her research raises important questions for further investigation. The concept of community seems central to the success of the rural *Escuelas Nuevas*. This leads to questions about the sense

of community among the families in the urban schools now implementing this model. Do they self-identify as a community? What happens when families from various rural communities relocate to an urban setting? She underscores the critical question: can this model, transposed from other settings, contribute to social justice and to building social capital? For example, do families have the energy and long-term commitment to the community to develop a community school? One also wonders about the impact of the large school size found in urban areas and to the all too frequent lack of teacher trust on community/family/school relationships, relationships that were central to the success of the rural *Escuelas Nuevas*.

Upegui-Hernandez presents us with a dynamic view of social capital and of specific, situational constraints in replicating social models. Furthermore, if I understand correctly, Upegui-Hernandez makes an important though implicit point here: it is only when people have power that a civil society is created in which noncoercive reconciliation is truly possible. Hopefully, Upegui-Hernandez' work will be part of a growing body of research by indigenous researchers (Montiel, 2001) that contributes to the national educational policy dialogue as well as to international psychological perspectives on

the complex dynamics of social capital and structural peace-building,

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