

TRANSFORMING AN EDUCATION SYSTEM THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: THE CASE OF COLOMBIA

Juan Carlos HENNESSEY¹
Virginia Mihaela DUMITRESCU²

Abstract

The present article sets out to identify the weaknesses of the education system of a Latin American country and the means by which that system can be “revolutionized” in such a way as to bring about a much needed paradigm shift for the benefit of society as a whole. In Colombia, a country plagued with poverty, inequality and their consequences (violence, insecurity, etc.), the education system is not preparing the new generation to face the various social, political and economic challenges that will determine the nation’s quality of life in the future, hence the urgent need for an “academic revolution” using leadership and effective communication skills as primary tools, and teachers and their educational environments as agents of change. In a developing country like Colombia, students’ education can no longer be reduced to assimilating tons of information, but should consist in “learning for life”, in preparing to meet the requirements of an increasingly demanding labour market and face the challenges of real life both within the context of globalization, and against the backdrop of Colombia’s specific problems. That is why it is imperative to educate future leaders that understand their context and can fit into the world’s scenario without losing sight of their country’s variables.

Keywords: learning for life, leadership skills, communication skills, effective class

Introduction

Colombia is not preparing the new generation to face the various social, political and economic challenges that will determine its quality of life in the future. Under these circumstances, an “academic revolution” is absolutely mandatory in order to replace most of the existing paradigms in the education sector. The tools that must be used are leadership and effective communication skills, and the agents of this change must be the teachers and their educational environments. In a developing country like Colombia, education can no longer be based on assimilating tons of information; students must be aware of their community’s problems and understand that there is not an infinite number of opportunities (so they must create

¹ Juan Carlos Hennessey, jchfe@hotmail.com

² Virginia Mihaela Dumitrescu, The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, mihdum2409@yahoo.com

them in many cases). Educators are called upon to develop students' leadership skills that will later on enable graduates to face the challenges of real life and meet the requirements of an increasingly demanding labour market.

The present article will start by giving an overview of the challenges facing our world today, as well as the challenges Colombia is facing in its effort to generate life quality; it will then look at the reality of Colombia's education level based on the PISA (Program of International Student Assessment) evaluation. The second part will provide a theoretical framework on the topics of leadership and effective communication focusing on their particular relevance to the academic environments in a developing country. The final part will concentrate on integrating leadership and communication skills with objectives and procedures, and identifying clear methodologies for successful "learning for life" processes. These procedures will include a model of continuous improvement meant to bring about the change in the teaching habits that Colombia's education system needs. Finally the conclusions will be presented.

Using Education as a Tool to Face the New Era

Globalization in the world is a fact. Since the cybernetic boom of the internet, communities in the world have been sharing all kinds of products, knowledge and cultural habits. The new world scenario shows the importance of conquering international markets and thus ensuring a positive balance of payments in a country. A natural consequence of the huge force of globalization is informatization, a process in which information and communication technologies shape cultural and civic discourse. This includes not only computers and the Internet, but also traditional media technologies such as films, satellite TV and telecommunications. The importance of those two forces resides not only in their enormous economic impact in the world but also in the social and cultural change they can produce in society. The most powerful organizations in the world such as the United Nations (UN), the UNICEF and the World Bank always talk about reducing poverty and the gaps between the different communities around the world – as illustrated by the following statements made by The World Bank in 2000 ("technological development should be used for the purposes of providing for health, agriculture, and environmental change, and ultimately, to eliminate poverty"), or by the UN in 1998 ("we in the United Nations are convinced that communications technology has a great democratizing power waiting to be harnessed to our global struggle for peace and development. The quantity and quality of available information is changing dramatically every day, in every country, in every corner of the world. Citizens are gaining greater access to information, too. And the spread of information is making accountability and transparency facts of life for any government").

However, for many people this is not happening. Many theorists argue that globalization is working in a centripetal way, forcing homogenization and western

style consumerism – hence the frequent criticism of the “coca-colonization” and the “McDonaldization” of the world and the destruction of traditional cultures. On the question of poverty the news is not very good either. A United Nations Development Project report in 1999 argued that “globalization was indeed widening the gap between the rich and poor nations, and that the industrialized nations overwhelmingly benefit from both globalization of markets and the rising importance of information and knowledge in the new global economy”. Moreover, the report estimates that English is the language of choice for 80 percent of web sites, and that 26 percent of Americans use the World Wide Web – as opposed to 3 percent of Russians, 0.4 percent of the population of South Asia and 0.2 percent for the Arab states.

This brings us back to the problem of education. Are countries all over the world prepared to raise their new generation so that it will be able to connect their smaller economies and their equally important cultures to this world without clear frontiers? Are cultures strong enough to survive the bombarding of the utilitarian model and Hollywood lifestyle patterns? In our opinion it is important that communities dealing with this problem should understand that there is a high probability that they are not ready for these changes and they have to do something as soon as possible. The answers to the above questions can be found in the academic environment. People must believe in their community and understand their strengths and weaknesses from an early age. They must prepare for future challenges. This is the only way societies in developing countries can grow in this globalized world: by getting a clear picture of what they are and a complete list of skills developed through school to compete in the international market. The example of countries like the United States and their efforts to maintain their supremacy in the world by attaching special importance to the education system is extremely relevant. An article in the December 3, 2010 issue of *New York Times* says: “Now Bill Gates, who in recent years has turned his attention and considerable fortune to improving American education, is investing \$335 million through his foundation to overhaul the personnel departments of several big school systems. A big chunk of that money is financing research by dozens of social scientists and thousands of teachers to develop a better system for evaluating classroom instruction”. This research is focused on the value added that teachers can bring to a specific class. Developing countries must understand the importance of an effective education system to the development of society as a whole, and the responsibility of teachers in the education process.

Colombia's Academic Reality

Colombia is a country with very special characteristics (such as poverty and inequality, and a host of dire consequences like violence, insecurity, etc., sending out negative signals to potential international investors whose role is so important for the country's development). Colombia therefore needs students who are not only prepared for the challenges of globalization but also able to deal with its social problems that undermine any achievements the country may have in the production

sector. Therefore, attention should be given first to sustainability in the area of human resources, and afterwards to sustainability in production. It is completely urgent to educate future leaders that understand their country's situation and can fit into this world's scenario while at the same time taking into account their country's own variables.

In 2006 and 2009 Colombia participated in the PISA program (IPSE, International Program of Students' Evaluation), an a project of the OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) which was initiated in the late 90's and whose objective was to evaluate fifteen year-old students and see how prepared they are to face the challenges of adult life. Their results are helpful both for countries (as a guide for future political decisions in the field of education) and for educators who want to improve the education level of their country. PISA focuses on questions such as: Are students prepared for the future? Can they analyze, think and communicate their ideas effectively? Do they have interests that can be developed throughout their lives as productive members of the economy and society? The education process should not be focused on students knowing everything they need; instead, it should verify the bases that will enable people to continue the correct learning procedures in the different environments they must live. PISA not only evaluates what students know, but the skills of applying their knowledge in different contexts inside and outside schools. The evaluation includes three main topics. In Reading, PISA focuses on reading to learn and not in learning to read. The concept points not only to literal comprehension but to the skill of using it to accomplish the different objectives in life. In Mathematics it is focused on the skills of recognizing and formulating problems, including the thinking and use of concepts, processes, and tools to describe, explain and predict different situations. Finally, in Science it concentrates on the understanding of scientific concepts and skills to get a clear perspective on reality.

Table 1 PISA results 2006

	Colombia	Average for the Caribbean and Latin America	Average countries of the OECD	Best Country
Mathematics	370	394	498	563 (Finland)
Science	388	408	500	549 (China)
Reading	385	403	492	556 (Korea)

Source: PISA results 2006

Table 2 PISA results 2009

	Colombia	Average for the Caribbean and Latin America	Average countries of the OECD	Best Country
Mathematics	381	393	496	600 (Shanghai)
Science	402	405	498	575 (Shanghai)
Reading	413	408	494	556

Source: PISA results 2009

The poor and almost identical 2006 and 2009 PISA results in Tables 1 and 2 raise two questions: How is Colombia supposed to compete in a globalized world if its future workers are not even near the level of their best foreign counterparts? And how is Colombia supposed to solve its social problems with people that are not ready to understand problems, create solutions using the knowledge acquired, and communicate the procedures of these solutions? The answer lies in the education sector, where the problem is not the amount of information that students receive but the attitude towards education, or how information is given and received.

Leadership and Communication Skills for Learning Environments

An organization's progress depends to a great extent on the effective coordination of the people involved in the processes. So power as the ability to get other people to do what we want appears to be a very important characteristic of leaders of an organization. Out of the five possible sources of individual power identified by Handy (1987) - physical power (the use of a superior force; the bully, the big man, the tyrant, terrorism); resource power (the use or possession of valued resources that are desired by the other part); position power (a legal or legitimate power given by the role the person has in an organization, very common in managers, teachers and inspectors); expert power (or the power given to someone because of his/her expertise); and personal power (gained by charisma, popularity and personality) – the last one, **personal power**, deserves special attention when we talk about leadership. One of the most important assets of this type of power is **emotional intelligence**, as defined by Goleman (1999): a person's self-awareness, self-confidence, self-control, commitment and integrity, and a person's ability to communicate, influence, initiate change and accept change. Goleman states that managers who do not develop their emotional intelligence have difficulty in building good relationships with peers, subordinates, superiors and clients.

Critical thinking as understood by Michael Scriven & Richard Paul ("the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness" (Scriven and Paul, 2003) also becomes fundamental for leadership because leaders must know how to make good judgments about information and arguments, and present persuasive ideas. Evaluating information must be a strong characteristic of people that make decisions. In any organization or business, decision making processes play a vital role in achieving progress, and the key to

success is taking the right decisions. Knowing and understanding the environment gives the option to adapt to change - and the world's globalization scenario of globalization is all about continuous and fast change.

Communication skills are also of major importance to any organization, which is why people in various areas of study are focusing their attention on this topic. According to Joseph A. DeVito, "there is communication whenever messages are sent or received and whenever significance is attached to the signals issued by another person. Always human communication is distorted by noise, occurs in a context, has a certain effect and gives way to feedback" (DeVito, 1993: 5). The noise mentioned can be of a physical nature (noisy background, dark glasses, etc), of a physiological nature (like stereotypes) or a semantic nature (language, technical words, etc). Listening skills are critical to effective communication. Many people are very good at expressing their ideas but sometimes not so good at listening. Ruxandra Constantinescu (2006) divides the listening process into five phases (reception, comprehension, memorizing, evaluation and feedback) and mentions three filters used to express information: behaviour, thinking and emotions. Sinclair J (1998) states that communication is the process of conveying information, ideas or intention by language, signs, symbols and behavior. Behavior plays a very important role in communication. What a person says is the content of the message, and what a person does nonverbally represents the relationship with the interlocutor.

Adair's Leadership Model

John Adair created a leadership model using three overlapping circles which he called "Action Centered Leadership". The model is easy to remember, apply and adapt to any situation. The main idea is keeping the right balance, getting results, building morale, improving quality, developing teams and productivity. The circles represent achieving the task, managing the team or group, and managing individuals. According to Adair, understanding what motivates individuals to act is fundamental to engaging their interest and focusing their efforts. The will that leads to action is governed by motives, and motives are inner needs or desires that can be conscious or unconscious. Adair included a 50:50 rule in his model: 50 % of the motivation of individuals comes from themselves and the other 50% relies on external factors – which contradicts most of the motivation gurus who assert that motivation is from within the individual. This shows how important it is to understand the different variables of the environment in which the situation develops. Adair also suggests that the 50% of team building success comes from team skills and attitudes and the other 50% comes from the leader. One factor alone cannot complete the equation of success.

The Academic Environment

The verb “to teach” is much more than explaining information and checking if students know it by heart. The main idea of teaching must be giving the information to students while they are willing to receive it and know what to do with it in their lives. There are four student’s layers that a teacher must penetrate to gain access into the student’s world and create with them a real learning process: feeling safe, focusing, wanting to learn and real learning.

Students who feel that they are in a safe environment at school will be open to learn and concentrate better. The whole idea of this “safe environment” is to connect with students and avoid the seven deadly habits that destroy relations as mentioned by Glasser (2001): criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing and rewarding people to control them. We are sometimes unhappy because we cannot figure out the way of maintaining relations with others. External control (physical and position power) must be replaced by internal control (promoted by personal power).

Once the teacher has connected with his students and opened the channels of effective communication, they need to understand that students’ lifestyle today includes iPods, amazing new computer games, web social pages, etc. Classes must be dynamic to capture students’ attention. In his book *Choice Theory* William Glasser (1999) explains how people are unhappy because one or more of their needs are not satisfied. He explains how all of us have these needs (for survival, power, freedom, fun and love) in different degrees and that each one of us must learn to recognize which one is not being satisfied in our real world. In the classroom, students’ needs can be catered to in various ways. **Survival:** students must feel they are not in any danger of being bullied by other students or of being treated badly by adults (teachers/parents). There are continuous conflicts in school: teachers-students, students-students and parents-students. Conflict negotiation, critical thinking and decision making are crucial to teachers who must represent figures of justice in the classroom. **Love:** students must feel that teachers and the other students care about them. **Power:** students must feel powerful but not at the expense of others. They need to feel useful. They have to develop their personal mastery and they have to receive recognition for the good things they accomplish. **Freedom:** students must be given choices during classes without deviating from the main objective, as well as opportunities to express their opinions and feedback. **Fun:** classes must be enjoyable. To accomplish a good connection with students, it is important that teachers do not limit their role as teachers to the hours of teaching.

As for “wanting to learn”, teachers should inspire students to do a task because they think it is the better choice. Tomlinson describes the type of information the students process as useful and will want to study: the information must be relevant, personal, familiar, connected with the work they know, able to help students

understand themselves and their lives more fully, authentic, offering “real” history, math or art, not just exercises about the subject; it should be the type of information that can be used immediately for something that matters, and it should make students more powerful now as well as in the future (Tomlinson, 1999: 30). If students have taken the decision they want to learn something, the class will flow smoothly.

In this process of “real learning”, understanding means much more than recalling. It means the student can explore the idea and use it in different ways. Barrel (1995) describes understanding an idea as the moment that the student can use it, explain it, give examples, compare it, propose new problems, create models of the problem and use the knowledge in their own performance. It is a long way and not everybody can go step by step to accomplish this process. Crossing the student’s layers takes time, and communication and leadership skills are the keys to success. Teachers must think globally but act locally to prepare students who can adjust to any situation anywhere in the world while at the same time understanding their own environment. The idea is to train students to become lifelong learners perfectly equipped for the scenario that the world is presenting.

The Effective Class

Normally education is defined as acquiring knowledge. Glasser proposes a new definition: “education is using and improving knowledge that is congruent with recent findings on how the brain works and with the information age we have now entered” (Glasser, 1999: 66). In the real world your success depends on the skill of using information, not on just being knowledgeable.

The class can be divided into three specific moments so that students may prepare, develop and self-evaluate their performance: warm up (a small chat about an academic or discipline problem related to the previous class, an open debate about some topic of interest to students), development (the process in which the teacher explains a topic, which involves attention on the part of students, individual work, group work and feedback) and self-evaluation (a moment that should take place at the end of each class. During the last ten or five minutes students will write in their notebooks or diaries how they felt about the following topics: How was my performance? How was the group’s performance? What did I learn today? How can I improve this situation?). Van Tassel-Baska (1998) suggests that teachers should help the child understand his or her giftedness and set reasonable goals based on ability, interest and personality.

School is a place that brings together students from various backgrounds, and therefore conflicts may appear every day. The key to developing citizens that will live in peace (Colombia’s main necessity) is teaching students to solve their differences.

Students also need to learn to cooperate and work together. Group work is generally understood as several students being involved in carrying out a task at the end of which one of them gathers all the information and articulates it. The result is that only one of them assimilates all the information and none of them is involved in real cooperation. To avoid that, any project whose objective is team growth and team spirit enhancement must have a correct timing and follow all the stages recommended by Tuckman (1965): forming (the individual's behaviour is driven by being accepted as part of the group), storming (different ideas competing for consideration), norming (the team converging towards the same goals) and performing (finding a way of doing the job smoothly). Dividing of the workload among the team members is a natural concept, but it must happen after the forming, storming and norming stages, as a group decision of assuming individual responsibilities. There must be a deadline for individual tasks as well as face to face feedback given by all group members to each of their team members. The teacher must appear as a guide helping students in this process but at the same time letting them discover the different ways to agree and work as a group. Strachota argues that "unless we go through the complexities of struggle and invention, our knowledge is empty. If this is true, I can't transfer my knowledge and experience to children whom I teach. Instead I have to find ways to help children take responsibility for inventing their own understanding of the world and how to live in it" (Strachota, 1996: 5).

Team projects must not be disconnected from the needs of the community. Since in real life people have to integrate all kinds of professional and external variables to solve the different situations they have at work, the same project must include aspects of different subjects and each teacher must collaborate by providing with the theory that is needed even if the project has not been initiated in their classes. Students must see a strong united team of teachers that encourage them to follow the example and work as real cooperative groups with their classmates. Sometimes teachers of different subjects may participate in the same class with the same objective. As a result of such innovations, students show more interest in what is going on and at the same time teachers see that a door of infinite new learning is opening for them.

The Teacher's Improvement Model

After identifying the strengths in communication skills and leadership, and their relation with the student's layers and the effective class, we propose a model that teachers can use for self-improvement. Teachers generally use the *teach-evaluate model*, and prepare themselves in topics of their areas or pedagogic ideology. The new model also includes connection, feedback, self evaluation and improvement plan and is based on the general idea of the continuous growth and change teachers must experience over time. The generations of students are changing fast and the world is asking for different skills each day. If everything around is changing we

cannot expect the ones that are specifically called upon to prepare and practice learning habits with the students to do otherwise. After teaching the same way for many years it will be really hard for teachers to self evaluate and want to improve. But the only way of learning for life is “wanting” to learn at the same time as their students. Change occurs when we really open ourselves to the views of others to see things differently, to engage in an open exchange of ideas and when we listen deeply to those who do not see the world as we do. In an interview for the *Journal of Staff Development* (2001) Peter Senge states that leaders who are patient and really passionate are willing to make themselves vulnerable and have to be prepared to be in the firing line.

The teacher’s improvement model will therefore consist of such elements as connection (involving the interaction between students and the entire education environment, and getting through the first two student’s layers for a strong and effective starting point of the model), teaching (involving the third student’s layer where a student chooses to “want” to learn and the teacher uses the “effective class” procedures we described to generate a dynamic atmosphere and grab students’ interest), evaluating (taking into account the skills acquired by students and not their capacity to memorize information; the process must be connected with real life situations and must include the fourth student’s layer and long term integrated projects; students must recognize what they have learned as useful for their lives and the community), feedback. In the same interview Senge says: “It is easy to say that we value diversity, but the rubber meets the road when we watch our own reaction to someone who sees things differently from us. If someone is doing something different in his or her classroom, am I truly interested in why they are doing this and how well it is working, particularly if it is something different than what I do?”, and he continues: “Seeing students as forces for innovation. They are the only ones who see the system as a whole. Kids go from class to class, to the playground, to the streets, to the home, and to all the other places that shape how they grow up. They continually experience the larger system, which shapes what is and is not possible in school. Educators do not see this system. Parents do not see this system. Yet, the kids are seldom really listened to.” (Sparks, 2001) Teachers must choose the appropriate moments and mechanisms to collect the data. They can use surveys, personal meetings with some colleagues or students, or group meetings to discuss what can be improved. The last one can be painful for sensitive people who are not used to them. Teachers should try to identify students’ unsatisfied needs and find ways to fill those needs. After finishing the collection of data and being prepared to analyze it and transform it into raw material for personal growth, the teacher must start the self-evaluation process. In general terms, “knowledge” of a subject is not a problem for professional teachers. The problem is about connection (with one student, with a whole group, with the work environment and even with himself or herself). This last part of the model consists in an improvement plan using colleagues’ experience and results. Senge gives the following example: “Teachers see teaching as an individualistic profession. Well, there’s no rule that says that. There’s no rule that keeps teachers from

collaborating. There's no law that says teachers can't meet for an hour every day. Maybe they have to do it at 5 o'clock in the evening, but it can be done. While the formal structures of schools may make collaboration difficult, such structures can be changed. But changing the structures won't amount to much if there isn't a genuine desire on the part of teachers to do their work in a more cooperative way. I remember a middle school principal who told me many years ago that one of the hardest things she had done in a five-year journey of pretty astounding innovation in a middle school was to teach teachers to team. Eventually, she got to the point where teachers spent on average an hour a day conferring about how their classes were going, the experiments they were trying, how their kids were doing. They had to do some very imaginative things with the classroom schedule to allow this to happen. The point is that no one is forcing teachers to work alone; it is a creation of the members of the system and it can be changed if they have the will to do so." (Senge, 2001: 1) Teachers must collaborate towards a common goal in the same way that they teach their students to work together. Teachers' improvement plans can include recording some classes and checking their own mistakes or recording others' classes and learning about other teachers' techniques.

Conclusions

Colombia needs a change for two main reasons. The world is asking for competitive countries that can integrate their economies in the globalized scenario and the nation needs a peaceful and responsible society that can see the future as a collective objective. The process of making the change must start in primary school because it is easier to develop the appropriate habits of mind and patterns of behaviour at an early age. The change must instill in young students a desire to learn, as well as the ideas of responsibility and community service that will have a great impact on their personalities for the rest of their lives. Teachers become the essential agents of change so they need to be prepared for it. The country needs teachers that are experts in connecting with their students and at the same time connecting students with the real context of their country and the world. The preparation of teachers must be complemented with powerful tools of effective communication and leadership skills. In the education process is not enough to focus on transmitting and assimilating tons of knowledge if students do not know how to use that knowledge towards a sustainable future with social responsibilities, and if they cannot use the acquired communication and leadership skills in order to be competitive in the international open markets. Teachers, in their turn, must change as fast as the new generations and be aware of how the context is being affected. Finally the nation must understand the importance and responsibility of teachers and the education sector, and therefore the need to invest in various mechanisms to facilitate trainings, conferences and support for the improvement plans in each school. While the government understands that this is the best investment of the country in the middle and long term teachers must love their profession, feel proud of it and make personal changes to bring about a real academic transformation will in Colombia in the near future. In spite of the

specificity of each education system and each attempt to reform it, the identification of ways to improve an ailing education sector that is not attuned to the needs of society may be found relevant to educators in any part of the developing world (Romania included), who can always learn valuable lessons from other nations' experience.

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The authors

Juan Carlos Hennesey is a Colombian economist who graduated from "La Escuela Colombiana de Ingenieria" in Bogotá. He is also certified in Reality Therapy and Leadership from the "William Glasser Institute" in the United States, and has a master's degree in International Business Communication from The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. He has dedicated a great part of his career to education but he also has a background in the stock market sector. He is co-author of *Leadership: A Global and Cultural Approach* (2010).

Virginia Mihaela Dumitrescu is a Lecturer in English for Business Communication with The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, translator, co-author of *Mind Your Steps to Success. English for Students of Cybernetics*, author of articles on education, literature, criticism, translation theory and intercultural business communication. She holds a Ph.D. in Literary Theory from Bucharest University. She has taken part in international professional exchange programmes, ESP teacher-training courses, and conferences.