



ENVISIONING THE FUTURE: COLOMBIA 2015

Four years ago Patricia Romero, the vibrant academic coordinator for [Colegio Nueva Inglaterra](#), a secondary school in Bogotá, Colombia, and colleagues such as Marcela Barbosa, the school's public relations manager, realized something about their students:

"We thought – 'our kids don't know their city, they don't know anything about our country.' And what you learn in social studies classes, you memorize dates and facts, but you don't learn," Patricia told us when she, Marcela, their students, and their colleagues from a neighboring secondary school, [Gimnasio El Hontanar](#), visited the Harvard Graduate School of Education in October.

From this revelation arose a multi-disciplinary project that now stretches over thirty-three schools all over Colombia and involves the many talents of over 1000 secondary school students. It has resulted in a play, scale models of cities, detailed data analysis, websites, history reports, coloring books, futuristic fashion shows, plans for sustainable development, and a national school fair. In its depths one can find the hard work, research, creativity, and the visions of a new generation for *their* country, for *their* Colombia.



Students from Colombia 2015

It started, however, at Colegio Nueva Inglaterra. Patricia, a WIDE World alumna, had shared ideas about Teaching for Understanding (TfU) with her colleagues and they had subsequently incorporated it into their ongoing teacher training and classroom planning. With TfU in mind, they devised [Proyecto Bogotá 2015](#), which asked students to consider three simple yet evocative questions – "what was Bogotá like in the past," "how far has it come," and "what do you see as its future?"



Visions of Colombia in 2015

in English, on the [Proyecto Bogotá website](#).)

Emboldened by their success, the Colegio invited other schools to participate in similar projects under the umbrella title of **Colombia 2015**. In May 2006, 33 schools converged on Bogotá to showcase their results and celebrate the country's diversity in a [national fair](#).

Estefania Cardona, a 10th grader from the Hontanar school, described how their class approached their work for the fair:

Patricia and Marcela were keen to make sure that this special project had a consistent thread of understanding. For Juan Alejandro Puiz, now an articulate 10th grader with a knack for answering an interviewer's questions before they're even asked, the method is self-evident:

"In our project we search the past and create a big question, 'How is it going to be in Bogotá in 2015?,' our generative topic, and it is very interesting. Why? Because we can imagine our future and everyone asks [each other] 'How is it going to be with your project?' We develop throughlines that are based on these big questions."

To find the answers the entire school worked together – researching the city's history by visiting libraries, museums, and conducting interviews; creating posters, dramas, reports, and oral presentations to showcase their findings; and setting their creative minds loose on visions for its future. (A stunning collection of their work can be found,

“First we made a discussion about the problems in the Cundinamarca [the larger municipality around Bogotá] and the possible solutions and resources. After that we made field trips to learn more about the different places, made surveys, analyzed all the data, and then focused on how to solve the problems.”

Maria Cristina Barbosa, the principal of Gimnasio El Hontanar, recognized the value of the project not only for her students but also for her teaching staff. Her introduction to TfU came through the project itself. She noted that she had noticed a difference in her teachers.

“Now teachers are more conscious in studying, in participating in the process. I think because the young student teachers have learned there’s another way,” Maria said.



Folk Costumes from the Colombia 2015 Fair

The flurry of activity generated by these projects was astounding, but how were the project’s results *and* day-to-day schoolwork being assessed during these years, often the most difficult part of the TfU process to plan and carry out?

“One of the things we agree we need to work on is ongoing assessment,” Patricia noted, highlighting the difficulty of introducing assessment that looks closely at what students have understood. “We can plan this beautiful unit and lots of activities to do with the kids, but sometimes when we get to the assessment it goes back to the traditional way. It’s like if they don’t pass the test they flunk.”



Juan Sebastian, Patricia, Kristina, Estefania, and Sebastian

However, students themselves were beginning to see a difference in the approaches their teachers took to assessment.

“In our class we have three stages of evaluation,” Sebastian Baquero, a 10th grader with a quiet air, contributed. “The last stage would be the final evaluation but in that evaluation we gain good grades because our processes are complete and we have [examined] all the topics.”

“In the project we involve different subjects,” Estefania said, nodding her head. “So we can have different points of view to the problem, we can connect all the ideas and we learn more in the evaluation, we have more confidence.”

What did parents and community make of all of this activity in a country where so much of a student’s future depends on passing the national exams and gaining good grades? Was Teaching for Understanding a frightening concept?

“In my house, my dad wants the school to teach me things that can help me to defend myself in other countries,” Juan Sebastian Zambrano, a 9th grader explained. “He always told me that with teachers in his time it was always in a classroom and the teacher was just copying things another person said.”

“We have two kinds of state tests that the kids have to take and we are doing better,” Patricia said matter-of-factly. “Each year we get better results so I guess it’s coming out right. It takes time though.”

In the meantime, the students of Colombia have big plans to expand their project past national borders, to Latin America 2015 and beyond.

“We’re going to go to Ecuador and keep going. We want to tell everyone that this can be possible, all these things that we are proposing could be done, and we are working for it to happen.” Kristina Couelli, a 10th grader, said confidently.

“And we are not dreaming, we are projecting,” Juan Alejandro added, “Because dreaming is like flying – no – we are projecting our future and we have already started.”



Sandrine from WIDE World, Marcela, Maria Cristina, and David from WIDE World