



Center for Civic Education CIVITAS INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS

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The Project Citizen Experience in Bogota, Colombia

Building New Leaders

They came to give it their all. And they succeeded. They were nervous, but they had a reason. There were juries, therefore, there would only be one winner. And there was one, but everyone experienced the taste of victory.

In fact, without knowing the results, every one of the almost 500 Bogotá students went out of auditorium Guillermo Cano Isaza with a sense of greatness, because they were assured that "now, we are better citizens than before."

The ten schools that participated in the **Project Citizen** showcase organized by Fundación Presencia (a think tank actively committed to the public interest) and *El Espectador* (a prominent newspaper in Colombia) planted the seed of a new model of citizen involvement. The juries had a difficult job choosing the best, because of the different subjects and the complete presentations of the students.

The winning topic was the environment, awarded to the school, Fundación Ideales Gimnasio Santa Ana, located in Suba.

The Contestants Speak

As contestant schools waited in anticipation for the results, every call made by *El Espectador* was received with the question, "Have we won the prize?" We insisted that, "No, we do not know the results yet, we only want to know your impressions about the **Project Citizen** experience." And they responded.

Blanca Feliza Alarcón, a teacher from Gimnasio Santa Ana, the winning school, explained that she had read about **Project Citizen** in an editorial by Carlos Lleras de la Fuente and immediately contacted Fundación Presencia. For six months, the students worked on the environment issue. The girls learned a valuable lesson during their research that they can participate in developing a solution for a problem in their community. They were able to put into practice the theoretical contents and define an action plan. The students understood and proved that they are an important part of the public policymaking process.

Freya Adelfa Sánchez, a teacher from Heladia Mejía School, acknowledged: "It was an exhausting job, and the experience was very valuable, because it was the first time that my students participated in an investigation about a subject as complex as poverty in the area of Barrios Unidos."

Sanchez explained that, "The sources consulted were of great help and they helped to understand the problem better. However, we also faced many difficulties; the most difficult was managing the students' time. Most of the work was done out of class periods. But we continued with this work and also had the support of the District." The most positive fact is that "today we have more active citizens, including the staff of teachers and the school board," adds Adelfa.

Flaminio Alba, a student from Heladia Mejia, also made some final remarks: "I liked the way the group worked, we were able to develop a public policy, present it in front of an audience, and realize that I have a commitment to the city."

Building Future Leaders

Alba Marina Villegas, teacher at the Colegio Distrital Toberin at Usaquén, said: "The learning process was outstanding because the students had contact with the community. The students learned more about the Constitution and the importance of participation. We learned to participate, to read and interpret the rules, and be more aware and responsible citizens."

Andrés Felipe Morales, one of the students assured: "It was a very positive project because we understood that the problems and their solutions are not exclusively a government issue, but of the whole community, we are all active actors of the change and I think my life changed because today I am a more mature, responsible citizen."

Maria Stella Castillo, teacher from the General Santander School located in Engativá, told us: "The students learned to identify the problems that affected them, look for solutions and work as a team. After this process, they became new persons, citizens more committed to their country, more mature."

Camilo Cative, a seventh-grade student from that school corroborates: "I think it was excellent, because it allowed us to know in detail what a common problem, like robbery, is in this community. Moreover, we are part of the solution. We all feel we love Engativá more."

The representative of the Colegio Nueva York at Suba (whose topic was street pavement), said: "It is wonderful to have been able to participate in a project that promotes civic responsibility. We learned about the history of the neighborhood, exchanged experiences with the local authorities, and fulfilled the objectives of the project. Today we are more responsible and we are sharing a project with the IDU."

Jennifer Mosquera, another student of Colegio Nueva York agrees and explains that: "The most valuable experience was the closeness we experienced with the community, we felt like we were a part of the neighborhood, and were able to help our community by suggesting solutions to the railway issue."

The Joy of Knowing Their Participation Matters

Helena Bustos, teacher of the Colegio Alberto Lleras Camargo, Suba, said: "One of the most valuable lessons was teamwork. The way in which the students got in touch with reality and interacted with their community, the students learned that they have a forum in which they can participate and that their participation matters. They learned that the solution to their problems did not depend on others exclusively, but on themselves."

A ninth-grade student Wilson Andrés Paz explained: "The most important lesson was that as a group we learned to handle a public policy issue, we knew nothing about it, but eventually were able to present it to a jury. I learned about the laws and realized that the youth can do much for our community. Today, we feel that we are better citizens."

Marilyn Garzón, teacher from the Colegio Fe y Alegría, from the Garcés Navas neighborhood, pointed out: "The students could apply the theoretical concepts learned in class, especially how to do research work. Now they are more aware about the importance of their participation as a citizen."

The school Estrella del Sur from Ciudad Bolívar, who presented two projects, also reached similar conclusions. The teacher Julieta Rendón said: "The best part of this experience was the teamwork. The students learned to identify public policy issues and be a part of the solution to the problems."

The tenth-grade student Fernando Vargas, who worked on the unemployment issue in Ciudad Bolívar, said: "It was our first project, as a group we worked very closely, and although it wasn't the best project, we obtained the best gift: now we are better researchers and new leaders."

A Step Forward

The Normal Montessori teacher, Dora Sabogal, remarked: "The important thing to achieve was student participation; they did the field work and were the producers of their own development. This improved their self-esteem. They learned to take the initiative and be independent, participating citizens."

Some members of the jury also expressed their opinion about the results of this pedagogic experience. Adalberto Machado, Suba's mayor, observed in these youngsters "a strong desire for research, which caused them to be more aware of their surroundings. These children have better

idea of what leadership is. The project is a step forward in the path of change in the methods of teaching.”

Clemencia Chiappe, Director of IDEP, said: "This was a project for the students and done by the students. They are the ones who talk and define their future.”

An Experience Not To Be Forgotten

Susana Restrepo, President of Fundación Presencia, was in charge of designing and developing the guidelines of the **Project Citizen** and is the authorized voice to talk about this educational experience.

Q. Which is your opinion?

A. It is one of the better citizenship projects I have done in my entire professional career. This is something where the students get to directly participate and will not forget, and it was a wonderful experience because it opened new opportunities for youth participation.

Q. What follows now?

A. To apply this project in other cities. We have already presented it in Barranquilla and Cali, and this week we will do it in Medellin.

Q. What was the most difficult part of this project?

A. I think a lot of teachers found it hard to change some of the methods they were used to teaching. The process was quite difficult because of the fact that they had to deal with large groups of students

Q. What is your opinion of the teachers who implemented the projects?

A. Very satisfactory and I believe that the results are useful to grade teachers because they were the facilitators of the project. But, I also think there is room for improvement.

Q. Is this process going to continue?

A. Yes, and I hope to count on the necessary support to continue it. I wish I could take two or three of the students that participated this year and apply this experience to the whole country and overseas.

EL ESPECTADOR, Translated By Florencia Wyler