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Promoting tourism education in elementary and secondary schools: An experience from Colombia



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ABSTRACT

This 'reflective practice' presents and critically describes the case of the "Schools for Tourism" (CAT), a case of promoting tourism and tourist culture in Colombian public schools through early vocational training, reporting the idea, development, outreach, and achievements of this program, as this initiative has experienced significant growth over the last few years. The methodology to this paper is of qualitative nature, i.e. primary literature sources as well as a focus group with high-school students and in-depth interviews with initiators of the project were carried out. Appraisals on the ground suggest that teachers' enthusiasm and commitment are primary factors driving the success of this kind of tourism and hospitality training programs, as is the support given to the teachers implementing CAT. More funding (in form of college scholarships or loans) would be very welcome. While the program's benefits are more than clear to all of the stakeholders, a thorough evaluation is still to be carried out so as to fully assess the benefits but also the weaknesses of the program.

1. Introduction: the Program's context, history and goals

The present paper is a 'reflective practice' critically reporting about the "Schools for Tourism Program" (*Colegios Amigos del Turismo* by its official denomination in Spanish), henceforth CAT. An emerging reputable program promoting tourism and hospitality education in primary and secondary schools in Colombia (South America), its context and main elements will be laid out and analyzed. This 'reflective practice' takes on the form of a case-study i.e. an in-depth presentation of a concrete phenomenon allowing its detailed study and review (Stake, 1995).

In this first section, as a contextual introduction, Ramírez and Viatela's (2017) presentation of the CAT will be used as a framework. Although born in Colombia, the CAT Program has its roots in UNESCO's program "Unesco Associated Schools Network" from 1953, which initially aimed to instil in pre-college students a respect for human rights (International Coordination of UNESCO Associated Schools, 2006). Subsequently, its objectives were expanded to train young people to critically reflect on various contemporary issues, some of them related to the tourism sector, such as the importance of cultural exchanges as well as the significance of sustainable development. This was done through projects seeking to get young people ready for the challenges the planet would face in the near future, be they environmental, social, or cultural (UNESCO, 2009b). This program was enacted in different parts of the world, and some of its spin-offs arrived in Colombia.

In view of this, in 2005, Mr. Gustavo Toro, at the time national director of the Colombian Tourism Department (today's Vice-Ministry of Tourism), tasked himself with laying out the development of a CAT Program in Colombia, initially called Tourism Schools

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Program. This was a time when the national authorities identified domestic tourism as an important source of income and decided to act upon that chance by better educating the receptive communities and their younger residents.

Thus ensued a call for the development of the program's methodology and its subsequent application to a pilot project directed to eight schools located in different parts of the country. This challenge was taken up by the educator and tourism theorist, Luis Fernando Jiménez, through the Colombian P. A. S. Foundation, with an interdisciplinary team of teachers from the Externado de Colombia University and other trainers with experience in infant, basic, and secondary education.

The pilot phase of the program ran until 2010, and from then onwards it has extended to other schools across the country. Under the supervision of an advisory body appointed by the Vice Ministry of Tourism, a school wanting to join in the Program (be it an elementary or a high school) develops the project in quite a free way (see next section). While the implementation and consolidation of the program's advancements are overseen by the Vice Ministry, local schools and their communities may design a specific direction towards culture, nature, business, ecotourism, religion, health, etc. Depending on the locale's characteristics. This reflects Colombia's relatively flexible approach to teaching as far as the curriculum in compulsory education goes. Across the country, schools are encouraged to offer locally-relevant curricula and activities to their pupils (see Section 3).

By allowing flexibility within the program, the CAT program allows communities to apply local knowledge and understanding to increase the relevancy of the program in order to foster a knowledge and appreciation of the students' surroundings so that they may become aware of the importance and impact of tourism as a sector on their communities. The final goal is that they become part of a responsible society at social, cultural, and environmental levels. At the same time, students are trained "within a context of leisure to eventually become local leaders in leisure" (MinCIT, 2011). Therefore, it is a program whose primary goals are firstly making the participants love their environment, and secondly nurturing in them an interest for the tourist processes which might apply to their native environments.

2. Legal framework, methodology and day-to-day activities

While CAT started out as an initiative by the national government in 2005 (see previous section), around 2010 some regions started endorsing CAT. Such was the case for Bogota and its surrounding region Cundinamarca and for Santander, a northeastern region. The legal framework supporting this initiative are the current national Laws, mainly when they specify the autonomy of each educational centre in developing its own focus/es within the general national curriculum. Similar to CAT, there are other programs in Colombia that have succeeded in developing analogous school programs important to Colombia's economy, such as the program in Agriculture and Cattle, a highly successful program.

Therefore, schools are free to opt in or out based on their willingness to participate. If they do enter the Program, they must integrate the programme's principles of "good use of leisure time," "love for the environment," and "going towards sustainability" into their general curriculum (known in Spanish as *Proyecto Educativo Institucional – PEI*) in a cross-disciplinary manner.

Technical support is given by the Ministry to the schools wanting to opt in in order to modify their curricula and train teachers, but also to decide what to teach and which projects to carry out. As mentioned above, these will depend on the school's environment as well as the scholar community's wishes and possibilities. The methodology to implement the program is a participative and flexible one, and it takes around one year of training and counselling to the school, before the institution can apply for program's membership (MinCIT and FONTUR, 2013).

Further, in the course of the program's implementation in a school, there are workshops for teachers to deepen their understanding of tourism topics. These include: tourism demand, development of tourist products, destination management, etc.

The methodology to follow is clearly described in Chaparro Díaz and Machado (2016) and consists of six steps beginning with a diagnosis of the school and the needs of its environment. Then, the program works with the teachers to build up the curriculum's modifications and finishes with self-evaluation. However, this self-evaluation tool is little used, representing a major weakness in the program. According to these authors, the pedagogical theories that are most in line with the teaching of tourism in school are cognitivism and constructivism. These theories imply much contact with the environment, as does tourism, a profession which requires a close observation and analysis of one's surroundings. Therefore, schools following one of these two theories are more likely to succeed in their application of the CAT principles.

For the schools participating in the program, leisure becomes the central axis around which education is conceived. A group of CAT schoolteachers in Bogota stated that

Within the experience in each school, and beyond the challenge posed by the methodology of adjusting the topics as well as the curricular redesign to include the development of competences towards the industry, it is worth underscoring that the Program helps us in reflecting on the general sense of 'quality of life' and 'ecology' and teaches us to take into account the balance between the logic of the market, the consumerism and the humanism (MinCIT and FONTUR, 2013).

As for the implementation of these principles and the day-to-day activities deriving from them it must be said that each school that chooses to be part of CAT may implement the program's activities in the levels and ways they think are most adequate. A school in Bogota, for instance, implemented the program in their "first cycle" (5–8 years of age), putting more emphasis on the discovery and appreciation of the children's cultural environment, while other schools have chosen to implement the program for later cycles so as to emphasize gaining professional skills related to tourism. An example of the latter is a school located on the Caribbean Coast, which teaches vocational hospitality courses to the students, whereby Tourism is seen as a cross-teaching subject, and is especially intensive in the last two years of high school; therefore, graduates enter the workforce with significant professional hospitality skills. One of the most widely-used pedagogic tools across all CAT schools is the *Proyecto Integrador* or 'integrating project.' This is a yearly integrated

research project carried out by the students requiring the use of labs, field work, etc. It is common across all schools in the country; however, CAT schools implement it with the program's specific goals in mind. In sum, there are different degrees of application of the CAT implemented by the schools depending on each school's pedagogic strategy.

Since the schools adhering to the program are connected via a network, there is an exchange of information and experiences among them. There is also a yearly CAT conference for exchange and learning. This conference takes place in a different city every year in order to maintain contact among teachers in various regions. It is to underscore that in 2019 the first national conference for students of CAT schools took place in Bogota and was a success.

The program's management is nowadays outsourced by the Vice Ministry of Tourism. Since 2019, Colmayor Antioquia University (a well-established university delivering degrees in tourism located in the city of Medellin) is responsible for the promotion and coordination of the CAT program and its correct implementation in the 236 schools adhering to it across all Colombian regions.

3. The development of the program in figures

The program started out in 2005 with 8 schools in different parts of the country. It has experienced exponential growth since 2010 and, since November 2018, 236 schools across Colombia are participating. This means it reaches out to some 230.000 students who are guided by approximately 950 teachers. In the 2018 bid, 50 new schools from all over the country were accepted into CAT. The program currently enjoys high demand from the side of the schools, reflecting the current boom in Colombian tourism. Even if the country is centrally organised (and sometimes the National Government in Bogota is accused of centralism, matters of education notwithstanding) the CAT is quite a decentralized initiative, which helps to 'politically' balance the national educational landscape. For instance, although Bogota and its surrounding region comprise 25% of the national population, the area was only allocated 11% of the nation's CAT schools. Out of the last 50 entrants to the program, many schools were located in 'remote' places in the east and south of the country. In fact, due to the pervasion of Colombia's armed civil conflict, these regions were previously closed off to tourism; however, following the signature of the peace treaty in 2016, these areas have recently started to receive visitors, see [Table 1](#):

4. Positive impacts of the CAT

Today, one can already see some of the beneficial impacts of CAT. This section summarizes the primary benefits:

- a. *Human impact*: the principle impact of the program is its 'human impact', one that is very difficult to adjudicate, but could stand to deliver the greatest level of benefit. This benefit is seen amongst the thousands of children who have enjoyed the 'background thinking' of CAT, i.e. better interacting with the environment, leading more sustainable lives, etc. Unfortunately, there remains a gap in reliable analysis of these benefits.
- b. *Professional/Industry impact*: a similar impact is of course the 'professional' one, i.e. having hundreds of young people who leave high school with hospitality skills. In principle, this should benefit the country's tourist industry, but we also lack statistics and objective valuation of this impact.
- c. *Schools' Funding*: schools joining CAT benefit with supplemental sources of funding, for books, tools, labs, etc. (however see next section). Nowadays, school funding in Colombia comes mainly from the side of the national government, sometimes supplemented by the regional governments. The underfunding of the educational public system in the country is a chronic problem so these extra funding sources are very welcomed.
- d. *Innovative pedagogical tools developed*: the program has created its own pedagogical tools, a fact which may be counted as a general contribution to educational development in the country. The most noticeable tool is the one called "Traveling suitcase," which is a tool kit with different instructional proposals for the CATs to develop their own. The "suitcase" therefore:

Proposes to children and youngsters activities which help to develop their sense of belonging to the areas they are from by proposing them activities to investigate their environment and to approach them to their culture and their roots. At the same time, it is a tool to help teachers developing new contents which bridge the gap between the school's PEI and the training proposed by the

Table 1

Locations of the CATs. The macro-regions in the coastal areas concentrate the highest numbers of schools, following their investment in a tourism-based model of development. The spread of the schools all over Colombia is evenly distributed, with the Caribbean region (the country's first tourist destination) holding a slight majority. The coastal regions were also the territories with the first CATs. The south and east regions implemented their first CATs in 2018 and as such have fewer schools committed to the Program, accordingly. (Source: Author from data in [MinCIT and FONTUR, 2018](#)).

MACRO-REGION	No. of Schools	'Departamentos' or regions with the highest no. of Schools (in brackets)
Caribbean coast	65 (28%)	Magdalena (17); Bolívar (11)
West & Pacific coast	52 (22%)	Nariño (10)
Centre & Northeast	50 (21%)	Boyacá (15); Cundinamarca (15)
South & East	43 (18%)	Meta (19); Amazonia (5)
Bogota city	26 (11%)	

Program (MINCIT and FONTUR, no date, p. 2).

5. A critical issue: Funding

Funding remains a concern in the program. While legally endorsed by the regional authorities (upon whom rest the legal attributions in pre-college education in Colombia), there is no real source of funding to undertake actions for the pupils or to further educate teachers who are involved in the CAT, and the overall commitment remains insufficient (Bogota City Council, 2017). However, other governmental agencies support the CAT's activities in different ways, such as donating materials for the library, and organizing English courses for students and teachers.

Only in very recent years has the national government started funding CAT graduates in university education, thus facilitating the transition from high school education in CAT's to university programs in tourism and hospitality management: in 2016, 186 students were funded with a total expenditure of some \$ 1.4 billion Colombian Pesos (some US\$ 412.000). For the years 2017 and 2018, the government's commitment has decreased, as only 128 graduates from high school CAT's got scholarships for their post-secondary education in tourism-related topics.

While these may seem like respectable figures, the amount of students favoured by such scholarships is fractional when compared to the overall figures of students graduating from CAT. Conversely, the universities teaching hospitality and tourism subjects have very few students in their ranks coming from CAT, and as such, they do not feel enthusiastic about the program.

6. An assessment of the program's strengths and weaknesses

This subsection reports on some strengths and weaknesses of CAT. We are still far from having reliable statistics and evaluation metrics; what is reported here is more qualitative than quantitative in nature. However it is a cursory attempt at answering these questions.

As a means to evaluate the program's impact on the students trained in CATs, a focus group was conducted in October 2018 among a group of 40 students about to graduate from the program who were attending the school Ciudad de Villavicencio in Bogota. While there was a general satisfaction with this initiative, some of the issues raised in the present paper were found among the students, mainly a very low knowledge of the general framework of the program. As for proposals, some of the students asked for the program to be 'overarching' in their schools, as they feel the program is not fully integrated. Some also requested a larger scholarship program allowing them to carry on their studies at prestigious universities.

The question of a smooth transition of students from secondary school to university remains an unanswered one: while there are hopes that students enrolled in this program go on to study Tourism or Hospitality Management at universities and eventually become leaders of the nation's tourism industry, only a minority of CAT graduates choose to do so (see former section), a phenomenon that can be explained by key factors. Specifically, the CAT program is only open to public schools, not private ones. The former enrol mainly the lower classes in Colombia, so youth graduating from a CAT find it difficult to pay for university education. Lately, the Vice Ministry has tried to make the passage from high school to university via a series of partnerships among CAT's and their neighbouring universities which include credits transfer from the former to the latter.

A crucial point to be made here is that, in the CAT, an overall evaluation remains to be carried out. As we are still in the growing phase of the program, much emphasis is put nowadays on consulting for schools and training for teachers. In the foreseeable future, a thorough evaluation and quantification will be needed to fully assess the benefits of this program for the authorities, families, and children, as well as the hospitality industry. Some experts, however, have asked for this evaluation to be carried out, as it is the only means to fully assess the impact of the program's outreach. .

However, the current project's largest hurdle seems to be the teachers' inconsistent commitment to CAT: since almost no teacher has been educated in tourism-related topics, they find it hard to change their curricula from their area of expertise to this unfamiliar topic. It is necessary for the project to succeed in a school to have one or several teachers really committed and motivated about the program, otherwise it does not come to its full fruition within a CAT (MinCIT and FONTUR, 2013). Compounding on this factor, high levels of school teacher turnover threaten the continuity of the program's implementation. And in Colombia, this turnover is a relatively high one.

Recently, the Vice Ministry has tried to alleviate these issues by offering teachers certified education in tourism and in English, as stated above. The teachers are encouraged by that, as it enhances their personal resumé and so they are motivated for this 'extra mile' the CAT program requires.

Anecdotally speaking, many testimonials demonstrate a positive benefit for the communities involved in the program. For example, a group of teachers at a school say that "knowing the territory, caring for the environment, discovering our cultural traits, and watching what surrounds us are great benefits of the program".

Finally, we mustn't forget here the hundreds of 'integrating projects' that have been produced at the CAT. These projects, in a larger or smaller scale, have had their impact on the communities and remain a pivotal point of the program. López Olachica (2018) outlines the positive impacts of the CAT program in the neighbourhood Usme, Bogota, chiefly underscoring the entrepreneurship as one of the program's tools that has had an impact on this neighbourhood.

7. Conclusions

CAT is a Program that has seen a good deal of commitment from the side of the authorities and the scholarly community. A

methodologically coherent Program, it has empowered dozens of schools in their autonomy and has pushed tourism and tourist culture in the country in a moment where the industry is hugely growing and needs well-trained human resources.

However, there are several shortcomings that need to be addressed for the program to come to its full potential. First, there are shortcomings in funding, which impede the program's reach. The lack of funding also poses difficulties in transitioning from high school to university for its graduates. Second, it has been demonstrated it needs enthusiastic and committed teachers delivering the program, which is not always the case. Third: from the side of pupils, there seems to be a very low knowledge of the program – even when they are being funded by it, so more 'institutional PR' is needed towards its primary target. Fourth: an overall and rigorous evaluation of the program must be implemented. Finally, a recent criticism raised by some university professors is that the CAT's curriculum 'interferes' with regular scholar curricula rather than reinforces them, demonstrating a need for a cautious and balanced implementation of the program.

But, notwithstanding these drawbacks, the CAT Program has proved a good instrument to accrue tourism (and humanistic) sensibility among Colombian schools. It has proven to serve its goals by touching the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of pupils, making them aware of ethical values of sustainable tourism development. One can only hope that in the future the issues pointed in the paragraph above will be addressed and the program may be disseminated on a greater scale. In fact, the recent announcement by UNWTO's secretary Mr. Zurab Pololikashvili in his visit to Colombia in October 2019 that the UN will endorse CAT as the first program of its kind promoting tourism in schools speaks for the institutional respect and attention the program has attracted at an international scale.

On a more general note, this experience delivers a message in favor of such kind of early vocational programs, perhaps implemented not just by the educational authorities as in Colombia, but also with the cooperation of the concerned economic sector, from which directions and funding might be expected.

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