



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Success Stories

Pirque Agro-ecological School: promoting culturally acceptable, socially just and ecologically sound education

by Caroline Stevens



Vulnerable young people, considered to be difficult children in their primary or elementary school, have transformed their lives through the sustainable education project developed by the Pirque Agro-ecological School, an institution that aims to create an environment for its students where values such as respect, self-discipline and trust help to build relationships within the whole educational community.



Located in Pirque, a commune of the Santiago Metropolitan Region of Chile, and founded in 1991, the school aims to provide 14 to 18 year-olds with an opportunity to gain their secondary school diploma and subsequently a technical diploma in agriculture and livestock.

What makes the school different?

This is the first educational institution in Chile that has implemented an innovative form of teaching, with values based on student-teacher trust and applying that relationship to the environment in its educational programme.

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Its main objective is to raise the quality of life of the students and the community on the basis of agro-ecology, with a “culturally acceptable, socially just and ecologically sound” education, according to Roberto Miranda, head of the school.

To do this, it was necessary to innovate, diverging from strict standards, vertical relationships, discrimination and delinquency. “We believe that education should take place in a balanced

environment, like natural systems. Education that meets these requirements caters to diversity and nurtures the particular needs of all individuals”, says Roberto Miranda.

Students conduct their activities in a facility surrounded by six to seven hectares of countryside and animals (including goats and poultry). Here, they learn the tasks associated with a career in the sector and that form part of the curriculum, such as harvesting, cheese-making, gardening and working in greenhouses and the dairy.

“I like to help teachers, be their right hand; we help collect eggs, harvest honey and tend to the goats”, says one student, José Ignacio. Another, Felipe, says that after studying veterinary medicine he would like to return as a teacher, like Claudio Recabal, who graduated from the school in 2001 and returned as a teacher in 2013.

Claudio Recabal was a rebellious child, who was unhappy at home. After leaving school he went to live in Chiloé where he studied agronomy and sustainable rural development. However, he returned, “because it is difficult to find social projects that make sense to you - but this does”, he says. “I firmly believe that working or studying with the land is a powerful channel that can help young people to deal with the emotional baggage that they bring from their homes”.

In the last two years of school, students do very interesting work, which equips them with technical and social tools, including cultivating an area of land with a special methodology through which the work process is learned and observed. “They make things live and grow with their own hands”, adds Claudio.

Since the school was established 13 years ago there have been more than 2,000 students, 100% of whom have graduated and 75% of whom have graduated with a technical diploma in agriculture and livestock, finding job opportunities immediately after completing their studies.

There are currently 430 students at upper secondary level, and the aim is to provide job opportunities in the short, medium and long term for the vast majority of them, placing emphasis on training and professionalization.

José Ignacio explains that one of the things he likes the most about his school is the freedom in which they live. “The best thing is that there are no inspectors, because it is up to the students to behave themselves and the door is always open for those who do not want to stay”. Felipe, meanwhile, explains the importance of the friendship between teachers and students, “It is different from the relationship that we had at the other school, which was distant; here we feel accompanied and respected by them, as if they are our friends”.

The importance of diversity

This initiative is supported by “Fundación Origen”, a non-profit organization entirely dedicated to this educational project. The Executive Director, Mary Anne Müller, decided to found the organization after working with children who had committed crimes and were considered to be rebellious.

The school prioritizes both students who have not been accepted into other schools and those willing to opt for training in the agricultural field. It does not focus on results. By focusing on individuals, it has been recognized as a school of academic excellence for more than six years by the

Ministry of Education, noted for the educational advances and the professionalism of the teachers and teaching assistants.

The head considers that part of this success lies in the heterogeneity of the people who work and form part of the school community, “We endorse the diversity of educational scenarios, the diversity of students and parents; greater diversity ensures balance. I would like to use a metaphor that has become part of the school’s culture: ‘It is very easy for disease to attack a monoculture, which is why agrochemicals are used so much in certain types of farming, so that production is maintained with certain characteristics; however, in a native forest, for example, where there are many different species, there is always a balance and if a virus attacks, there is something to contain it. This can be applied to an educational environment: in selective schools, for example, an imbalance is created; in our school, everyone belongs – the doors are open to all”.

Fundación Origen has been working with young people for more than 20 years. According to the Project Coordinator, Carlos Alcalde, the Foundation works on the principle that education should not be based only on the intellectual dimension but also on elements of a sustainable environment incorporating all spheres of human life: mental, physical, emotional and affective, creative and spiritual.

“Sustainable education is synonymous with respect, love, innovation, inclusion and taking the best of everything we know to make it our own”, says Mr Alcalde. Therefore, emphasis is placed on diversity and quality education, giving young people a vision of the world that allows them to transform themselves and tools with which they can transform their realities. Living in diversity enhances learning.

The importance of agricultural training

The idea of training agricultural technicians is to strengthen young people through job opportunities and a clear environmental awareness.

“We teach ecologically sound agriculture, and in order to do so, the teachers develop holistic methodologies”, explains Roberto Miranda. “We apply the theme technically and we want the students to be part of this discourse through the elements that we show there, for example, the academic subjects are linked together to deliver integrated learning and generate a stronger identity and harmony with the community”.

As part of their training, José Ignacio and Felipe emphasize the importance of the “internal workshop”, a space in the learning activities where each student expresses their feelings and confides in their peers, “and everything remains between us, with respect for each other”, says Felipe.

Fostering horizontal dialogue between students and teachers

Love, respect and trust are the foundations of the rules of coexistence. Many of the students are from violent backgrounds, which is why the school must be a place of peace.

In order to help create this environment, horizontal dialogue is encouraged between students, teachers and heads, especially when resolving conflicts and making decisions. “Young people mature

at different paces; we accompany them during adolescence and this starts with dialogue and trust”, says Roberto Miranda.

Claudio Recabal says that as a teacher, he plays an important role in the lives of young people. “There are students with behavioural problems because they come from families with serious economic difficulties, violence and crime, so we transmit an encouraging message, through trust, and always using a horizontal approach.”

“During the time I have spent teaching at this school, I have learned how important it is to give young people affection and high levels of responsibility, so that they learn to regulate themselves, because imposed discipline – in the long run – makes them react rebelliously”, adds Claudio Recabal.

The school is encouraged to maintain an “open door” policy, as the students have no wish to leave the school. As a result, the entrance of the school is literally open all day to allow people to come and go freely.

The school’s funding comes from State subsidies, but there is an estimated deficit of 20%. As a result, the school applies for public funding pertaining to education and relies on contributions from businesses and international organizations.

“We apply to all State and international programmes and funds relating to our work, such as the “preferential school subsidy” (SEP), but we still cannot fully cover our needs”, says the school’s head. “To help the situation, we have generated our own businesses: presently we have an organic vegetable garden, a dairy, a poultry house, an apicultural centre, a bakery and the Foundation’s hotel and events centre”.

Finally, Carlos Alcalde explains that “establishing a model school is also a matter of defining how we wish to be as a society; in this school we believe that all people have potential and deserve an opportunity”.

Further information:

<http://fundacionorigenchile.org/eng/agroecological-school-pirque/>

As lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), UNESCO promotes an education that allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development.

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