

Aulas Sin Fronteras: A National Contest (Argentina)

Summary

Aulas Sin Fronteras (classrooms without borders) is a countrywide school contest that involves teachers and students alike. The aim of the programme is to strengthen democracy by generating collective actions to influence public policies. Since 1997, more than 2,000 schools have participated in the contest, presenting more than 2,500 projects. All together, more than 10,000 teachers and 100,000 pupils from all grades have participated.

School classes design and carry out their own projects and submit it to the contest. Finalists are invited to participate and present their project in a national conference. One such award-winning initiative is detailed below, entitled 'Neighbourhood problems, everybody's responsibility – education for democracy and citizen participation' and was completed by students from grade 12, from San Luis Gonzaga School in Rosario.

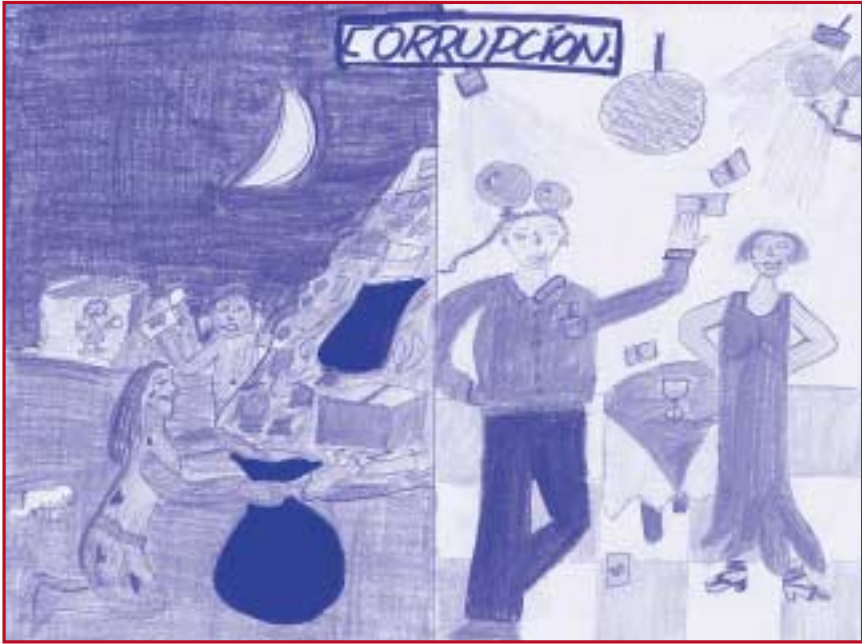
The programme has been developed by the *Poder Ciudadano* (Citizen Power) Foundation, TI's member in Argentina, and most work is done voluntarily¹.

Background

Argentina is a country with a tradition of dictatorship, authoritarian governments and low citizen participation, with systemic corruption in the political and economic spheres. Marginalisation and the exclusion of large sections of the population from the political process enables powerful groups to dominate public policy making, thus threatening democracy and the well-being of the nation.

To address these problems, *Poder Ciudadano* has developed the *Aulas Sin Fronteras* programme, which encourages students to engage in dialogue with policy makers, and to develop change for the community. The programme promotes democratic participation at school and community levels, aiming to improve community cohesion and access to information. The programme is based around a contest of innovative educational projects that promote citizen participation and empowerment.

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Ana Maria Muenkel Delgado (12), Nicaragua

The project

Aulas Sin Fronteras has been held six times between 1997 to 2001 and more than 2,000 schools have presented some 2,500 projects. In addition, 20 forums and conferences have been held, attended by up to 500 participants, as well as training programmes in several cities of Argentina. There has also been media coverage on the programme and participation in various TV and radio programmes. Most of *Aulas Sin Fronteras*' work is done by volunteers.

Methodology of the contest

The contest is announced at the beginning of the school year through leaflets, posters and electronically. There is no specific format for contributions, and participants are free to choose a structure they prefer. The structure of applications effect how they are evaluated: A neatly structured format allows for quick appraisal and short listing, but lessens the scope for creativity. On the other hand, a non-structured format allows for interesting and inspirational ideas to be communicated, but can make the selection process lengthy and difficult.

Participants complete their project during the school year, and submit the documentation to the jury, a team of volunteers consisting of education professionals and dedicated public figures, at the end of the year.

The best projects are then short listed by the jury, grouped according to grade and thematic area, e.g. ecological education, artistic education, educational media etc. In each group, four to five projects are selected for presentation or exhibition at the national *congreso de intercambio*, a conference that presents the projects to the general public. Presentations last 40–60 minutes and are followed by a question and answer session with the audience, and a public debate. The final selection of award winners is made by the audience of the con-

An example of an award-winning project

"Neighbourhood Problems, Everybody's Responsibility – Education for Democracy and Citizen Participation"

This project was carried out in School N° 1182 in Rosario (Santa Fe, Argentina), during the months of October and November, 1997, by 83 pupils of the final year (6th year of secondary school). The residents of the neighbourhood are working people, most of them with little education. A large percentage of the families face a poor economic situation, with a considerable number of people unemployed and under-employed.

The project goals were, amongst others, to create an understanding of democratic processes (especially elections), to raise awareness of rights and duties of citizens, and to develop skills in understanding collective problems and finding solutions for the common good.

We consider democratic formation in schools not just to be an additional subject to study. Instead, children should experience and exercise it, for example, by constructing norms for living together, experiencing the possibilities of choosing, voicing opinions, disagreeing and making proposals.

Elections for deputies and councillors

On October 26th 1997, national elections took place for deputies and councillors. This topical event encouraged a variety of classroom activities that were integrated into subjects such as social sciences and language, as well as mathematics (statistics).

gress. Awards are given at the closing ceremony of the conference, they include computers, scholarships, books and funds to further develop or disseminate a given project. All of the awards are donated by private supporters of the programme. In addition, some projects are rewarded a special mention for an outstanding achievement and presented in an exhibition hall at the congress venue.

During the celebration, winners can directly address the audience, and this moment is often filled with emotion as some participants have travelled across the country, often for the first time in their lives, to present the result of their collective work. Many are grateful and excited to be able to speak about their ideas and their hopes for the future.

Preparations

Our project began with discussions about democracy, the role of the Constitution and citizen rights in social science class. The electoral process and the functions of the authorities at national, provincial and municipal levels were explained, as well as the *ley de lemas* [pooling of votes between party factions], which is the current electoral system in Santa Fe.

Students were asked to bring newspaper clippings and news bulletins, and collect electoral lists of the various parties. In groups, they made posters to inform their companions in other courses about the election process. In the mathematics class, they worked on graphs and percentages following the data that appeared in the newspapers about candidates and parties.

They also carried out surveys among the parents with questions such as:

- Do you know what the election is for on October 26th?
- What, in your opinion, are the qualities a candidate should have?
- What do you consider to be the most urgent problems in our city? and in our country?

Interviews with candidates for councillor

We decided to invite candidates from different parties to the school and interview them. We had previously used independent information on the record and background of the candidates, prepared by NGOs.

In the language area the students, organised in groups, drew up various questions for the interviews.

Example of an interview sheet:

- Name and family name:
- Age:
- Which grouping are you a candidate for?
- What level of education have you reached?
- What is your current occupation?
- What did you work as before?
- Why did you decide to present yourself to be a councillor?
- What political activities have you performed?
- What, for you, are the most important problems of the city of Rosario?
- What projects have you thought of to present in the Council if you are elected?
- What are your proposals to solve Rosario's problems?

During the interviews, the young people presented very interesting questions about the public functions, the work of a councillor, the background of the candidates, and their proposals for solving specific problems of the neighbourhood.

Work with the Neighbourhood Association

At the same time, we received a proposal from the Empalme Graneros Neighbourhood Association. They asked us to visit different blocks of the neighbourhood and record the problems and needs that we noticed, and to formulate proposals for solving them. We felt that this activity enabled us to establish links between the school and other institutions in the community. At the same time, it was a good opportunity to encourage the participation and commitment of young people as citizens.

To put the tour of the neighbourhood streets into practice, we organised groups to collect the information in different zones, taking one block each. The young people saw different aspects of the reality and also consulted the neighbours. The data was put into a chart. The young people performed this task with great enthusiasm and responsibility. After a short time, they

brought the complete charts to the school and we shared what the groups had found out. The survey was made on 13 city blocks. We all drew up a new chart together to reflect the problems that were common to the various zones.

Our work was much applauded by the members of the Neighbourhood Association.

"We are Councillors for one day": Visit to the Rosario City Council

Prior to the visit to the City Council, we prepared a folder specifying the problems and needs of the neighbourhood and added the signatures of teachers and 83 students of the 6th Year. We also wrote two proposals for improving a square located near the school, asking for more lighting, cleaning, maintenance and the incorporation of games for children.

During the visit we were informed about the composition of the Council, the different working commissions, and its regulations and procedures (by-laws, resolutions, decrees, memoranda). Each student was given a notebook with up-to-date information on the Rosario Municipality, its background and political organisation, which was useful for continuing the task in class. We also handed in our proposals.

Some days after our visit to the Municipal Council, we received a call to tell us that our proposals would be presented at the next Council meeting, and a request to provide more detailed information on the problems we had pointed out. We elaborated on our proposals on improving traffic lights, replanting and removing trees, fixing of roads and draining, improvements in lighting, traffic lights, frequency of bus service, and creation of green spaces. Our proposals were discussed by the Council - and made into decrees! At the beginning of 1998 we were delighted to hear that the Municipal Council had sanctioned six decrees. We had really made a difference and helped the community.

The project has enabled us to understand how the City Council functions, but also to value democracy and the experience of working together. Through the project, we transcended the limits of the school and established links with community bodies and individuals. Many of us are now committed to citizen participation and confident that change is possible.

Written by Elena María Florencia Dietrich



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Results and recommendations

The project of the San Luis Gonzaga School has been documented, together with other award-winning projects, in a book that is distributed gratis to teachers, public officials and the media. *Poder Ciudadano* encourages participants to interact and create their own networks. Various award winners have organised contests and public forums in their own community, thus multiplying the effect of *Aulas Sin Fronteras*. In addition, a platform and informal network has been created to facilitate online decentralised information exchange.

Over the years, teachers have been able to integrate the contest into their annual planning. With each *congreso* expectations are raised and students and teachers become motivated to participate in the following year. The programme has reached a wide audience and it has been replicated by NGOs and education authorities on local level.

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The informal network and project database are available at www.redsinfronteras.org.ar