



# Beyond Oil

Education for Growth, Inclusion  
and Human Flourishing in  
Venezuela



DAVID ROCKEFELLER CENTER  
FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY



# The Democratic School: Reimagining Democracy in Venezuela's Classrooms



**Martin West**

Professor at Harvard  
Graduate School of Education



**Lorena Pardo**

EPA, Harvard Graduate  
School of Education



**Peter Levine**

Tisch College for Civic Life, Tufts  
University



1:30-2:15

Moderated by Samuel Rivero



HARVARD



GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF EDUCATION

# The democratic school: Reimagining democracy in Venezuela's classrooms

---

Lorena Pardo, Samuel Rivero, Emilia Alvear, Andrés de Marco, & Juan Wulff  
Harvard Graduate School of Education - Harvard College

# Agenda

- 1. A day as a Venezuelan student:** Textbooks, teachers, curriculum
- 1. The Democratic School model:** A four pillars framework
- 1. Rebuilding democracy from the education system:** Recommendations on curriculum, instructional materials, governance, and teacher development



# 1. A day as a Venezuelan student

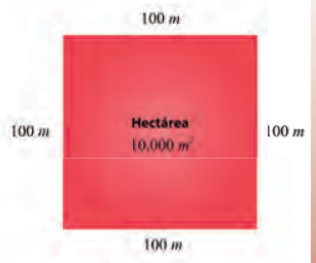


## Learning to calculate the area of land plots

### Conozcamos sobre medidas agrarias

Reciben el nombre de medidas agrarias aquellas que se emplean para medir terrenos y parcelas agrícolas. La unidad de medida es el área. Un área es equivalente a un terreno en forma rectangular que tenga 100 m de largo por 100 m de ancho, es decir, un área tiene 100 m<sup>2</sup>, y utilizamos, como símbolo para referirnos a esta unidad, la letra *a*.

Entre los múltiplos del área se encuentra la hectárea (*ha*) que es equivalente a 100 áreas o 10.000 m<sup>2</sup>. Un submúltiplo del área es el que estudiamos anteriormente, el metro cuadrado, que equivale a la centésima parte del área y también lo llamamos centiárea (*ca*).



## Discovering the Land and Agricultural Development Law, decreed by Chávez

### Conversemos sobre la Ley de Tierras Urbanas

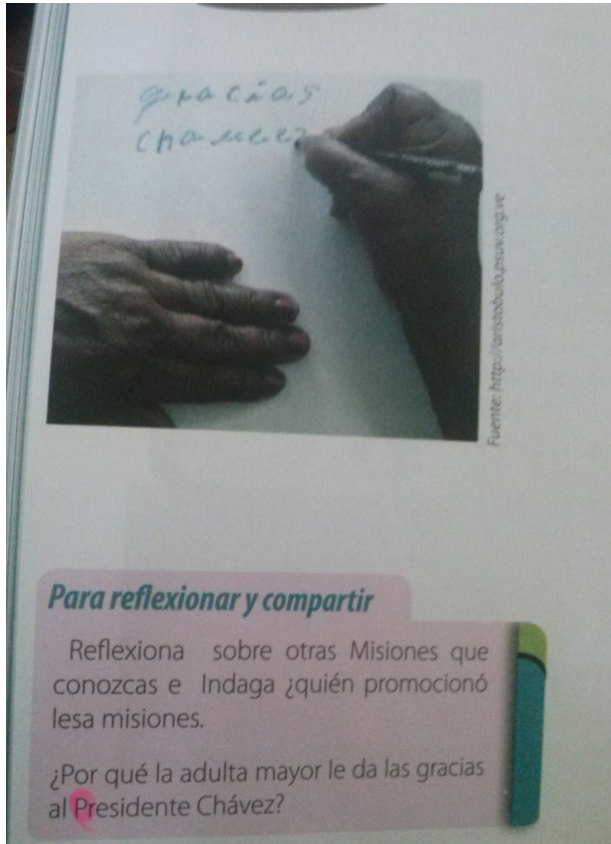
El 13 de noviembre del 2001, el Presidente de la República decretó la Ley de Tierras y Desarrollo Agrario, cuyo objeto principal es el establecer las bases del desarrollo rural integral y sustentable para el desarrollo humano y crecimiento económico del sector agrario, la justa distribución de la riqueza y una planificación estratégica, democrática y participativa. Se elimina el latifundio y la tercerización como sistemas contrarios a la justicia, la igualdad, al interés general y a la paz social en el campo. Se asegura la biodiversidad, la seguridad agroalimentaria y la vigencia efectiva de los derechos de protección ambiental y agroalimentario de la presente y las futuras generaciones.

## Learning English by reading about the government's social programs

*La Misión Vivienda Venezuela* aims at solving the nation's housing shortage, and its goal is the construction of new living units. So far, the government has provided many homes for residents, something that has been considered as impressive due to the short amount of time the program has been active.



Unit 2: Today and yesterday



## A day as a Venezuelan student

### *For reflection and sharing*

(...)

"Why does the elderly woman thank President Chávez?"

## Instructional materials

**+100M**

copies of the  
Colección Bicentenario  
distributed by 2015

**62%**

of pages in the 6th-grade  
Social Studies book  
dedicated to the Chávez  
government



## Institutional Pressure to Teachers



Has anyone here had an experience like this, either as a teacher or as a student?

## Indoctrination in the National Curriculum



### Democratic Language

"The development of values, attitudes, and virtues of full democracy"

### Bolivarian Mandate

"Guards full correspondence with the political, social, and economic project of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela"

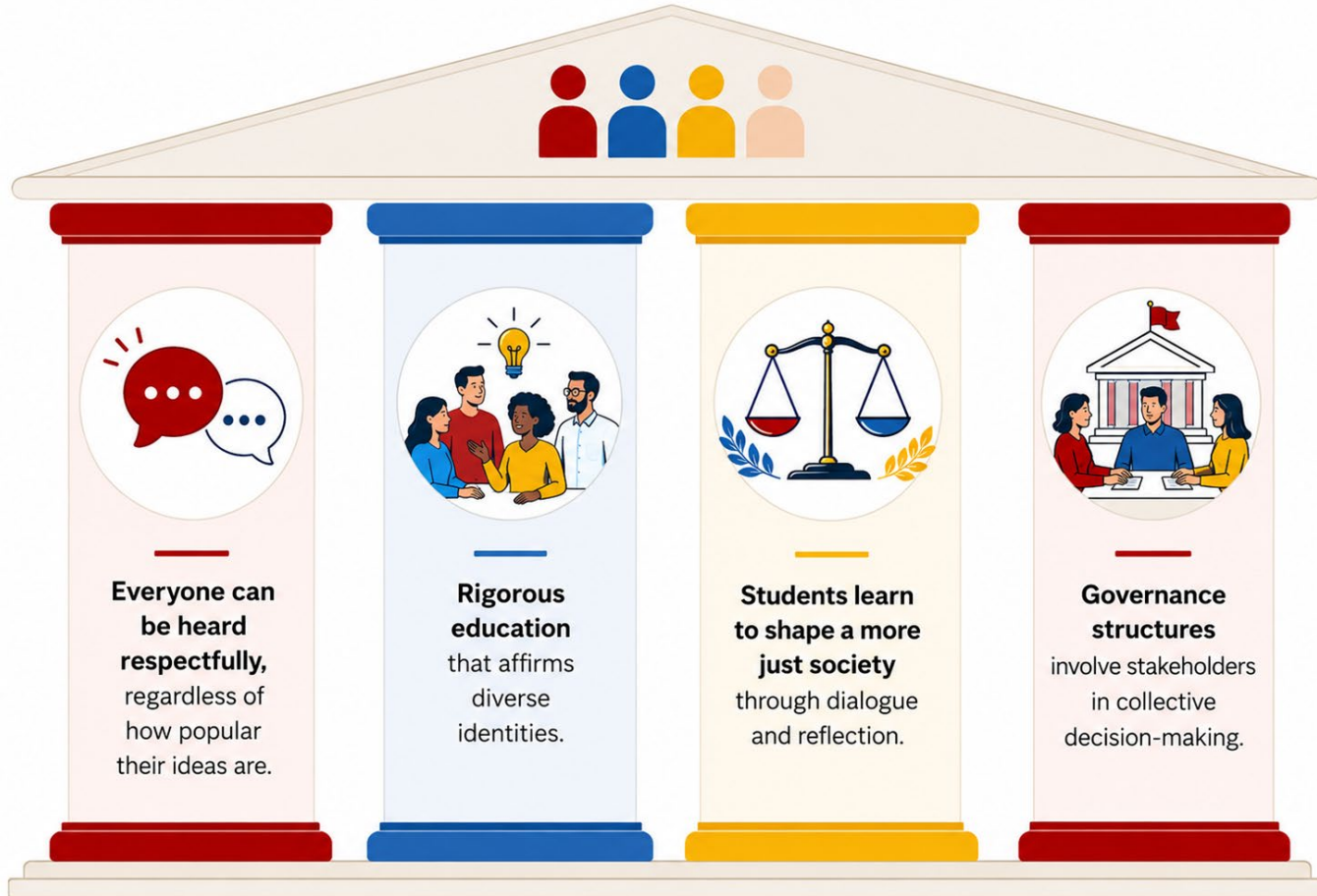
## When Civic Education Stops Building Democracy

Venezuela's basic education subsystem fails to **adequately promote** the learning and exercise of **democratic values** through the way it **structures** and **delivers** democratic civic education.

## 2. The Democratic School Model



Photo: Ding Hongfa, 2026.



### 3. Rebuilding Democracy from the Education System





1

**Teaching  
How to Teach  
Democracy**



2

**Redesigning  
Instructional  
Materials**



3

**Democratizing  
School  
Governance**



4

**Reforming  
the National  
Curriculum**



Short term

# 1. Teaching How to Teach Democracy



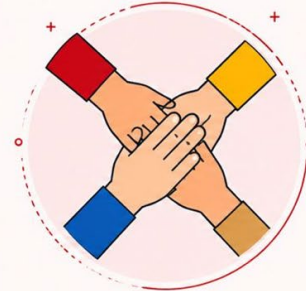
1

Face-to-face or virtual formats.



2

Active learning focus on civic and democratic education challenges: moderating debates, designing discussions



3

Collective participation and learning communities

Medium term

## 2. Redesign of Instructional Materials

### Post-Pinochet Chile (1998)

Curricular reform integrated civic education across all subjects. Textbook language became 'ideological battles' resolved through pluralistic debate.

Medium term

## 2. Redesign of Instructional Materials



Medium term

## 3. Democratizing School Governance

### Strengthened Student Councils

- Annual action plan with public accountability reporting
- Power to propose initiatives and organize assemblies
- Binding participation in school decision-making

### Democratic School Council (restructured Consejo Educativo)

- Representatives from school leadership, teachers, students, families, and staff
- Binding authority over school climate and disciplinary norms
- Civic education planning and school-level initiative prioritization
- Legal protection from external political interference

Long term

## 4. Reforming the National Curriculum

- The reform process must embody democracy
- It must learn from Chile's curriculum reform, which succeeded only when they replaced expert-driven deliberation with genuinely open, multi-actor forums.

**National History**

**Competences for Deliberation,  
Dissent, and Tolerance**

**Cross-Curricular Axes**

## Conclusion

Schools are not just places to learn math and literacy. They are **where we can learn how to live together**, to listen, to disagree with respect, and to build a better society.



## Conclusion

**The democracy Venezuela is searching for may be not only at the ballot box in the next elections, it may be forged in the classroom.**



## Conclusion

**That is the power** of curriculum, materials, the school environment, and of **those who make it all real: teachers.**



# Thank you!

**Lorena Pardo Rojas**

[lpardo@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:lpardo@gse.harvard.edu)

**Samuel Rivero Meza**

[sriveromeza@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:sriveromeza@gse.harvard.edu)

**Emilia Alvear R**

[ealvearrodriguez@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:ealvearrodriguez@gse.harvard.edu)

**Andrés de Marco**

[andresdemarco@college.harvard.edu](mailto:andresdemarco@college.harvard.edu)

**Juan Wulff**

[juan\\_wulff@college.harvard.edu](mailto:juan_wulff@college.harvard.edu)

# References

- Ding Hongfa. (2026, January 12). *A student learns to read on the first day of the new semester in a public school in Caracas, Venezuela* [Photograph]. Xinhua News Agency. <https://english.news.cn/20260113/840ccd91c8c7497e9db5ee872a584aad/c.html>
- Ding Hongfa. (2026, January 12). *Students study in a classroom on the first day of the new semester in a public school in Caracas, Venezuela* [Photograph]. Xinhua News Agency. <https://english.news.cn/20260113/840ccd91c8c7497e9db5ee872a584aad/c.html>
- Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación. (2013). *Matemática para la vida*, [Textbook, 1st year of secondary education, p. 194, 195].
- Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación. (2013). *Inglés My fifth victory*, [Textbook, fifth year of secondary education, p. 34].
- Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación. (2011). *Patria y ciudadanía* [Textbook, 1st year of secondary education, p. 120].
- Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación. (2016, mayo 20). *La entrega de 100 millones de libros de la Colección Bicentenario es un milagro posible en revolución* [Publicación de Facebook]. <https://www.facebook.com/mineducacionve/posts/1120956301290361/>
- Pulido, D. (2016, March 13). *Currículo Básico Nacional y Currículo Nacional Bolivariano* [SlideShare presentation]. SlideShare. <https://es.slideshare.net/slideshow/curriculo-bsico-nacional-y-curriculo-nacional-bolivariano/59486005>
- Ramírez, T. (2012). El texto escolar como arma política. *Venezuela y su Gente: Ciencias Sociales 6to. Grado. Investigación y Postgrado*, 27(1), 163–194. <https://ve.scielo.org/pdf/ip/v27n1/art07.pdf>
- Sequera, V., & Aguilar, F. (2018, April 5). *Venezuelan schools emptying as Chavez legacy under threat*. Reuters via Yahoo News. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/venezuelan-schools-emptying-chavez-legacy-under-threat-122928103.html>
- Tarazona, J. [@javiertarazona]. (2017, March 6). *[Photograph of children drawing Hugo Chávez in Venezuelan school]*. Twitter. As cited in Martín, S. (2017, March 8). PanAm Post. <https://panampost.com/sabrina-martin/2017/03/08/adoctrinamiento-amor-hugo-chavez/>
- The MENTOR Initiative. (2023). *[Photograph of hygiene promotion programme in Venezuelan school]*. <https://mentor-initiative.org/hygiene-promotion-for-children-in-venezuela/>

# Extra slides

*For possible questions*

# A day as a Venezuelan student

5

**¡TREMENDA AREPA, COMADRE!**  
Números racionales



Learning rational numbers with *arepas*!

**Arepa de maíz pelado:** mejor conocida en la costa venezolana como "arepa pelada" o "arepa raspada" en Oriente, esta clase de arepa proviene del maíz pelado, que es aquel que conserva su cáscara y que se reblandece hirviéndolo con cal. Al molerlo, conserva los componentes nutritivos del lumen y la cáscara.



**Arepa andina:** se elabora con harina de trigo, y se consume principalmente en las zonas montañosas de los Andes venezolanos.

**Arepa de harina de maíz precocida:** se elabora con la harina que se obtiene luego de la precocción del maíz.



# Ideologization of the curriculum



Structurally, the CNB adopts cross-curricular learning areas.



Articulates competences in critical thinking and civic participation.



Explicitly names citizenship education as a central goal.



Its graduate profile lists values including pluralism, tolerance, equity, and cooperative work.

## Ideologization of the curriculum

Process oriented toward "achieving the model of State set out in the Constitution." Participation is present, but its scope is defined by a political project established in advance.

Framed to 'reconstruct knowledge' within 21st-century socialism. Ideas bounded by state ideology.

Canon of independence figures used to justify socialist project, not open inquiry.

## Protests against the instructional materials



# The Democratic School: Reimagining Democracy in Venezuela's Classrooms



**Martin West**

Professor at Harvard  
Graduate School of Education



**Lorena Pardo**

EPA, Harvard Graduate  
School of Education



**Peter Levine**

Tisch College for Civic Life, Tufts  
University



1:30-2:15

Moderated by Samuel Rivero



# Beyond Oil

Education for Growth, Inclusion  
and Human Flourishing in  
Venezuela



DAVID ROCKEFELLER CENTER  
FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

