JOE FARRELL EDUCATOR, 73

U of T prof developed alternative models to aid learning in developing countries

Innovator firmly believed in promoting equality, helping the disadvantaged and tailoring teaching to students' needs

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Joe Farrell would invariably brag to his graduate classes with this question: How would you know a school anywhere in the world?

"It would have four walls," his students would answer. "There would be a teacher at the front, a blackboard, and it would have many desks."

"Don't be so sure!" he'd reply. "If you're so convinced learning would be the same anywhere in the world?"

A leader in the field of comparative education, Farrell founded the Comparative and International Development Education Centre (CIDE) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. During the 40 years he taught there, he served as a mentor to scores of fellow instructors and researchers, as well as students.

His work on alternative schools in the developing world, educational planning and equity in education informed practice and scholarship here and abroad. He believed that while it is possible to plan education and even teach, it is not possible to plan and control learning.

As a past president of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), he served on the newly established Education Sub-Committee for UNESCO. He was a top consultant with U.S. AID, CIDA, UNESCO and the World Bank. He was honorary fellow of the Comparative, International and Education Society (CIES) of the United States.

Joseph Farrell died on Dec. 8 in Toronto of septicaemia. He was 73.

Born in DalKal, Ill., in 1930, he was the only child of Irish immigrant parents. His mother, Agnes, worked at the Northern Illinois University library, no doubt fostering her son's love of learning. His father, Raymond, ran a small cab company in town and worked nights as a truck driver.

Farrell's unswerving vocation as a comparative and international educator had its roots at a young age, when he was schooled and surrounded by hundreds of other curious, innovative young people from around the globe.

"I was profoundly moved by that experience," he recalled, "and returned home with a burning desire to learn more about other cultures, how people lived and learned in them – a desire that I have never left me."

He kept up solid links with the scouting movement his entire life, drawing analogies between the informal learning among the children in the organization and his work among developing nations.

Farrell received his BA from Northern Illinois University and after working as a primary school teacher for a few years completed a PhD in education at Syracuse University in 1966. He moved to Canada after graduation, teaching at the newly established education faculty at OISE in Toronto.

He quickly became a familiar presence there – grinning from behind his guitar while entertaining students; or behind a lectern, or sharing meals about camping in the Andes beneath the shadow of a condor.

Early on and throughout his career he supported non-formal methods of teaching, particularly for marginal and young people in developing countries.

Quoting Niccolo Machiavelli and applying it to contemporary times, Farrell said there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain of success than to take the lead in introducing a new order of things.

He took risks and pushed boundaries but knew that effective change in educational methods takes time: from child to child; teacher to teacher; school to school; and community to community.

This so-called "quiet revolution in schooling" reshaped the educational framework in Latin America, Bangladesh, Egypt and many countries in Africa. But his most intense work occurred more than 40 years ago, during the Popular Unity government in Chile under the tutelage of her father, whose work on education in Chile was officially recognized in 1994 by then-president Eduar- do Frei Patiño.

Farrell believed that traditional schooling restricts a child's learning potential while non-formal educational methods unleash it. The Egyptian and Bangladeshi programs, for example, specifically target girls – the most disadvantaged group in these countries. Boys are free to enroll only if space allows.

His colleague at OISE, Nick Connolly, worked with him on girls' schools in Egypt. He recalled one-room buildings constructed from bricks of dung, topped with tin roofs and glassless windows.

Local people collected broken bits of plastic and styrofoam from the streets of Cairo and used this litter as teaching aids for the children: studying numbers, for example, from ragged egg cartons and pizza boxes.

"These children are so much on supporting strengths that he saw in the other systems and working with those," said Connolly. "His essays show him to be a non-conformist man of educational letters."

In Colombia, there is an innovative and successful educational system called "Escuela Nueva" (New School). This is referred to as the grandmother of alternative models in developing countries.

It started on a small scale in the late 1970s and has grown to about 33,000 schools. This model has been adopted in at least 10 other Latin American nations and has been used to develop new educational programs in many parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

These programs focus on local adaptations changed in the school day or school year, for instance making room for important community events such as coffee harvests, when children are routinely pulled from the classroom to help out.

As Farrell routine noted, there is less emphasis on teaching and more emphasis on learning.

This quiet pedagogical revolution has spread to Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan.

Farrell kept abreast of these alternatives in various ways, always humbly advising, observing and reporting on their successes.

"Part of this problem with this man is he was very self-effacing," says Karen Mundy, associate dean of research and a Canada Research Chair at OISE. "He was larger than life in a social sense but he never made students read his work, which was a very rare thing among accomplished academics.

"But she added, he imbued his teaching with these core ideas: What's the meaning of equity in education? What kind of learning helps are humans? And are schools suited to the nature of our learning; our capacity to learn, or do they stymie us?"

In 2008, Farrell retired from OISE, although he continued to teach one course on comparative education. He also still sang folk ballads to meanering education students up in that monastically tall building overlooking River Street.

Joseph Farrell is survived by his mother, Agnes, wife, Joan, son Michael, daughter Jennifer and grandchildren Guinevere, Gavin and Mabel Ray.

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