



Please cite the source as:

Cordero, G. (1999). Education, Poverty and Inequality: An Interview with Fernando Reimers. *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, 1 (1). Retrieved month day, year from: <http://redie.uabc.mx/vol1no1/contents-reimers1.html>

Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa

Vol. 1, No. 1, 1999

Education, Poverty and Inequality. An Interview with Fernando Reimers

Educación, pobreza y desigualdad. Entrevista a Fernando Reimers

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Abstract

Dr. Reimers makes some statements about the possibility of providing equal opportunities for education to children from social groups living below the poverty line. The interview includes an analysis of school, family and social factors related to the uneven access of low-income classes in Latin America to instruction. He suggests some lines of research to build a framework for policy designs that might increase education opportunities for them.

Key words: Educational policy, educational opportunities, poverty.

Dr. Fernando Reimers is a professor of the Department of Administration, Planning and Social Policy of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is the present director of the Master's Degree Program in International Educational Policy offered by this institution. He has focused his investigation work on analyzing the relationship between education, poverty and equality, and on studying education opportunities for children of low-income families. Dr. Reimers, born in Venezuela, is particularly interested in the study of educational development in Latin America. He has worked in El Salvador, Paraguay, Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua y Venezuela. Besides his work on our continent, he has also worked in Pakistan, Egypt and Jordania. Dr. Reimers has been a consultant of the World Bank and of various governments, in the area of educational change. He has published four books, as well as multiple articles and chapters on education and development. He has also worked on several projects with Noel McGinn, with whom he wrote the book *Informed dialogue: Using research to shape education policy around the world*, in which he tells how to use the results of academic work for constructing public policies on education. He is now collaborating with 18 colleagues from 7 American countries, on a book on education, poverty and inequality.

Graciela Cordero-Arroyo: First, I want to thank Dr. Fernando Reimers for giving us at the Online Journal of Educational Research, this interview on the problem of poverty and the inequality of educational opportunities. Dr. Reimers, my first question is about current estimates of the magnitude of poverty in Latin America. What is happening to poverty levels in Latin America?

Fernando Reimers: Latin America has the highest levels of income inequality in the world. At least one out of every three families, and two out of every five people, live below the poverty line. According to data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), the number of people living below the poverty line increased from 136 million in 1980, to 204 million in 1997, and the number of people in extreme poverty increased from 62 million to 90 million during the same period. The CEPAL's analysis holds that if these trends continue, and in view of the low prospects for economic growth in the coming years, it does not seem possible that poverty levels will show any significant decrease. If we look at a projection of the region's poverty reduction rates for the last nine years, we can see that it would take more than 20 years to halve the current percentage of households that are in extreme poverty, and more than 30 years to cut in half the current percentage of poor households. Because these groups suffer from various forms of social exclusion, in comparison with those who have been able to rise out of poverty in recent years, we can say that even these estimates are optimistic.

GCA: Can education reduce poverty in Latin America?

FR: We must differentiate between the impact of education on the lives of the poor, and its impact on poverty itself, and on inequality. There is no doubt that many individuals and social groups have been incorporated into the Latin American educational system in recent decades. In this sense, educational expansion has permitted an increase in the education of the poor, and so has improved their living

conditions, while the lack of schooling itself is a condition for exclusion. On the other hand, poverty is a relative concept. We cannot think solely about poverty without thinking about the inequality of the region. If a social group maintains its living conditions, but society as a whole raises its lifestyle, the relative position of the first group has declined, and its level of exclusion has increased.

Fifty years ago, having electricity and telephone service was almost a luxury, while today it is a necessity for participating in the society; thirty years ago, access to communications media, radio, and television would have also been considered a luxury. Now, a lack of that access increases the exclusion of those groups that still don't have it, because it means they lack to information that will allow them to participate in the society. Another question, different from whether educational expansion has raised the living conditions of the poor—which it has—, is whether it has changed their relative position in the social structure, and whether it has allowed intergenerational social mobility. There is no evidence that the educational systems are giving opportunities for intergenerational social mobility to the children of the continent's poor, and much less that this expansion has contributed to a decrease in social inequality.

However, there is evidence that educational expansion has facilitated a certain intergenerational educational mobility. The children of yesterday's poor have achieved higher levels of education than their parents. The children of today's poor can also hope to have higher levels of education than their parents. In this sense, the chances for many children on the continent have increased, including those for the children of the poor. This is the result of public policies intended to provide universal access to education. The significance of this change should not be underestimated, since it shows that educational policies are indeed important. Indeed, there would be more poor families on the continent if it were not for the commitment to education which the voters, the parents, and the governments have maintained during the last few years. But in analyzing the educational progress of the continent we must not only ask what has changed, but what could have changed, and has not. At that point, the conclusions regarding the contributions of education to the reduction of poverty and inequality take on another hue. Moreover, in Latin America there is a growing acceptance of the importance of education in reducing poverty. According to ECLAC, many countries in the region increased their educational spending significantly during the nineties so as to reverse the decline that occurred in the eighties. Still, simply increasing the amount we spend on education spending is not enough to provide the needed educational opportunities. We must also understand the processes that limit learning opportunities for disadvantaged children, and we must carefully consider the variety of evidence regarding *how* the monies are spent, so that the resources can in point of fact, generate greater educational opportunities.

GCA: I'd like to talk for a moment about the concept of "educational opportunities". How do you see "educational opportunities"?

FR: Educational opportunities can be understood as the five rungs of a ladder. The first rung, the most basic one, is the opportunity to enroll in the first grade of school. The second level of opportunity consists in learning enough in first grade to finish it with a mastery of pre-academic abilities that permit the child to continue learning at school. The third rung is the opportunity to finish the first stage of schooling: to know how to read and write, do simple arithmetic, establish cause-effect relationships, and to possess basic information about history, science and social science. The fourth rung is made up of each scholastic level's graduates' having abilities and knowledge comparable to that of other alumnae of the same scholastic level. Finally, the fifth rung of opportunity is for all the graduates of the same educational level to be in possession of the same social and economic options that will allow them to enlarge their life perspectives.

GCA: What is the relationship between educational opportunities and poverty?

FR: Much of the emphasis on the region's educational policy is concentrated on the first level of opportunity. This is an opportunity accessible to most of the region's children—but not all. It is usually between the first and the second levels on the ladder of educational opportunities that the poor get left behind. One out of three children who enters first grade, fails when he or she is just beginning scholastic life. Many of the children of the poor have no type of preschool education, and many teachers who work with these little ones have not been trained to cope with their specific problems. Repeating grades is disproportionately high among the poor. Research has shown that repeating leads to more repeating, and later, to dropping out. As to the third level of opportunity, we can say that the disadvantaged social groups are at fourth grade level, scholastically, and that because of this, the majority never completes the initial cycle. The fourth rung of opportunity is also inaccessible to low-income families. Many students in Latin America don't have this opportunity because the schools are segregated on the basis of family income, and sometimes, on that of the population's ethnic origin. In general, those students who come from low-income families get the lowest grades on standard tests. Finally, we can say that the fifth level of opportunity does not exist in Latin America. Studies have shown that indigenous workers—especially women—with the same level of education and work experience as their mestizo counterparts, earn less money.

GCA: I find that very interesting, because it calls into question the idea that guaranteeing equality of access to basic education by expanding the enrollment, provides enough educational opportunities for the disadvantaged groups. What you are saying, lets us understand and approach educational opportunity from a less-limited perspective.

FR: Well, we do have to recognize the importance of quantitative expansion in the continent's educational systems. That expansion has permitted the incorporaton of new social groups into the educational system, and has given these people the potential for reaching higher educational levels. Starting from that time, and running to the end of the twentieth century, there has not been as much exclusion

of the children of the poor as there was fifty years ago—which shows that the educational system has a relative autonomy regarding the social system, and that it is not just a device for reproducing the existing social structure. However, as I said before, the equality of educational opportunity goes beyond equal access to schooling. There are other barriers that limit equality at higher levels—social-differentiation mechanisms dictating the educational opportunities of children who have already achieved equality at the lower levels of the educational-opportunity scale. The educational opportunities of these children are influenced by their parents' position in the social structure, and that has as much to do with the opportunity to reach different educational levels as with the possibilities of learning in each of those levels. In that sense, if the question is, "Is there an equality of educational opportunity in the Americas?", the answer is "No". The power unleashed by globalization will give great advantages to those who have more education, and in spite of the deliberate efforts to give the children of the poor an increase in educational potential, the opportunity gap between these children and those of the educationally and economically privileged will become wider.

GCA: If equality of opportunity goes beyond the equality of access to the school, what other factors do you think contribute to the inequality of educational opportunity?

FR: There are several types of processes that contribute to this growing inequality. These processes operate within the school, outside the school, and in the interaction between the educational system and the social world—in the broadest sense. Let me give you a brief explanation of each one of those.

In the educational system there are three processes that contribute to inequality. One is the result of private financing of children's education, which for those children who can pay for it, offers the best chance of attending a really good preschool, and of being ready to learn when they start to kindergarten and first grade. These children have a better chance of attending an excellent elementary school and junior high school, and a greater possibility of going to college.

Also, since educational institutions are extremely stratified, another social process that leads to educational inequality has to do with the influence of their schoolmates in the advancement of learning opportunity. Those children who are in schools where their classmates receive more support and encouragement at home, probably will learn from them, and will have teachers with higher expectations of their educational potential than do those children who go to schools where many of their classmates come from low-income families. Racial and social segregation is another important process that is leading to more educational inequality.

A third, and more obvious process, results from the disparity in the use of public educational funds, the most obvious manifestation being the difference in the levels of public spending for those children who attend different types of public schools, or schools in different geographic areas.

Outside the educational system, the processes that intensify the inequality of educational opportunities originate in the life conditions of the poor children, processes which weaken their health and make them more physically and psychologically vulnerable. For some poor families, short-term economic demands can make school attendance a luxury rather than a regular life event. Poor families also feel more resentful about school-associated costs: books, notebooks, uniforms, etc.

The third and last type of social process contributing to the reproduction of inequality in the schools is the interaction between social and educational influences. The family's outright poverty, especially in the lower educational levels, molds the ecology of the school and the classrooms. The aggregate level of penury influences the teachers' expectations. The different levels of parents' education evoke different levels of response from the teachers and the schools. Teachers have high expectations for the academic achievement of children whose parents are perceived as financially capable of providing an educational process of many years' duration. The interaction of an aggregate factor, such as the characteristics of parents; and of an internal factor, such as the expectations of the children; results in the creation of different educational climates for different children.

On the other hand, having just one school calendar for everyone; teaching in just one "national" language; presenting curriculums with concrete references closely related to the life of certain groups of children, and foreign to others; and using just one work method in the classroom, are other types of influences that negatively affect the equity of educational opportunities.

GCA: This theme has already been widely studied in previous decades. What differences exist between the earlier theoretical focuses, and the present approaches to education and social inequality?

FR: Certainly, these lines of investigation are at least 30 years old in the field of educational sociology. These questions were central to the educational research stemming from different traditions, including structural functionalism, the theory of conflict and the new sociology of education. All these interpretative frameworks attempted to explain the schools' level of autonomy as relating to society, their reproductive functions and their potential for changing social inequality and structure. However, these schematics were developed to explain the relationship between education and social structure in countries where the universalization of primary education and junior high school education had been consolidated for many decades.

As an example, let's take the work of Bernstein on the English educational system, and that of Bourdieu and Passeron on that of France. In contrast to the European educational systems, in Latin America those systems have experienced great dynamism—in terms of expansion—during a good part of the century, so that access to education has changed, incorporating new social groups. Educational

reform has been a central policy of many continental governments, by which to attempt to influence the distribution of social opportunities.

On the other hand, knowledge about the relationship between education and poverty was generated in contexts other than those of countries in America today. Some of the studies done in the sixties, on education and social opportunity in the United States were done at a time when a series of progressive policies were being launched, and there was not time enough to evaluate their impact, or the degree to which they could be sustained. Now that we are approaching the end of the century, the integration of these individual economies into a global economy has brought up new questions about the type of skills that schools should develop in the students so as to give them an opportunity to participate in the benefits and rewards of this global economy. For example, the increased money-making worth of higher education will cause families with greater potential to try very hard to ensure that their children can get a high-quality college education and this will increase inequality. In a nutshell, our continent's changing social and educational context justifies the theoretical value of seeking new answers to some of the old questions, under the new contextual circumstances of the Americas.

GCA: I am hearing you speak of "the Americas" in general, and not of Latin America in particular. I consider that as a change in problem focus. This change in focus is due to...?

FR: Due to the migratory flows, to globalization and advances in communication, the countries of this continent are becoming integrated in various ways. Children who are born in one country can spend a great part of their lives in countries other than those they were born in; and culture, language and life perspectives are included in the migration. Spanish is the second principal language in the United States, and the same thing happens with English in Latin America. There are more than 30 million descendants of Hispanics living in the United States. All these links and interchanges unite the countries of America in a common destiny. Unfortunately, poverty and inequality also unite the countries of our continent.

GCA: The theme of equality has been incorporated into the discussion of educational policy on an international level. How did we get from a political discourse that favored quality, to a political discourse that favors equality on an international level?

FR: The political discourse of the mid-seventies favored quality over access and equity. It sought a way to establish a direct relationship between the needs of the economy and the products of the educational system. Hence, the twentieth century closed with a debate on issues such as efficiency, minimum standards, testing, decentralization and management, and discussions about the type of education needed for a certain type of economy. However, now occupying an important place in the international debate, is the extent to which education systems offer equal opportunities to all children. United Nations international agencies such as UNICEF and UNESCO are facing these problems. The conference

"Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, addressed the need to ensure educational opportunities at the basic level. UNESCO's last report, that of the Delors Commission, provides a vision for education, concerned primarily with equal educational opportunities. In the American Presidential Summit in Santiago, Chile, in March 1998, it was agreed that education was the most important area on the agenda, and was related to the reduction of poverty in the continent.

However, the elimination of poverty and the reduction of inequality is not yet a priority for the governments and for those who are not poor. It is noteworthy that in the current discourse on educational reform at the continental level, no questions are being asked as to whether there is a sufficient investment in the education of the poor, while there is plenty of rhetoric about the need to improve efficiency and to manage more wisely that which is spent. This lets us see that there are competing interests occupying the agenda of elected governments so that poverty is just one more problem, and perhaps not the most important priority, of citizens and governments across the Americas. From my point of view, poverty and inequality are affairs of political decision, not a problem of doctrine nor of natural selection. It is the result of collective choices and decisions about who should be educated, how, and at what cost. Poverty is the result of choice, not of the poor, but principally of those who are not poor. It is the result of how those who are not poor define their interests and responsibilities, and how they influence the priorities of public action. This means that questions about the relationship between poverty and inequality must be clear not only to educational researchers but also to political analysts, educational administrators, parents, teachers and different political groups, and to civil society.

GCA: What recent research and works can help us to understand better the relationship between education, inequality and social change in the Americas at the end of the century?

FR: There are several important works. Let me cite just three. Londono wrote his book *Poverty, Inequality and Human Capital Formation in Latin America 1950-2025*, where he concludes that the low systematic investment in human capital is the origin of the region's inequalities of income. Another very interesting study is that of David Plank, who in his book *The Means of our Salvation. Public education in Brazil, 1930-1995*, studied the origins of social inequality in Brazil over a period of 65 years. Plank argues that the origins of these profound inequalities is the political system that favors the private interests of small elite groups. Also important is *Latin American Education*, by Carlos Alberto Torres and Adriana Puigros. In that book the authors explain how the problem of inequality has been placed in a secondary position in the agenda of the financially-pressured states. From these authors' perspective, this condition has restricted the pedagogical utopia of public education as a fundamental right. ECLAC's most recent report on social development contains an invaluable analysis of the evolution of poverty in Latin America. Also, the Inter-American Development Bank has published an interesting study on inequality in Latin America in its latest annual report on development. Soon there is coming out a book documenting the work which 18

colleagues have been doing on the challenges of equal opportunities in the Americas. The book represents an important effort that has brought together academics and educational administrators from the USA, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. This analysis of the Americas allows us to appreciate the strong influence that social stratification and inequality have on the learning opportunities for low-income children in each of these countries in the Americas.

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