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Neo-Liberal Educational Reform in Latin America

Las reformas educativas neoliberales en Latinoamérica

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Abstract

Using the argument that educational systems in Latin American are inefficient, political organizations and international financial institutions promoted reforms based on free market principles to modernize education in the region. Chile was used as a laboratory for these reforms, which were then applied to other Latin American countries. This paper analyzes the argument that educational quality is improved through competition—used as a strategy to privatize the educational system—by transferring its financing from public to private sources, to the detriment of the national system of education. Finally, this paper

examines the modernization process and the failure of the free market model of the Mexican system of education.

Key words: Educational reform, neo-liberalism, educational financing.

Resumen

Con el argumento de la ineficiencia de los sistemas educativos de Latinoamérica, organizaciones políticas y de financiamiento internacional promovieron reformas para modernizar la educación en esta región, con la lógica del libre mercado. Chile fue el laboratorio de las reformas que posteriormente se generalizaron al resto de los países. En este artículo se analiza el argumento de la mejoría de la calidad educativa mediante la competencia, como una estrategia para privatizar la educación, con el traslado del financiamiento público al privado, en detrimento de los sistemas educativos nacionales. Finalmente, se presenta la modernización y el fracaso del sistema educativo mexicano organizado desde el modelo del libre mercado.

Palabras clave: Reforma educativa, neoliberalismo, financiamiento de la educación.

Introduction

The current cultural, sociopolitical and economic model of globalization is driven by a renewed policy of concentration of capital in the global elites. The American intellectual Noam Chomsky (2001) states that it is not possible to know or to explain the objectives of public policies and programs in Latin America without considering the recommendations of international financial agencies, which specifically detail every area of life in developing countries, conditioning loans on the implementation of their recommendations. Latin American governments have been forced to implement similar policies in order to free the structural productive sectors—previously reserved exclusively for the State—and, in a second stage, to free the commercial, financial and service sectors.

The fundamental premise of neoliberalism for the worldwide reorganization of economic, social and cultural life is the free market, unrestricted competition between supply and demand. This principle is absurd, considering the conditions of inequality in Latin America in relation to the developed countries, since half of its population lives in poverty.

Although the region's trade makes up 22% of the world total, wealth is concentrated in the United States and Canada and in the continent's upper classes, through the massive transfer of wealth from south to north and as a result of the unequal distribution of wealth within Latin American societies (Birdsall, 1999). Therefore, faced with conditions of such extreme inequality, both international as well as domestic, the injustice of any public policy, including education, based on the principle of competition, is clear.

The promotion of educational reforms in Latin America

Neoliberal educational reforms in Latin America were proposed by national and international power entities in response to the problems of quality in the educational systems in the region. The diagnosis and proposals for modernization of education in Latin America were executed with the participation of an extremely diverse group of social actors from the Latin American states, led by politicians, intellectuals and academics as well as nongovernmental organizations from the United States. They concluded that the lack of educational efficiency, effectiveness and productivity stemmed from the rapid growth of national education systems, due to the massification of enrollment and the inefficiency of highly centralized schemes of administrative operation. The problem of educational quality in Latin America was reduced to a problem of management.

The proposed solution was to transform the structures and organization of educational systems, using the logic of free market competition. The functions, resources, and powers of centralized national entities were to be transferred to local authorities, to ensure the efficient administration of resources. Decentralization would favor the autonomy of local education administration, by reducing the subordination of state institutions to a national centralized authority, thereby—it was hoped—democratizing education. An additional benefit would be the reduction of the heavy and costly bureaucracy, thereby contributing to "small" government.

The promoters of these reforms were the Inter-American Dialogue (IAD)[1] and the Corporation for Development Research (CINDE, acronym in Spanish), and their sponsors: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID),[2] the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), AVINA Foundation, The Tinker Foundation, GE Found, Global Development Network and others. Thus, to promote these educational changes in Latin America, in 1982 the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL, http://www.preal.org) was created.

The objectives of PREAL have been to promote administrative decentralization, equitable quality education, teacher development and shared funding by various social entities. It also seeks to transfer the administration of education to municipalities and to engage the private sector with the social sector, local governments and parents (Gajardo, 1999). Its two institutional programs are, first, "Business and Education", designed to link education with production processes and to encourage the business sector to exercise leadership in the improvement of educational quality. The second is the program "Internships for Teachers in Latin America and the Caribbean".

Naomi Klein (2001a) has studied corporate interest in participating in school organization. This author has identified the way in which large corporations in the United States, since the late eighties, have endeavored to add significant numbers of young people—concentrated in schools—to the ranks of their products' consumers. They eliminated the boundary between education and advertising

and, in this way, schools became major advertising sites with a constant and permanent display of ads and posters promoting products to the students—both in print as well as through computer programs installed on computers donated to the schools. They violated the privacy of young people in order to explore their interests and internet browsing patterns and thus induce the consumption of existing products or create new ones based on their "research". As a result, during the nineties, large companies in the U.S. were able to boost young people's consumption.

The meaning of education was distorted through the use of prizes for students who created new promotional or sales designs for the products of sponsoring companies, as part of the school curriculum. The pedagogical argument put forward was that this is a way of directly linking the school with the field of business and the working world.

Another aspect worth noting is the policy of donations in cash or in kind, with which large companies impose conditions on schools, teachers and students, obligating them to refrain from criticism, censure and from speaking out against corporate policies—despite the fact that these same companies harm public health, damage the environment and sponsor political actions through their national and international labor policies, including acts against constitutionally instituted governments in other countries (Klein, 2001b). Naturally the educational values that have been promulgated are profit, competition and *social Darwinism*.

The history of education reforms in Latin America

Chile was the continental laboratory for the implementation of educational reforms. In 1980 the first National System for the Measurement of Educational Quality (SIMCE, its Spanish acronym) was founded and, in accordance with its results, in 1981 the subsidy for public education was reduced (Núñez, cited in Puiggrós, 1994). The privatization mechanism in Chile was the Program for Subsidized Private Education, with the result that between 1980 and 1990, 22% of public school enrollment was transferred to private schools and $402.4 million dollars of public funds were likewise allotted to private schools (Rojas, 1997).

The decentralization of education administration from the federal level to municipalities and private schools resulted in the modification of teachers' contractual conditions and working hours, as well as the elimination of their unions. In regard to administrative and pedagogical aspects, the curricular flexibility to adapt content and minimum targets to the local reality was ensured through the establishment of the Institutional Educational Project (PEI, Spanish acronym), which was also the case in Venezuela, Colombia and Argentina.

The second part of the Chilean educational reform took place during the government of the Coalition of Parties for Democracy, a central-left coalition responsible for the election defeat of the military regime; a political change that did not result in the modification of the country's social and economic model. The new

Coalition government maintained the privatization of education imposed by the dictatorship. Political actors on the left argued that the costs of reversing the educational reforms would be very high and would "preclude the transition to democracy" (Rojas, 1977, p. 22); in addition, they considered decentralization as an opportunity to expand the role of regional power entities, by promoting the participation of local stakeholders in the development of educational policies. In 1993 the legislature—including leftist parties—passed the *Joint Funding Act*, authorizing private schools that were recipients of subsidies from public funds to charge fees, without suffering a subsequent decrease in the government subsidy, as had been the case during the period of the dictatorship (Rojas, 1997).

In Argentina the first attempt at decentralization occurred in 1978 and demonstrated the inability of the provinces to fund the schools that were transferred to them. The federal government failed to comply with school funding and civil society could not assume, either economically or culturally, the functions delegated to it by the State. The research findings of Guillermina Tiramonti (Tiramonti, 1997) reported that in the second attempt, in 1991, the social imaginary of the Argentine people began a process of transmutation and went from considering the funding of education as a human right and a duty of the State to considering it a right to be acquired through competition for financial resources, dependent on performance evaluation. Parents and teachers who in 1991 had been public school advocates and had resisted the trend toward privatization by 1995 had developed in its place a strong interinstitutional competitiveness geared toward obtaining the additional resources associated with the funding of special educational projects.

According to reports from the Argentine Workers' Confederation (Puiggrós, 1994; Tiramonti, 1997), the social demands faced by teachers in this country are more along the lines of public assistance than of a pedagogical nature, given the precariousness in which most of the low income population lives. Teachers in provincial schools and in poor neighborhoods have about an hour a day on average to really engage in teaching, since public schools have become dining halls and health care and basic nutrition centers for children, mothers and the elderly and unemployed. For its part, the middle class demands an education that will allow it immediate insertion into the workplace, in order to maintain its social condition, even though the job providers in the locality or region—who directly influence local education policies—cannot really satisfy these demands.

The modernization scheme tested in Chile and Argentina was repeated in Colombia in 1994, with the program "On the Edge of Opportunity" within the regulatory framework of the *General Education Act*, which established the Institutional Educational Project (PEI). That same year Costa Rica followed suit with its "Educational Policy for the 21st Century" through the High Council for Education. Similarly, Panama implemented the reforms "Pact for the Modernization of Panamanian Education" and the ten-year strategy "Modernization of Panamanian Education". In Brazil the experience has been different because of

the relative political autonomy of the educational systems in the federative states (Gajardo, 1999).

Also during the same year, El Salvador joined the other countries with the plan "Education with a View to the 21st Century" and "Up and Running with Educational Reform", which received technical assistance from Harvard University and funding from the Inter-American Development Bank.

In all of these cases, an evaluation has been used to emphasize the values of competitiveness and utilitarianism, the principles of private enterprise—bonus pay for quality, salary according to "performance", contracts with time limits for teachers—and the prestige of private schools has risen, to which students migrate in view of the impoverishment of public schools.

Ana De Salomé (2000) draws attention to the weakening of the defense of public higher education in El Salvador due to the undemocratic discrimination, segregation and anti-humanism of the neoliberal privatization educational discourse. In regards to the management of education, as it is presented in the context of privatization policies, the actors—teachers and parents—are faced with the responsibility of solving the school's immediate problems, with the resources at their disposal (additional time and effort; money, whether personal or collective). This implies an overexploitation on the one hand while at the same time reducing the pressure on the State resulting from social demands for the educational services it is obligated to provide. In the absence of a theoretical posture showing that the capitalist system favors social inequalities, school administration—through the imposition of a self-management approach—emerges as a mediating body in the pursuit of structural social change.

The decentralization of education

The political discourse of the "new federalism" has given rise to strategies for the reorganization of the national State, with a series of government policies aimed at the decentralization of national programs through their assignation to the federative states and municipalities. Political changes are limited to administrative and management changes in two directions: toward the state and local level, promoting social and educational self-management; and toward the intergovernmental level, thus justifying the disappearance of the nation-state and unnecessary national sovereignty, in order to smooth the way for international free trade.

The explicit argument supporting the reforms for achieving the "thinning of the State"—in other words, small government—is the need to streamline the administrative apparatus by reducing the state bureaucratic structure, which is seen in neoliberalism as the cause of social and economic inefficiency. In an effort to impart legitimacy to this discourse, the need for such changes is presented as benefitting the majority, even though their true aim is to promote market forces and maintain control of the social classes (Ornelas, 2003).

With decentralization, the organization of national political involvement is limited to the local sphere in its mobilization and potential and political actors are fragmented.

Another effect is the delegation of responsibility for the funding of education to the population through self-funding mechanisms. Adriana Puiggrós (1994) claims that educational decentralization does not represent the transfer of power to the people, but rather to the most powerful private groups. Nor does it mean the democratic pluralization of cultural proposals, but the balkanization of pedagogical discourse and the dismantling of State education, which is now transferred to national and international educational business enterprises.

Reforms and educational quality

The current concept of quality in education is based on total quality management (TQM), a highly successful paradigm in private corporations. The causes of "inefficiency" in public sector agencies have been analyzed using this approach and solutions proposed for them. The idea is that in order to improve the quality of goods and services, public centers must be influenced by free market principles. The TQM system has the following components: leadership, strategy, policy, personnel management, resources, processes and procedures (*plan-do-check-act*); it also includes meeting the expectations of customers and staff, in addition to reengineering processes and assessing results and impact on society. We should not forget that this reengineering emerged in the 1950's as a proposal for increasing profit rate following the breakdown of the Taylor-Ford industrial model.

Various studies (Beare, Caldwell and Millikan; Caldwell and Spinks; López Rupérez, cited in Santana, 1997) identified TQM as the fundamental factor behind the efficiency of private schools and felt that it would achieve excellence in public schools as well. In this regard, Santana (1997) argues that there is sufficient evidence that the models tested in other types of organizations cannot be mechanically applied to public organizations, including schools. Furthermore, citing José Gimeno Sacristán, Santana notes that in establishing the decentralized development of curriculum proposed in TQM, work between peers is prescribed for the planning, operation and independent evaluation. However, if not accompanied by training, education and the necessary material support, it will prove to be a disastrous experience, as well as more expensive than the centralized model. Senior and mid-level educational administration officials, advocates of quality management, place the responsibility for success or failure on the school and the teachers. As Juan Escudero (1999) points out, the last link in the chain of educational administration bears the social, pedagogical and economic burden for moving education forward.

Quality, evaluation and financing of education

One of the axioms of educational reform is the evaluation of school performance as an indicator of quality. These assessments, both nationally as well as internationally, are carried out as if the only variable to consider was academic achievement, regardless of socioeconomic conditions. The assumption is that social classes do not exist, nor is there socioeconomic and cultural inequality between the developed and developing countries.

Ferreiro (cited in Bustamante), Tort (cited in Bustamante) and Sarmiento (cited in Bustamante) assert that it has been repeatedly shown that in individual assessments, regardless of the aspect chosen, what is evaluated is socioeconomic condition, rather than actual intelligence, the difference in reading and writing abilities, or some other knowledge. It is recognized in academia that 80% of learning outcomes correspond to the socioeconomic conditions of life of the students' families (IIPE-Buenos Aires, 2001). It is striking that this fact is ignored—if not systematically suppressed—in academic and educational administrative circles.

Thus evaluation becomes a tool for the allocation of resources. The way it operates is clarified in a study by Eswin G.West (1998), who notes that in almost all the developing countries, in a comparison between public and private schools of performance evaluation results, the latter will always surpass the former. He argues that there is evidence that competition between public and private schools improves educational opportunities when parents and students are given the option—through individualization of funding—to choose the school they feel offers the best educational qualities.

Finally, according to West (1998), individualized State funding to private schools functions as a social equalizer and an act of justice, by providing people lacking sufficient resources access to private institutions which would otherwise be out of reach for them.[3] Hence, subsidizing private education with public funds is justified because these students achieve the highest test scores, the quality of education is improved through competition between public and private schools and social justice is advanced by equalizing the opportunities for private education in the population.

The studies offered as evidence of this logic describe the socio-educational reality and were conducted with methodological rigor; however, they do not explain the causes of the reality they describe. First, they do not take into account that a private educational enterprise is essentially a business whose objective is profit, whereas public education has broader social goals. The privatization of public education through state funding to private schools is a complete reversal of social values that benefits those who have the most with the resources of the majority which has the least. Moreover, contrary to all arguments for exposing educational services to the laws of the free market, subsidies for private schools contradict this

very principle by subsidizing the business ventures of private individuals with public funds.

Even if we take the view that subsidizing the payment of tuition fees at private schools provides social opportunities, tuition is only a small fraction of the educational spending generated by private schooling; the student and his family enter a world of material and symbolic needs inscribed in the values of the social class, very distant from their own socioeconomic condition, expenses for which no one will subsidize them.

The problems of socioeconomic and cultural inequality are not created by education, nor will it resolve them. What can be observed is a shifting of attention from the origin of economic and sociocultural problems to the school environment, thereby abandoning the actual search for comprehensive social solutions and social justice.

We must remember that negligible funding for sustained growth in Latin American countries and the coverage of their educational systems is what has caused the deterioration in the quality of services, and not vice versa, as some would have us believe when presenting as a cause that which is really an effect. In Mexico alone from 1982 to 1987 the educational system lost one third of its actual funding and teachers' salaries declined between 50 and 60% (Noriega, 1997).

As a result of the discourse on educational quality, public education is discredited due to the results of students' test scores, and its budget is decreased by the individualization of educational funding and its subsequent transfer to the private sector. Public schools are placed in a precarious financial, pedagogical and cognitive position, and thus are deprived of any possibility of being agencies of social mobility.

The case of Mexico

Public education policies in Mexico have been designed to harmonize the education sector with the rest of public policies that are aimed at structural change and linked to the reform of the State apparatus. The components of this reform are: the withdrawal of federal government from education, through administrative decentralization and federalization; the transfer of funding, maintenance and equipping of kindergarten, elementary and middle schools, normal schools and the National Pedagogical University to the states and municipalities; the privatization of kindergarten, elementary and middle school education through the policy of free education with *cost-sharing*, serving the underprivileged population with compensatory programs; and, most important of all, an explicit link with the business sector at all educational levels.

Initially, it was important to involve the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE, Spanish abbreviation), in order to ensure that teachers would not oppose the administrative and educational reforms and changes in values that would take

effect. Currently, even after federalization, the SNTE continues to retain its status as a national organization, although it has been circumscribed, restructured and placed by its leadership in the service of the neoconservative project. Margarita Noriega (1997) affirms that in the modernizing model of educational development the growth of universities is slowed, as quality is emphasized over coverage; tuition and fees increase, union involvement decreases and a system of individualized incentives and institutional and project evaluations is established. Student demand is channeled towards technological universities and private institutions of higher education.

The political course has been subject to the same kind of coercion which has already achieved economic changes and there is increasingly intense pressure from the government and the elites to effect a cultural change that is favorable to business interests, both national and international. The processes of "adaptation" to new trends and educational policies have been carried out with over determination of the economic course imposed by external pressures that have subjugated and enervated the response and mobilization capacity of the different social actors in Mexico.

The cooptation of the Mexican left has played an important role; one example is the University of Guadalajara (UdeG, abbreviation in Spanish) in Mexico, once combative and socialist, and which now is academically oriented toward the elitist approach to academic excellence and productivity—leaving aside the concept of education for the masses. Not only has the focus on improving educational quality in search of excellence reduced enrollments, but with the *Institutional Development Plan 1995-2001*, educational objectives were officially changed in order to link them primarily with the business and production sector (Navarro, 1998).

The former leftist student leaders, later chancellors at the UdeG, having embraced the modernizing discourse, presented university reforms sponsored by private enterprise in the state of Jalisco and by the U.S. embassy. Adolph Horn, representing the American business community in Guadalajara, in 2002 presided over the University Foundation that has financed the reforms of the UdeG (Cuellar y Frías, 2002).

The misrepresentation of information—or disinformation—by the government to the public in the mass media has played a decisive role in this process, although the opportunism displayed by academics that espouse the trend of modernizing discourse is also worth noting.

The educational project of the current government of President Vicente Fox is a continuation of the educational policy of previous governments. The "Quality School Program" (PEC, its abbreviation in Spanish) in Mexico is the implementation of the GTE strategy for the transformation of the organization and functioning of the Mexican educational system. The explicit objective of PEC is the redirection of federal and state educational management into the schools themselves. Pedagogically it is the independent development of a school project and the

instrumentation of accountability mechanisms in the system, through the evaluation of schools and teachers. In the Mexican model "healthy competition" does not occur between schools, but is directed against the school project which the members of the schools themselves have devised and "self-imposed" in order to qualify for the allocation of special funds. It is formally legalized through the *Performance Contract*, which is signed by the teachers, the administrative staff and the School Board for Social Participation, as well as by the State educational authorities.

Since the official goal of this project is to promote shared educational funding with the aim of obtaining additional financing—in order for the school project to be viable—the school staff must apply to the State and Federal authorities for additional resources through the Municipal Council for Social Participation (Secretaría de Educación Pública—Ministry of Public Education—2003).

The argument that the transformation of school administration and educational performance is the responsibility of teachers is based on the principle that they must fulfill the commitments they assumed when they signed the Performance Contract, combining their creativity—as if they had not so far pursued their work creatively—with the management leadership of the school principal and the inspiration of corporate ideology. Thus it is easy to see how the State's responsibility to provide educational outcomes for society, with efficiency and quality, is transferred to teachers.

Participation in the school project requires that the teaching staff labor beyond their working hours, in order to manage and apply for the additional funding now required. Planning must be accompanied by self-evaluation as well as an accounting of the funds that have been received, which places a particular responsibility on the teacher, who may be held accountable if the envisioned educational improvement is not achieved. The performance parameters are developed by a group of experts who have designed these indicators for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and which are used to compare the performance of students in countries belonging to this organism with Mexican students.

Furthermore, the transfer of the financial responsibility for providing education from the State to parents is defended on the grounds that there should be shared funding. The ideological aspect is covered by offering the liberal argument that parents have the right to choose the orientation of their children's education. This principle of 19th century liberalism has influenced the neoliberal reorientation of education in Mexico; however, a paradoxical alliance with the conservatism of the National Parents' Union has allowed the infiltration of the values that liberalism once fought against, by denying the triad of historical educational values: free, secular and public education.

With the collapse of the industrial sector, the rise in unemployment, the concentration of wealth in a small elite and the increasing poverty of most of the

population, the model of economic-political and social-educational development based on trade and business liberalization n has manifested its failure in Latin America. Now, ten years after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect, Mexico is the best example of this failure (Núñez, 2004). In the latest evaluations of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of OECD, Mexico has occupied the last places in the results for reading comprehension, writing and science (National Institute for Educational Evaluation, 2003).

To continue in this direction is to persist in error; an alternative model of economic, political, social and educational development is required—one that redistributes material and symbolic wealth and genuinely promotes scientific, technological and cultural development at the national level.

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[1] The Inter-American Dialogue is the central guide for U.S. policy analysis and issues of communication and exchange in the Western Hemisphere. The sponsors of Inter-American Dialogue are the principle multinational corporations, as can be seen on its website. (http://www.thedialogue.org/programs/corporate/members.asp)

[2] The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (http://www.usaid.gov) funds non-governmental organizations in Latin America, with the aim of orienting the internal policies of the region towards U.S. goals or interests. The most obvious example of this was the participation of Adolfo A. Franco and Otto Reich (the latter U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs) in the organization of the failed "coup" against the constitutional government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Franco was the most senior USAID official for Latin America and the organization's website (http://www.usaid.gov/espanol/franco.html) identifies him as one of the hundred most influential Hispanics in the U.S. In the early eighties Otto Reich held the same position (Casson y Brooks, 2002).

[3] Individualized funding consists of various forms of government subsidies: direct grants to schools—whether public or private—according to the number of students enrolled, as in the case of Chile, Colombia and Guatemala. Another variation is to give checks, scholarships or educational vouchers directly to the parents, so that they may personally select the school of their choice, as is done in Sweden, the U.S. and Great Britain. Another version is a combination of both strategies, as in Canada (West, 1998).