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The Young People and the Challenges of Educational and Work Inclusion in Argentina after the Structural Changes of the 90's. Causes, Dynamics and Consequences

Los jóvenes y los retos de la inclusión educativa y laboral en Argentina, a partir de las transformaciones de los años 90. Causas, dinámicas y consecuencias

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Abstract

The structural changes implemented in the 90s touched every area and sector of Argentine society. These changes had an undeniable paradigmatic character. At this time new guide lines were erected—dynamics and social fabrics that induced the gestation of complex and contradictory processes of social inclusion and exclusion. The environment of educational policy constituted a neurological epicenter for the changes undertaken. The advent of the Federal Education Act undoubtedly summed up the government's primary commitment to address the challenges rooted in the market society, the new employment directives, and democratic institutional life. In this context, the transitions of young people from the educational system to the employment market underwent profound changes hampered by the pluralization and the individualization of opportunities, risks, and socioeconomic segregation.

Key words: Youth, educational reform, access to education, Argentina.

Introduction

The poor---those who are called poor--
are those who have no silence,
nor can they buy it.

(Eduardo Galeano)

Today, the relationship established between education, youth and work has tended to be consolidated into one of the most important aspects of the developmental project in the various countries of the Latin American region.

Beyond the importance attributed to this strategic combination, we see that the insecurity of job offers, the questionable quality of public educational offerings, and the volatility of economic growth are inextricably bound to a trend toward concentration of wealth, the meritocratic distribution of social benefits and social dualization affecting mainly the younger generation.

From the implementation of education reforms in the decade of the 90s to the present, there has been an effort to build articulatory bridges between education and labor through programs, training activities and capacitation for supporting the transition of young people from schools to the labor market and adult life.

Despite the success of some programs for vocational training and the professional education of youth, the questionable quality of the formal and informal educational proposals; the segmentation and incoordination of the *curriculum*, the constant and elevated rate of unemployment; the proliferation of informal employment activities and the absence of political and institutional mechanisms call into question the supposed revalorization of the role of new generations as strategic actors of development. In this context one notes the loss of value of the proposals for

education and vocational training that seem to be related to the problematic access to decent and productive employment.

The established discontinuity between the trends and dynamics of labor market development, productive economic strategy, cultural changes and fashionable identity models and the post-reformation structural educational models is unquestionably an exposed nerve in the debate over how to harmonize the education/work binomial among the youth. The concomitance of these transformation processes is progressively acquiring greater relevance, reinforcing the necessity for discussing more profoundly the question of the young protagonists and all the challenges and restrictions they face today.

I. On the structural changes of the 90s and their mark on Argentine society

The structural changes implemented in Argentina, especially between the late 80s and mid-90s of the last century, produced significant changes in social policies, the structure of the labor market and the disposition of social actors and institutions involved in modulating the transition of young people from schools to the workplace and adulthood.

The challenges trampled by economic globalization after the intrusion of the values associated with flexibility, competitiveness, versatility, leadership capacity, organizational technical appropriateness, and resolute operationalism facing emerging conflicts among the most important aspects, promoted the viability of important socio-educational transformations. This obliged the educational community, the local public sector and the bodies of technical and financial cooperation to prosecute the dynamization of reforms in the political educational space (Filmus, 2003; Tedesco, 2004). The axes of this were the priorities and the objectives of the educational system, along with professional orientation, and the programming of technical, professional and labor strategies.

During the decade of the 90s, international organizations like the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, in consensus with the leadership of the educational administrations and local governments openly recognized the need for putting into practice reforms that would be inclined to redefine the theoretical and political bases for planning, implementing and evaluating the educational proposal in the countries of the region (Sottoli, 1999).

In this perspective, attention to the demands of the various social groups, reinforced by local governments and the focus of political actions and programs on specific community requirements, as well as the interest of the economic sector, made sense of the reforms being advocated (O' Donnell, 2001).

The proposals linked with the decentralization of the educational system, the flexibilization of curricular approaches, the quantitative and standardized evaluation

of the service, the reinforcement of institutional autonomy, the partial privatization and standardized service, strengthening the institutional autonomy, the partial privatization of the administration of educational services, the reduction of direct state intervention in matters of administration and financing, and the search for strategic alliances with the third sector (civil society and private initiative) crystallized the framework of priorities within which the most significant changes were managed (Aparicio, 2004; Riquelme, 2004).

Fifteen years after the implementation of Argentina's educational reforms, we may conclude that the coercive and unidirectional manner in which the greater part of the innovative projects were put in force did not foresee the noxious consequences that the policies of privatization and decentralization would have for the majority of the social sectors. The result was a greater concentration of power in the hands of the central government, a greater segmentation of the training offers in the hands of central government, and a systematic dismantling of public infrastructure, encouraged by the passive role of the state¹

The feeble accountability and unnecessary intervention that characterized the state during the process of structural reform made it impossible to guarantee satisfactory standards of excellence throughout the educational system—standards which otherwise would have supported the most destitute sectors in their learning processes, and would have made an understanding of quality more accessible to the most vulnerable groups of citizens (Puiggros, 2002).

In view of this, one could postulate that the enactment of the Federal Law of Education (24,195), in spite of the fact that it led to some improvement in certain aspects of the curriculum (technological and administrative), resulted in increasing the inequality of people's access to education, in proportion to their economic, ethno-cultural and family situation. At that time, then, it was persons of the more affluent sectors who had a better opportunity for establishing themselves in the social, economic and labor system, and for maintaining themselves within it.

It is no coincidence that once the failure of the new educational plan's programs and policies had been substantiated, many of the changes came under review—the result being that the Federal Law of Education, fifteen years after its implementation, was recently replaced by the National Education Law (26.206).

In Argentina and Latin America, there is a consensus of opinion that the educational system, with all its political, institutional, professional, scientific, technological and curricular aspects, needs a critical and substantial appraisal, due to the urgency need for changes in the fields of economy, labor, culture and society, both globally and locally (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC] and UNESCO, 1992, ECLAC, 2000). This substantial restatement of the educational schematic has bolstered the modernization of its political, philosophical and epistemological foundations, as well as the organization of curricula, teaching and practice, the imprint of historical social processes of learning and teaching, and the

impact of biographical and collective knowledge, skills and socialized values by educational institutions in every modality and at every level (Filmus, 1999).

Since the reform went into effect, educational policy has sought to establish strategies for strengthening social integration; curricular alternatives and methodologies for overcoming the deficits inherent in the educational system; and for forming communications bridges between the spheres of educational training and those of other areas and social policies. In reality, the manner in which the educational reform proposal was implemented gave it a coercive, decontextualized, and auto-referential character. Furthermore, it was revealed as impossible to engage with the variety of scenarios, interstices and dynamics associated with educational training in the broad, diverse, educational spectrum of the nation.

The focus of the objectives and proposals of the new model were shown to modify for the most part, the bureaucratic, legal, educational and institutional components of the educational system without considering the importance of working on the dispositions, predispositions and representations of those involved in the action and educational scenarios. Different analyses prepared concerning the impact of the reform (Tedesco and Lopez, 2001; Salvia and Miranda, 1999; Puiggros, 1999) conclude that this marked complexity was ignored by the political, bureaucratic and technical sector in charge of putting the educational reform in place. It is specifically in this setting that even now there are in play tangled factors related to finding the requisite, appropriate criteria for training children and youth, as well as for the dimension of future social challenges.

The breakdown of the social fabric and the deterioration of the traditional mechanisms of social transition and promotion in the juvenile political, social and civilian arena have also shown the inadequacy of this educational policy in confronting and supporting the ongoing processes of social transformation. The search for appropriate responses to the challenges of the social, occupational and educational integration of young people is still a sore spot in the debate over educational policy in Argentina.

All in all, the predominance of the frustration the educational reform and its set of structural reforms have left behind them, should engender the reflection necessary to effect a real change in the lives of future generations.

II. The perception and the imperception of young people: a possible cause of the problems

The stage of life in which youth is set acquires differentiated characteristics, according to the type of society, the socioeconomic strata to which young people belong, as well as the cultural idiosyncrasy, gender and geographical life situation in which they are involved. These conditioners substantially alter the moment, the dynamic, the sense and the attributes that define what it means to be young and to be a part of youth in a certain historical time and place (Urresti and Margulis, 1996; Bajoit, 2003).

From this, it is clear that the culmination of the juvenile stage today is not necessarily marked by incorporation into adulthood and access to secure employment, as it used to be, traditionally, concatenated with a process of prior preparation and vocational education—a "social moratorium" within the collective imagination in modern, Western societies (Krauskopf, 2004).

Currently it appears that young people experience a profound process of social differentiation, pluralization and identity strongly rooted in versatility, flexibility and mobility, erected as decisive canons of family, individual and collective life. This in turn puts in check the legitimacy of the universal and consistent vision regarding young people and their life worlds, which still operates in the imagination of society and its institutions of socialization, such as schools. In this perspective, the imprint of inequality, the lack of opportunities, and the lack of political parameters and institutional points of reference generate differentiating breaches that simultaneously pluralize and separate young people in their *condition of youth*.

In consequence, the transition from school to the labor market, and the participation of youth in collective life suffers a considerable modification. This is due to at least three reasons: a) the deep uncertainty that erupts in the dailiness of young people, b) the absence of permanent collective values that would provide a frame of reference and make sense of the processes of socialization, and c) the imminent collapse of the political and social mechanisms of social compensation and the loss of the legitimacy of public institutions (Sirvent, 2000).

In Argentina, the prolonged absence of mechanisms of social regulation and promotion for helping young people overcome difficulties in the workplace, and in the educational, economic and family environment, is an abuse: the greatest stumbling block in dealing with young people, the causes and effects of problems such as unemployment, school dropout, life's precariousness, poverty, risk, disorientation, marginality and delinquency, among the most significant.

However, although these difficulties promise the historical projection of societies and the unfolding of the new generations' cognitive potential, they also continue to appear as secondary or almost irrelevant aspects of the political agenda in ministries and institutions which have direct implications on the discussion of issues related to education, employment and youth.

The exclusion of young people is a handicap relating to the concretization of a competitive and sustainable model of development regarding which, paradoxically, there is an attempt to implement. Paradoxically, because the youth of today will be the adults of tomorrow, and hence the problems affecting them, like the advantageous conditions, will influence the future deployment of their skills, talents and knowledge, as well as the historic projection of society as a whole (Aparicio, 2006; Tedesco, 2004).

The frail and feeble involvement of young people in the establishment of a more inclusive model of development, impacts and affects the meager amount of

recognition—explicit and implicit—given their interests, privileges and needs by organizations and bureaucratic, institutional and political actors. It is very disquieting to observe the marginalization of youth in areas of decision-making where proposals and actions that have direct bearing on their lives and on their educational and employment projects are being discussed.

Consequently, the idea of promoting the training of young people to act as participants in the processes of social transformation appears to be achievable only as a more distant goal rather than as a practicable reality, unless serious work is done to modify the political and social view instituted in society and in the state, as having to do with the young (Sirvent, 2001, Rodriguez, 2005).

In other words, belittling young people's capacity for involvement and negotiation strategies hinders the deployment of skills and experiences of participation and negotiation of interests, which ends in reproducing simplistic cultural stereotypes remote from reality.

The practices of exclusion and discrimination against different social groups (women, indigenous people, the poor, the elderly, the disabled, ethnic or religious minorities, the non-heterosexual) defined by features almost always adscriptive in terms of cultural and symbolic representations of what constitutes the "difference", fracture the identity of a society, negatively affect the sense of belonging to it for those who are marginalized, and therefore, undermine social cohesion. This is a complex phenomenon (...) that manifests itself subjectively in sociocultural representations, stereotypes, traditions and stigmas (ECLAC, 2007, p. 84).

As we can see, public policies aimed at young people do not have an up-to-date generational perspective, relevant and systematic, to take the place of the subjective characteristics and polyvalent biographies. The lackluster attention given by public administration and political and institutional management to the intrinsic diversity and heterogeneity of youth, is a major cause for young people's invisibility in their diversity and uniqueness.

Due to the lack of congruence between public policies and programs, and the demands, interests and expectations of the younger generation, Rodriguez (2002) adds that:

Children who are cared for by mother-child programs, are not necessarily assisted by vocational training programs later on when they reach adolescence, or by housing programs when they set up new families, etc.

This being the case, even though we might have a much stronger political resolve, as well as far greater resources with which to operate, we would go on facing serious problems of management, making it more appropriate to look for alternative answers, and to address the issues we have pointed out—those whose solution, furthermore, might lie more closely within our reach (not the case with resources) (p. 71).

III. Youth transitions and their new dynamics, risks and possibilities

In the specific area of the labor market, the turnaround in the employment policy brought with it the dynamization of a process of rationalization of resources and public investment in this sector, having to do with recycling and dismantling institutions (trade unions, bodies and spaces of concertation and intersectorial dialogue), reforms in the fields of organization and social protection, ampliation of the strategic power of promoters in the economy's private sector, the decentralization of the political and administrative responsibilities of the State, and the diversification of channels for local economic and regional development (Aparicio, 2005; Salvia and Tuñón, 2002).

The unsatisfactory generation of employment, not quantitatively or qualitatively consistent with the demands, profiles and potential of the different productive actors, finds its explanation in the segregating logic of the current neoliberal economic model. Unemployment impinges upon youth as one of the most common problems producing skepticism regarding the contribution of educational and vocational training institutions that might improve their personal and social alternatives (accumulated educational capital) for participating fully in the benefits of employment and the society (Jacinto, 1999; Gallart, 1999). This is not surprising in a situation where everything seems to indicate that the accumulation of educational credentials is no longer a "blank check" to ensure inclusion and social advancement.

In this scenario there are new trends and logics that would define the beginning of a new stage in the transition of young people, namely:

- Trends towards greater selectivity and socioeconomic exclusion (Fitoussi and Rosenvallon, 1997; Minujín 1998b);
- The transformation of contractual relations, the weak social protection, and the restricted forms of participation in the labor market as well as in political and institutional life (Tokman, 2003);
- The unpredictability and dizzying, transitory nature of the processes and institutions for change itself (Minujín, 1998a);
- The immediacy and flexibility which require constant adaptation by young people to the new structures of the economic and employment world (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2004);
- The lack of specialized political alternatives in the youth sector, and the lack of an intersectorial political strategy capable of providing an underpinning for all the programs and actions developed by the state and civil society, for the purpose of reducing the uncertainties and risks which permeate the transitions of young people (Carbajal, 2005; Gallart, 2000a; Jacinto, 2001). International Labor [ILO], 2004).

In 2000 in Argentina, unemployment among the youth population reached the highest level in that nation's history: 46.6% for those aged 15-25 years ([ILO, 2001, 2002). However, the deterioration in social structure, economy and employment appears to have kept pace with an ever-increasing constriction of formal and

productive employment and production, the concentration of wealth, the decrease in opportunities for participation in the social benefits of employment, and the low profile of the political proposals implemented in the field of educational training designed for teenagers and young people with difficulties in educational, work-related and social integration (Carbajal, 2005; Gallart, 2000a; Jacinto, 2001). International Labor [ILO],

The structural dissociation between compliance with the requirements of flexibilization, productivity and efficiency demanded of the units of production of services and products by the new macroeconomic patterns, and the negative consequences registered in the productive, occupational and social system, has opened a broad range of challenges exerting an inexorable demand for unified resolution by the state, the productive sector, and society as a whole (Zaffaroni, 2005).

During this period in history, across the spectrum of emerging economies, the paradoxical trend in the growth of macroeconomics was marked by an enlargement of the circuits of capital, a reduction of restrictions on private investment, a high rate of earnings by the financial and speculative sector, and the dynamism of monetary transactions. Indeed, none of this seems to have been concatenated to the creation of real jobs, the qualitative and quantitative expansion of social welfare and consumption among the citizens, a dedication to equal opportunities and social cohesion, support for ecological sustainability and the promotion of economic and productive structures and proposals (Beck, 1998, Bourdieu, 1998a, 1998b; Bauman, 2000).

However, the dichotomy created between the low generation of decent employment and the investors' level of earnings, the flow of capital and the economic financial dynamism reflect one of the most substantive and contradictory characters of the economic model of the free market. This relativizes the importance of generating employment and in parallel, improving working conditions and social welfare while consolidating its global hegemony (Castel, 1998, 2005, Gorz, 1989, 2000).

After the state reform, there was a change in all the criteria and priorities which give rise to the whole array of public policies. Therefore, in the last 15 years, there has been an effort to address recidivism and to provide focused, short-term solutions for social structural problems: poverty, unemployment, socioeconomic inequality, poor quality of the education system, etc. In this sense, it is clear that many of the proposals and work programs such as the Youth Training Project, the Image Project and the Micro-Company Project, as well as professional training programs designed to remedy youth unemployment, did not consider other social fields where young people operate and interact (Mancebo, 1998; Aparicio 2007b).

When thinking about how to overcome the socio-economic exclusion, the unemployment, the low educational expectations of our youngest citizens, and the overwhelming carelessness that permeates the majority of their occupational activities, we encounter a major problem: the hegemony of a standard vision of

youth and young people. As pointed out in Zaffaroni's timely observation (2007, p. 50):

The category of youth as a cultural construction is permeated throughout with the characteristics of a particular social formation; while in Europe it is perceived as a stage of psychosocial protection, in Latin America it is the sector most affected by inequality and exclusion.

Young people are not a social unit with interests in common. They differ—the youth of urban poverty, those of rural poverty, indigenous young people, those punished by social violence, those distanced from the school environment, the abandoned, the hungry, the homeless, those deprived of affection [...] Their cultural configurations are different, their social ties—there is only one real point where they approach a real heterogeneity, and it has to do with time; the time of youth is the future. That of adults is the present.

The new phenomena of individualization and pluralization of social backgrounds—as analyzed further on—has tended to relativize and “date” all the political strategy of training, instruction and socio-educational promotion (Gallart, 2000b). The standardization of the condition of the young person as a universal subject, restructured and almost stripped of historicity in our view, has contributed to an opacity of vision regarding young people's life-worlds (*Lebenswelt*), diminishing their idiosyncratic, identifying, historic, subjective, affective and representational aspects (Thiersch, 2002; Thiersch and Grunwald, 2004, Bourdieu, 1999).

In this way, the persistence of the social label or seal on young adults in the adult world and the state's ministerial, administrative and bureaucratic organizations has deepened the invisibility of their circumscribing, historical, social reality—namely, social institutions, games and power struggles; the interactions, the submissions, the survival strategies, the ways of consensus and negotiation; and the biographical and social projects, etc. (Margulis and Urresti 1997, ECLAC, 2001; Gallart, 2004a). That is to say:

This type of visualization dominated by the parameter of what the adult world identifies and defines as “youth”, on several occasions furthered the institution of generalized and barely-participative recommendations that increased the dissonance among the target population (framework of priorities and exigency), the methodological tools and program proposals (political framework) and the degree of plausibility and/or success of these programs' objectives (Aparicio, 2007a, p. 136).

If we consider the impact of policies aimed at aiding the transitions of young people (in education and employment) in this particular period, we may conclude that they could not meet two basic objectives:

- Diminish the uncertainty, lack of coordination, and defenselessness engendered by the new work processes of exclusion in a context of crisis, economic deceleration, and the exacerbation of the logic of the market as the only reference for social development, thus impairing the socioeducational priorities (Sirvent and Llosa, 1998);

- Address the social trends and logics that induce unequal distribution of educational benefits of education: specifically, the capital and culture socialized through professional training, the formal education system and other avenues of non-formal training (Rodríguez, 2002).²

In this context, and despite the failures of the past, educational policy is still called upon to play a role in transforming the lives of young people, not only to shed light on the complexity of the most pressing social, occupational and economic problems, but also to build strategies and programs and provide socioeducational training opportunities with the power to bring about change (UNESCO, 2001). That is, it is absolutely essential to abandon the assistentialist and fragmentary character that distinguished the forms of state socioeducational involvement in the 90s, and to try out criteria and actions that take the risk of empowerment, and not only that of the young players and their social environment.

IV. The occupational conditions of youth, between exclusion and participation

In the context of Argentina, and similarly in the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean, the incipient pluralization of life choices (civil, cultural, ethical, religious, sexual, etc.), and the individualization of decisions made regarding the organization of educational, professional and occupational trajectories are conspicuous as the new conditions of young people's lives.

From this perspective, the diversification of the niches and the alternatives for employment in its most diverse expressions—underemployment, overemployment, unemployment and multiple employment—come to constitute components inherent in the spectrum of alternatives—real and potential—of participation in the labor market. The modification of how the traditional mechanisms for inclusion in the labor market were regarded, the successive shifts and interruptions in the work cycle, and the ways in which the economic and occupational transitions significantly suppress economic and labor have had a significant effect on the logic of deployment, application and organization of the educational, professional and labor competencies acquired by individuals.³

This phenomenon exposes the deep level of division between the real demands of the labor market, and the capacity of absorption (recruitment by the economy and the function of educational policies). As evidence we should add that in the period 1998-2001 three out of four young people who were employed worked at jobs below their level of training.

In the sum of contradictions and restrictions that affect the education-employment-improvement possibilities for social participation, this particular fact aggravates the discouragement, the absence of expectations and the fragility of the occupational and professional projects. Like Jacinto, Lasida, and Ruétalo Berrutti (1998) we believe that:

“The greatest risk of exclusion particularly affects young people, who face a decrease in their chances for employment and social insertion. In a context where more and more skills needed for social life are the same needed for work, the strategic orientation of any involvement with them should be directed to strengthening them as social actors (p. 10). “

Consistent with this diagnosis and because of the dizzying rise in unemployment and the informality of work, Neff, Battistini Panigo and Perez (1999), postulate that these problems affected:

...the various social groups heterogeneously, hitting the poorest hardest—those whose long-term employment rate increased between 1988 and 1997, rising from 0.6% to 5.2%. By contrast, in the highest stratum, the relevant rate rose only 0.2% to 1.3% on the same dates (p. 64).

Thus, the step from productivity to occupational non-productivity obviously must be assumed in the first place, to be a structural condition of the productive market, and the second, as a direct consequence of the invasion of flexibilization, liberalization and privatization policies implemented in the labor market, and that in Argentina were strongly associated with insecurity and lack of social protection (Sage, 2002).

The significant lack of genuinely productive jobs became established in this particular period as a condition inherent in the job market, so that "only 3 out of every 10 jobs created in the decade can be included in this category; their share of total employment fell from 46.4% in 1990 to 42.4% in 1998 (Filmus, Kaplan and Moragues, 2001, p. 51).

As we well know, job stability is a sine qua non for achieving higher incomes and access to decent contract conditions, as well as for obtaining satisfactory levels of social protection and participation in certain basic social services and goods. Thus for example, under flexibilization of labor, contract patterns changed, becoming more individualistic, time-related and dynamic (ILO, 2005). The changes in this regard were concentrated mainly on the work hours, the grounds for dismissal, assignment and social coverage of workers, and the rights and obligations of both employees and employers, etc.

The impact of the vulnerability, segregation and inequality recorded in the Argentine labor market between 1998 and 2001 contributed to deteriorating living conditions and production, and also led to the failure of educational and employment transitions of young people. In this perspective Filmus *et al.* (2001) state that:

Informal labor increased at a greater annual rate than the overall employment (3.9%). Therefore, 6 of every 10 new jobs generated in the 90s were created by this sector, which meant that its share in the total number of those employed increased from 44.4% in 1990 to 47.9% in 1998. (p. 49).

Blame for the advance of the economy's informal sector was laid on the collapse of a productive and employment model based on free will, autonomous dynamism, and on the State's lack of comprehension. Contrary to the optimistic forecasts cherished

by the political and technocratic class, as well as by the economic sector, the fall of the modern sector of the economy, according to the study mentioned above, was reflected in the diminution of employment in this area from 55.6 % in 1990 to 52.1% in 1999.

The new economic model linked to the principles of a free market economy seems to have developed a fatal but effective strategy for evading the provision of social guarantees and refusing to assume legal and political commitments when recruiting the new labor force. Then, disdaining guidelines for control, regulation and external modulation that could alter the principles of liberalization and flexibilization of productive activities, it appealed to the control of an objective, self-regulating and connecting economic force, as the only valid rationale by which to achieve the success of productive activities, and to overcome the disfunctional aspects that plagued the productive employment system.

This unidirectional and simplistic logic undoubtedly represented the paradigmatic implementation of an economy out of control, disconnected from society and refusing to assume the long-term human cost of such profound transformations (Neffa *et al.*, 1999).

The precarious state of the labor market in the case of Argentina was compounded with the unequal distribution of income, wealth and social benefits. With equal force, it tended to strengthen the differences between social groups. This simultaneously strengthened the meritocratic assignment of jobs and the unequal distribution of social opportunities in order to objectify work trajectories and biographical projects.

Unemployment in the context of Argentina mainly affected young people exposed to conditions of poverty, social insecurity and economic risk. The majority of the unemployed, therefore, represented an itinerant, mobile, and vacant superpopulation, whose struggle for admission to the production system had a destabilizing impact on wage levels, union representation mechanisms and observance of the social and labor rights of those involved in the production chain (Monza, 1998, Aparicio, 2006).

V. The crossroads of inequality and social, economic and cultural diversity to day

The society of knowledge is a collective project anchored in the value and progress of technology and science, and has been progressively composed of an inexorable reference to the time of contemplating the socio-educational training of new generations (Castells, 1998). In this context, new opportunities for social participation on a global scale were defined, and new spaces for the creation of life projects, cultural identities and worldviews were created.

Young people in particular, due to their flexibility and dynamism, have major advantages in adapting to new contexts and features of scientific and technological knowledge, the development of languages and virtual codes for learning and

interaction, communicative innovation, cultural transformations and the deployment of economic and productive globalization. Because of this, it is young people who would be the preferred protagonists in the critical organization and sifting through of these processes of change.

In this perspective, the unrestricted participation of youth in the areas of knowledge and culture is vital and paramount for strategically guiding the historical social development of a community. Strangely enough, it is at this particular point that there is agreement—at a rhetorical level—among local and civil organizations, and international agencies of cooperation for the purpose of development.

But this question remains: if there is agreement in recognizing the importance of the role young people play in today's process of social development, then how can we explain that they have not been able to overcome:

- the elevated indices of youth unemployment and underemployment which reinforce the vulnerability and the breakdown of the different settings of their life,
- the problematic and diffuse organization of the educational offers directed toward the youth sector, which persist in not considering neither youth nor their organizations as valid interlocutors,
- the early incorporation into the labor market of the most vulnerable sectors, a situation which alters the biographical and social projection of youth, often impeding the proper culmination of the processes of educational and vocational training,
- the invisibility and political, institutional and legal powerlessness which young people experience, and which confuse the alternatives of considering young people holistically, that is to say, appealing to their identities, life contexts, perceptions and images,
- the feeble institutional and political participation of young people, which is proportional to the weak actual validation of the demands and requirements of the sector, and
- the lack of strategies for consensus at a civil and political level in an ambiguous and contradictory context, where young people on the one hand are known to assume a predominating role in managing development processes; and on the other hand, are often themselves those who remain marginalized from the benefits provided by education, social security, housing, decent jobs and entrance into the labor market?

In this scenario, young people feel trapped at the in the middle of the socioeconomic inequality running through the multiple contexts of their lives, and restricts their ability to organize their own paths and biographical transitions from the education system to the labor market. Consequently, uncertainty becomes a norm, instability a constant, and the search for channels of participation in the labor market and in social life seems to find no echo among the more important political and institutional measures in the field of education and employment (Zaffaroni, 2006; Sirvent, 1999).

The vulnerability of the young is a cumulative, long-term, structural problem that affects at least two generations, to be precise, today's youth and the youth of tomorrow. Over the past 30 years the deliberate absence of an inclusive social model with a capacity for inclusion and historic viability has made young people its principal victims. With such a critical focus, Zaffaroni (2007) notes that among the young:

In Argentina today, the sense of the future is altered, and is no longer the image of progress, where everything is on the way. Instead, it is changing into the chance/accidental, the random, where everything begins to look unsafe and ephemeral.

This sensation of insecurity linked to social unrest to massive unemployment, to the loss of identity, to uncertainty about the future, leads to an perplexed and bewildered "Who am I?" "How do I relate with others?" "What am I gonna do?" This uncertainty causes a breakdown of collective projects and performances, in terms of social organization, education, work, the affect, the possibility of the future (pp.50-51).

The analysis of the various fields of social inclusion and participation of young people is a task urgently needed for grasping the complexity of the scenarios and processes of educational and employment transition; then for developing strategies for political involvement consistent with the diversity and specificity of their demands, and coming to an agreement with youth on the subject of political intervention tools (programs, projects, institutional arrangements, pacts, laws, etc.)

In relation to this, proposals are needed for socioeducational training that will be effective in accompanying the transition of young people, and in building up their competencies, arrangements and social capital for addressing the changes generated within the labor market and social life.

In addition, proposals are needed for making intelligible the new forms of collective behavioral organization, and for providing a critical approach to the dynamics and interchanges conceived and developed among the various social fields of life, and for fighting the tendencies of socioeconomic exclusion that prevail at a local and global level. These are the icons impossible to delegate, and which guide future action in young people's political environment.

VI. Conclusion

Nobody liberates anybody, nor is anybody liberated alone
men are liberated in communion

—Paulo Freire

The consequences of the paradigmatic transformation of the State as universal comptroller and compensator of social inequalities took on a deadly dimension, which, in the end, damaged the social fabric and dismantled the strategic spaces and mechanisms for social political involvement. After the structural reforms were

introduced, the state social position of "arbitrator guarantor" was created, ready to intervene only in specific situations, and where it was essential, without attempting to follow the trends and the guidelines of an overvalued market, adhering to the interests of the economic, productive and entrepreneurial class.

Regarding these conditions, the post-social Argentine state—as some experts assert—was a victim of its own cuts and amputations, in trying and not being able, *a posteriori*, to accomplish the promotion of actions and policies capable of resolving the contradictions inherent in the prevailing economic, labor, social and educational environment which promised the objective possibilities of social participation by new generations.

In the political educational environment it is necessary to assume that young people and their trajectories of inclusion constitute in themselves a fundamental issue to address. For this reason, the specificity of their characters still requires a more systematic and contextual approach that will optimize the efforts undertaken in the field of educational training by the state, civil society, and industry representatives.

The approximation critical to the realities experienced by young people could significantly further a broadening of the theoretical and practical horizons of the socioeducational work done in this specific social area. Similarly, the generation of a space for reflection and debate that would anticipate increasing the involvement of young people in the socioeducational actions, can favor the effectiveness of public investment in that sector, while simultaneously increasing the democratic and participative foundation for their advent in political and institutional life.

As to the *naturalness* of how the problems and social contradictions are assumed in the environment of training young people, these constitute the beginning of every alternative for success. That is our challenge; therein too, lies the historical significance of that challenge. Based on this idea-force, the policies and programs for the promotion of the employment insertion of youth—sporadic efforts, barely contextualized in the past—require new theoretical and conceptual options that promote the perception of the heterogeneous, changeable and inequitable reality in which young people live today.

Young people who have a low educational level, prevented access to elementary material and symbolic goods with which to participate fully in social, political and cultural life, tend to be more prone to falling into poverty and insecure employment. This trend at present has not changed by any means, although it is recognized that its deadly consequences have are more apt to be stirred up and weighed through corrective actions undertaken by the state.

In a context where the low profile of educational offerings—formal and informal— is outstanding, and the political mechanisms of promotion seem to succumb to fragmentation and senselessness, it is necessary to move forward in the creation of political and institutional mechanisms that can support the integration and the

socioeducational participation of young people in a manner that will inspire their trust.

For this reason, and in conclusion, we will show that the same emphasis should be given to working on reorienting the political and social educational actions, trying to optimize the coordination of local actions as well as contextualizing the contribution of public investments—at a professional, institutional, and programming level—, according to the bona fide pleas of young people. Reinforcement (in the sense of *empowerment*) of young people's participation can exemplify an effective way to reconfigure the structures, logic and practices of social segregation now entrenched in the educational system and the labor market.

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¹ To this, we add what we have stated elsewhere: In this sense the weight of interest regarding the economic-productive sector shifts to other references and social forces linked to the community, cultural and local. This skewed point of view leads the market and all its subsidiaries to objectify its prerogatives and fundamental requirements. This, in turn, has allowed the validation of the productive sector's interests as the sole criterion for defining projects, strategies and models having to do with training and social intervention to counteract the problems affecting the world of youth. This has in fact led to a narrowing of the space, the pluralities and the interplay of negotiations occurring in the educational arena, which theoretically, in a democratic situation should prioritize and tend to improve the degree of penetration and articulation of educational offerings with the historical and social complexity of actors, contexts and local realities (Aparicio, 2007, pp.199-200).

² In a report on the relationship between education and employment, Filmus et al. (2001) predict that: Between 1980 y 1999, among those who finished junior high school, the percentage of those who found themselves in this situation rose from 7.2 % to 29.2%. If to this rate we add the self-employed and the unemployed, it is possible to propose that today in Argentina more than half of the junior high school graduates will receive no retirement benefits (p. 99).

³ Due to the prevailing socio-economic status among the young, Monza (1998, p. 228) comments that these are people who "share the greatest level of adaptability and consent to the criteria of insecurity, systematic deterioration, passive adaptation and flexibility which rule and review the tendencies of today's labor market in Argentina."