Successes and Failures of Latin American Education in the Twentieth Century

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The Century of Education: Preliminary Considerations

The Twentieth century is marked by the expansion of educational opportunities in Latin America. Particularly in the last five decades public resources, although limited, have been spent in the provision of basic education for children, youth and adults; the years of obligatory schooling are extended significantly; initial education is provided to an increasingly broad gamut of families; access for children with learning deficiencies or disabilities is facilitated in classrooms; and opportunities for the poor, immigrants and indigenous peoples, as well as for girls and women are substantially improved. Along with the expansion of opportunities, the efficiency is enhanced; more students remain in the primary and secondary levels and advance to post-secondary schools.

The expansion and universalization of education has been seen as a condition for social justice and individual responsibilities in Latin America. It means that they accept the argument of the Enlightenment, the modern premise which is reinforced with developments of economics of education as reviewed later. In their belief there is no social advance without more investments in education. A more educated population is supposed to be more tolerant and convivial and more productive and competitive in the markets.

Toward the end of the century, however, Latin American states, still healing the wounds external debt and fiscal crisis since the 1980’s, (2) could no longer attack the problems on the equity and relevance of education. The difficulties in financing and emerging philosophies of privatization seem to drive states to abandon responsibilities in financing public education, obscuring the triumphs
and allowing the miseries to revive. The elementary and secondary educational systems in Latin America are still segregated by social classes, where only the middle and upper classes flourish in private institutions. Initial education, decisive in the cognitive constitution of children, is not within the reach of the poor. Regrettably adult education, which used to be a central preoccupation in certain social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, is dropping out from public political issues. The problem of functional illiteracy still remains or gets worse in the trend of computerization. Teachers’ training and teachers’ wages continue to be a Gordian knot more fastened by the neoliberal transformations of policies. The politics of curriculum aiming at promoting scientific and humanistic education are bringing strong social discriminations, partly because some of Latin American countries remain outside the global market.

We see in the last years, innumerable strikes and demonstrations in universities in Chile, Brazil, Argentina and Mexico. They tell us that the Latin American universities, within their honorable reformist tradition, continue fighting for their identity and negotiating with political regimes less interested in supporting public universities. Moreover, public universities find themselves struggling to understand and manage the new pressures of globalization in the new century.

The greatesses of public education in this century run the great risk of being blinded by the miseries of public politics renouncing their liberal-democratic tradition and damaging the education of citizens. This article argues the triumphs and the miseries of Latin American education, highlights the distinct contribution of some significant ideas and signals in the final section some of the principal challenges for education in the new century. The crisis we confront is that the breakdown of public education may signify or anticipate the breakdown of the democratic pact in Latin American societies.

**State and Education: Unity in Diversity**

The Twentieth Century has been also the century of social revolutions in Latin America. During the century one can find three predominant political regimes which represent different styles of authoritarianism, i. e., authoritarian
populism, corporatism or military dictatorships. Each of them has marked the main administration of the state with important educational implications.

Certainly, highly aggregated historiographic periodization presents difficulties for the analysis of the links between the state and education, not only because of national peculiarities but also because of the dynamics of structural transformation. The social formations, to remember Marx, never die before the new social form is born. They juxtapose one another, survive over time and co-habitate. With the caution, it is clear that the beginnings of Latin American public education have sufficient elements in common, to justify a generic analysis here. The unity in diversity can be the motto of Latin American education in the Twentieth Century. Let me continue suggesting a few insights into the state-education relationship in Latin America.

The crisis of 1929 had urged the oligarchic states, first emerged in Latin America in 1860-1880s, to reorient the geopolitical axis toward the growing presence of US in place of Great Britain. Also it had given the original impulse to public systems of education. Next, dressed with distinct robes, the developmentalist state emerges from the middle of the 1940s until approximately the crisis of the 1970-80s, where the notion of education as human capital was decisive for the expansion of schooling systems. And even in the period of military dictatorships like Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, these technocratic models were not replaced, and coexisted side by side with spiritualist models inspired by conservative Catholic humanism. Finally the fiscal and debt crisis in the 1980s gives way to the models of structural adjustment and economic stabilization, that is, to the presence of neoliberal agenda toward decentralization and privatization of education.

Expansion and Crisis of Latin American Education:
The End of the Century

We have argued elsewhere (Torres and Puiggrós, 1997: 6–8) that the expansion of education in Latin America is linked to the early stage of industrialization since 1950s and that represents one of the highest rates of educational growth in the world. Between 1960 and 1970, the rates of growth of higher education and
of middle education were 247.9% and 258.3%, respectively (UNESCO 1974: 167; 227). Meanwhile the growth of primary education was, although significant, much more modest, reaching 167.6%.

A Chilean investigator, analyzing the financing of education, argues that the four decades preceding the 1990s represents a significant progress in the Latin American democracies, mentioning some achievements such as the expansion of access to education for school-aged children, the extension of the years of schooling, the increase in the provision for the schooling, the elimination of the socially differentiate channels, and so on (Schiefelbein, 1997: 32). This optimistic diagnosis doesn't reflect any overconfidence if one might consider the high rates of repetition and drop-out. (6)

In spite of secular growth of the educational system in terms of rates of enrollment, the rate of growth of educational spending, adjusted for inflation, diminished in the 1980s. A Venezuelan educator shows between 1975 and 1980 the total spending on education increased in all of the 18 countries studied, but that between 1980-1985 the total spending decreased in 12. (Reimers, 1990: 16). (7) According to the same research, the Ministries of Education in Latin America saw themselves forced to sacrifice equity and efficiency in order to reduce the educational spending under political pressures of structural adjustment (Reimer, 1991: 325–338). Another analysis of the changes in public financing of education in Latin America between 1970 and 1985 concludes that all the educational spendings except salary suffered a disproportionate cut, especially the spending in capital or infrastructure (Reimers and Tiburcio, 1993: 22). Those budget cuts have affected in a disproportionate manner primary education, the resources of which are so limited. A natural consequence of those adjustments is that the decrease in educational spending alienated the organizations of the teaching profession, creating new areas of conflict in the politics of education (Carnoy and Torres, 1992; Torres, 1998).

Educational Theories in Latin America:
A Difficult Transition toward Human Capital?

It's convenient to take stock of the ideas that animated the educational
debates in Latin America during the last Century. Yet, running the risk of making an economy of analysis that violates reality, I have preferred to synthesize the debates in terms of great lines of thought, without any pretension of exhaustiveness.

The school systems of Latin America reflect an extraordinary eclectic mixture of philosophical and pedagogical thoughts. An incredibly interesting mix is the pedagogical spiritualism, on occasions linked to Catholic education, including a conservative tone, and the logic of pedagogical positivism. As Moacir Gadotti (1998) points out, these orientations find their origins in the liberal pedagogical principles, from Rousseau to Pestalozzi, Herbart, and the education premises that came from the French Revolution.

In large part, this tradition is mixed with the practice of normalism, the Sarmientinean image of the teachers or, better said, the female teachers, as a missionary of the Enlightenment. The pedagogical and philosophical model of Normalism looked to sustain a homogeneous system and a homogenous pedagogical subject, ignoring the differences among classes, genders, religions, or ethnicities. They were indeed ever mounting with the growing international migration of the turn of the Twentieth Century from Europe. With a great sense of optimism in the civilizing task of school, normalism adopted, under the conservative necessities of the oligarchic regimes that brought life to the foundations of the modern Latin American schools, a model of positivist orientation to combat the traditional humanist or spiritualist curriculum that had a historic force in education (Puiggrós, 1990).

Positivism reflects a collection of propositions of how to carry out scientific work. Positivistic pedagogical thinkers argue that there is a fundamental social order motivating a dynamic of transformation of social reality. This order is discernible with the rigorous and objective application of the specific method of the social sciences. This method, obviously, reflects the premises of all the scientific methods linked to the model of the natural sciences.

In a curious twist of fate, the culmination of this process of relying on a method and a logic that would eliminate the spiritualist biases of Latin American pedagogical thought and that radically affected the experience of nor-
malism was the theory of human capital. The theory considers that the expense of education consists of two components, consumption and investment (Pescador, 1994: 163). In the latter case everything is based on a theory of rational choice and the maximization of profits under certain restrictions. From here arises the powerful concept of the rate of return on an investment in education which, disseminated in the bureaucratic environment of Latin America, have constituted an unavoidable reference in the educational decision-making process. It cannot be doubted that the theory, joined to the structural-functionalist models (Morrow & Torres, 1995: Torres, 1989; 1990) provided many of the keys for the allocation of resources and the formulation of educational politics in the world. This theory has enormous force in the 1950s and 1960s, extending into the present times, in constant reincarnations, in many of the economic formulations of neoliberalism in education.

However, in the measure that the educational opportunities have increased more rapidly than the labor opportunities, this has resulted in a true inflation of credentials. The educational threshold of the professions has risen systematically in the last four decades to a global level, and the notion divulged in the 1970s of the "diploma disease" poses difficult questions to answer from the statistical models of human capital. These themes invite an analysis that goes beyond the analytical possibilities of the theories of human capital and of the economics of education.

The "New School"

The movement of the "new school", originated in North American philosopher and pedagogue, John Dewey, comes from a distinguished tradition. The "New School" represents the most vigorous movement of renovation in the Twentieth Century (Gadotti, 1998: 147). With two pedagogical pillars, the notions of experience and activity, they seek to liberate the potentials of the individual and changing the social order. It is an education for the reformulation of democracy (Dewey, 1981). Obviously, the impact of this thought in Latin American still resounds with enormous force. It is little known Dewey was consulted immediately after the Mexican Revolution on how to adapt the principles of the "New
School" to the educational principles. Widely known, however, is the impact that the new school had in Brazil with the administration of Anixio Texeira, associated with the modernization of education. (10)

Beside such impacts, the "New School" was a marginal thought in the first decades of this century. Though liberal and radical pedagogues considered the North American educational system and the pedagogies a model example for reforming a country where the oligarchy owner of the land governed a fraudulent democracy, they were not lead to consider the fights that had given form to the North American curriculum (Dussell & Caruso, 1997: 108). After the Second World War, a renewed incorporation of Dewey, as pragmatic philosopher, took place but without displacing spiritualism and humanism, still hidden in the different layers of teachers' training institutions and Ministries of Education, especially in the Southern Cone.

**Paulo Freire and Popular Education**

Spiritualism and humanism reappearing time and time again in Latin America, the appearance of popular education in the cold decades of the 1960s and 1970s altered radically the educational proposals. The paradigm of popular education, personalized in Paulo Reglus Neves Freire, philosopher of education and pedagogue, was initially developed in Brazil and Chile, and spread itself with vigor in the Southern Cone, reaching Mexico, the United States, Canada, and then all around the world. The programs are originated by many governments; Colombia and the Dominican Republic with relation to rural integrated development plans (Torres, 1995a); the Municipal Secretary of Education of São Paulo, lead by Paulo Freire, 1989–1991 during the administration of the Workers Party (PT) (O'Cadiz, Wong, & Torres, 1998); Nicaragua with the popular education collectives (Arnove, 1986).

Popular education starts from a political and social analysis of the life conditions of the poor (like malnutrition, unemployment, health problems), and intends to arrive at an understanding, both at the level of individual and collective consciousness, of these conditions. And their programs, targeted as much to adults as to children, are intimately related with concrete capabilities, such as
reading, writing, and arithmetic, and seek to inspire in the participants a sense of pride, dignity, and confidence in order to reach a political and social level of autonomy.

For Paulo Freire and the pedagogy of the oppressed (Torres, 1995 (b); Gadotti, 1989; Rodrigues Brandao, 1981) the key problems of education are not methodological or pedagogical but political. The educational programs should be established in instruments or mechanisms of político-pedagogical collaborations with the socially subordinated sectors. It defines its educational activity as a “cultural action” whose central objective can be summarized with the term “conscientization.” In its most radical version, the conscientization resides in critical consciousness and class practice, that is, the “subjective conditions” of social transformation or social revolution.

In strictly educational terms, its intention is a non-authoritarian pedagogy. Teachers and students are at the same time students and teachers, horizontally linked by a pedagogical dialogue. The educational program can be carried out even in a “cultural circle” in informal or nonformal settings, and the transmission of ideas and understandings takes place starting from the previous knowledge of the educated. Among the fundamental characteristics of this focus one finds its historical resistance to work within the educational system, the apparatus of the capitalistic state and the educational bureaucracy, where relations of domination are hidden, with a strong presence of hidden curriculum. This pedagogy advocates, in many of its versions, the creation of de-schooling alternatives à la Illich, as Freire lamented in a conversation with me, the presence of a movement of “basism”, which implies the rejection of formal knowledge and authority, and the celebration of popular knowledge as the only origin of pedagogical work (Torres, 1994). Seeking to establish non-state alternatives, many of its representatives work close to political parties, or in universities and centers of research, as well as in Church-related organizations.

Clearly this pedagogical invention, linked to the notion of cultural revolution in the 1960s, is a model diametrically opposed to the predominant neoliberal model, which constitutes the most conservative and capitalist positions in Latin American education, contradicting with the spirit of public, obligatory and free
education. (11) For example, in the case of a distinguished liberal tradition like the post-revolutionary Mexican state, especially during the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the limits and possibilities of educational transformation are clearly influenced by key principles of the neoliberal tradition. And the triumph of a conservative candidate, overthrowing the Revolutionary Institutional Party that ruled the country for more than 76 years, makes very difficult to estimate the next direction of education in Mexico.

**The Neoliberal Agenda: The Idea of Privatization**

The analytic premises of the hegemonic neoliberal agenda, well represented in international organisms like the World Bank, can be categorized under the etiquette of supply-side economics. Two compatible political premises guide this agenda: the notion of privatization of public education and the reduction of public expenditure. On one side, these politics reduce the pressure of public expenditure through the privatization of the public enterprises and promote the liberalization of the market. On the other side, privatization is a powerful tool to depoliticize the regulatory practices of the state.

Neoliberals and neoconservatives argue that the state and the market are diametrically opposed options for providing specific services (Moran and Wright, 1991). Why is there a preference for the market over the state? The neoliberals consider the market more versatile than the state bureaucracy for countless reasons (Torres, 1996, 1998, Torres et al, 1999). They argue that the markets respond more rapidly to technological changes and the social demand. The markets are seen as more cost-effective in the provision of services. After all, some neoliberals link privatization of public enterprises with the solution of the problem of external debt. (Ramamurti, 1991: 153)

However, it is worth remarking that the process of privatization is not free from contradictions. For example, Ramamurti (1991: 168) suggested that "it is by no means certain that substantial efficiency gains will be realized in the long run by privatizing large [enterprises of the state] with high market power." A second source of conflict has to do with the regulatory mechanisms: "given Latin America's poor record of government regulation and the lack of established
procedures for resolving regulatory disputes, it is difficult to be optimistic about the quality of regulation after privatization” (Ramamurti, 1991: 169). A final criticism is that many proponents of market competition seek an illusion. Possibly these policies replace the state monopoly with a similar monopoly by new private enterprises.

In terms of specific education policies, the neoliberal agenda seeks an amalgam of positions, all of which are represented in the policies of the World Bank. It seeks a very laudable objective located at the heart of liberal politics for equality, such as increasing the participation of women in education. Yet though the World Bank supports the education of women, women are exactly those who have paid the highest price due to the policies of structural adjustment all over the world, and Latin America is no exception (Cavanagh, Wysham, and Arruda, 1994; Emeagwali, 1995; Caufield, 1995).

Prioritization of basic education and an emphasis on educational quality also characterize the educational agenda of the World Bank. But given the fact that the World Bank is composed primarily of economists and not of educators, the final objective of education policies is economic efficiency, liberalization of the markets, and globalization of capital, all of which harbor an overemphasis on quantitative methods to measure the success of educational policy (Coraggio, 1994: 168). So if it is suggested that one additional year of private education in the lowest levels of the system produces a greater increase in future earnings than in the higher levels, one may conclude very quickly that the investment in primary education will result in greater increases in the gross national product. For Coraggio, however, in a country built into a “reservoir” of qualified, cheap, and flexible workers that can produce goods and services for export, the real increase in the investment will not take place in the pockets of those productive workers, but in the pockets of consumers in the industrialized world.

Neoliberalism has been associated with the notion of globalization (Burbules & Torres, 2000). Then how has it impacted the formulation of educational politics in Latin America? Three aspects should be considered here: the political economy of educational financing, the linkages between education and work, and the creation of standards of academic excellence.
In terms of the political economy of education, as we pointed out earlier, the neoliberalism assumes an international agenda of the privatization of education for the correction of deficiencies of the state investment. This has driven new instruments of educational financing like vouchers, rates of return and charter schools, all of which are new technologies of analysis and planning or decentralization. An early and archetypical model of this orientation can be found in Chile.

In terms of the links between work and education, the old mechanisms of educational planning have been buried but how to make education respond to the dynamics of the job market continues to be a true enigma. The attempt of enhancing the linkages between universities and the business world continue to result in apparent insolvable dilemmas in Latin American countries. It is clear that in the job markets, the workers that receive the highest income are the symbolic analysts, very well defined in the book by Robert Reich (1992). Without increasing symbolic analysts, in which higher education has a grand task, it is impossible to capture a greater share of the economic resources of the international system.

In the end, the hegemonic neoliberal model has driven a movement for the creation of educational performance standards at an international level that have impacted practically all of the educational levels, from preschool to the university. Regrettably, this movement for standards has been used more as an instrument of control than as tool for educational benefits. Putting forth a specific definition of educational quality, this movement has produced substantive modifications in educational settings, requiring more tests and exams for the evaluation of learning and for the evaluation of systems. A clear example of it are the evaluation models of higher education implemented in Argentina in clear programmatic communication with the World Bank educational designers during the administration of Carlos Menem.

Although those three grand effects are discernible, their goodness is disputable. The impact of the neoliberal globalization is still heated material for academic and political discussion. The situation could not be more paradoxical. Consider, whether it be in the most remote rural area or in the heart of the Capital, you find a teacher working as a producer and diffuser of globalized
knowledge. This same teacher, upon questioning the premises of neoliberalism, could confront globalization in his or her daily practices. One has to admit that we know very little of what happens in classrooms everyday. It is necessary to implement more research into this level, both in curricular and pedagogical terms. According to empirical comparative research in the Pacific Rim (Torres, et al, 1999), it would not be very risky to imagine that, if the majority of teachers are involved in the unions, they are decidedly opposed to neoliberal globalization.

Undoubtedly the neoliberal mechanisms of globalization can be systematically critiqued. Their benefits could be disconfirmed by empirical investigation and some of their negative effects on education can be reversed with a different political philosophy. The dispute is a task of the civic movements, political parties that oppose the neoliberalism, and the teacher unions that have been confronted with neoliberalism.

Towards a New Educational Utopia?

Both qualitative and quantitative changes affect Latin American education in such a manner that the traditional models cannot realize and explain the complexity. Let us mention only some of the most salient aspects of the Latin American educational crisis. (Torres & Puiggros, 1987: 12-22)

There is a profound crisis in the understanding of which is the pedagogical subject to be educated. Behind it lays a dislocation between the discourses of teachers and students, or a dislocation between the discourses of new generations (most of which are the “Nintendo” generation in the developed world) and adult generations. It doesn’t simply assume secular problems on the relevance of education, such as equity, equality, social mobility and discrimination. What now confronts us is a strong crisis of legitimacy in the educational systems in terms of their effectiveness, that is to say, the effectiveness of the educational agents including teachers, parents, and educational institutions.

A rupture in the symbolic public link between generations may give rise to a crisis that complicates the miseries that we have observed here. It is becoming a difficult problem, in terms of both daily practices and political orientations,
how education is inserted in the organic crisis of Latin American societies. And even more so when the process of globalization, avoiding local symbols, diversifies the emotions, complexifies the options and makes it more difficult to communicate with the common population. While popular traditional cultures, a popular transnationalized culture and the political cultures developed by the state institutions are jumbled together, that is, while there is an enormous dispute over identity and a difficulty in ego recognition between individuals, there is also a rupture in the school walls, which already cannot protect the children. There is also a strong crisis in the logic of modernity that is prevalent in the schools. Countless indicators point to this crisis. Teaching the youth a reading and writing is getting more difficult since a youth culture is created around the manipulation of cybernetic and visual symbols, and the obstacles for learning the scientific and technical disciplines are growing larger (the crisis in teaching mathematics in Latin America reaching an unimaginable degree years back). Latin American education has been brought to the border on the abyss at the end of the century.

In another work (Torres & Puiggros, 1997: 19–23) we have made an assessment of education, considering various facets, to which I would now like to simply refer. It is necessary to struggle to incorporate the presence of unequal development in Latin America, that is, educationally or culturally odd combinations of clear affinities with the arts and humanities, the most advanced studies in science, and premodern, periphery, marginal and sometimes pre-Colombian cultures. These cultures are profoundly disconnected, in both linguistic and cultural terms, with the more sophisticated cultures of modernity and post-modernity and of course with the cultural capital that dominates schools. The hybridized cultures, analyzed by an Argentine researcher (Garcia Canclini, 1982; 1990) are created by a cultural mélange of mestizos, indigenous peoples, and Europeans (largely Spanish and Portuguese). In education, this is complexified in confronting what is called the asyncronicity of the Latin American educational models. (Gregorio Weimberg 1984) The notion of difference a la Derrida (1989) becomes increasingly more necessary which brings us to rescue the existentialist thought and offers theoretical and political perspectives, nourishing a culture of
difference into a political culture with the powerful postmodernist direction.

The attention to the crisis of school systems in Latin America has been stimulated by the crisis in Latin American democracies. In the new social, cultural, and political formations emerging in Latin America in the twentieth century we should have rescued the notion of pedagogical subjects (as much teachers as students) that end with a clear indication of the end of utopia (Jacoby, 1999). The "new problems" of the "new times" that the school systems are now living with in Latin America differ greatly from those of the 1950s. How can we educate street children, growing abundantly in the metropolises and peripheral urban areas of Latin America? How does the drug trafficking culture affect the scholastic task? How are the private networks affecting the accessibility to the scholastic knowledge? The recovery of pedagogical subjects and their links with the social and pedagogical structures requires an increasingly refined understanding of the subtleties of the fight for identity and a pedagogy preoccupied with the multiplicity of class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, religion, gender, and regionalism.

This crisis invites, clearly, a reconsideration of what role the states in Latin America should play. They continue to be problematic as much for democracy as for education. The rhetorics and the practices of the states are still conditioned strongly by the old Sarmientinean image of "educating the sovereign". The notion of oppression installed into the Latin American politico-pedagogical discourses by Paulo Freire, which we note with great pride, should guide the reflection on the role of the states in the 21st century. It remains to say that the fight for education is not simply a technocratic activity calmly implemented on the bureaucratic desks, or agitatedly negotiated in ministerial cloisters and union backrooms. Neither is it simply a fight for better educational opportunities for individuals. The fight for education is a question of state; it is a fight for the defense of democratic pact.