



RHETORIC, BEST WISHES AND REALITY: EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA. THE CHALLENGE OF EQUITY AND QUALITY

*(Retórica, buenos deseos y realidad: educación en Latinoamérica. El
desafío de la equidad y la calidad)*

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Abstract

The present article analyses the strategic role played by the educational vector in the alleviation of poverty at the present time. For that purpose, it articulates in three sections: in the first one, it analyses the most significant actions undertaken by international organizations on the fight against poverty. Secondly, it reviews the discourses of educational reforms during the 1990's, and the emerging topics of attention and interest within the latter.

Finally, in the third section, it offers an overview of the state of the question regarding poverty in Latin America and how this is affecting education, social expenditure cuttings, the situation of subemployment; while socio-cultural and family origin prove to be strong determinants. In view of this results, the conclusion deals with educational proposals, which react critically and pursue a higher degree of awareness and sensibilisation towards these problems, coinciding with the evaluation guidelines of the 'Education For All' plans.

Keywords

Education, poverty, educational reform, international organism

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza el rol estratégico que juega el vector educativo en el alivio de la pobreza en el escenario actual. Para ello se articula en tres apartados: en primer lugar analiza cuáles son las acciones que surgen desde los organismos internacionales más significativos en la lucha contra la pobreza para pasar, en segundo, a revisar cuáles han sido, durante en la década de los años noventa, los discursos subyacentes a las reformas educativas, así como los tópicos emergentes de atención e interés dentro de las mismas.

Finalmente, en la tercera parte, se plantea cuál es el estado de la cuestión que gira en torno a la pobreza en Latinoamérica y cómo está afectando a la educación, al recorte en gastos sociales, a la situación de un creciente subempleo, a la vez que el origen sociocultural y familiar supone un fuerte condicionante. A la vista de estos resultados, la conclusión aborda las propuestas educativas que reaccionan críticamente y se encaminan a una mayor sensibilización y concienciación sobre estos últimos problemas, coincidiendo con las directrices de evaluación de los planes de 'Educación para Todos'.

Descriptorios

Educación, pobreza, reforma educativa, organismos internacionales

Introduction

Aún sabiendo que la enseñanza superior es un motor de desarrollo económico y social, que tiene valor por sí misma al facilitar el desarrollo de las personas, su enriquecimiento cultural y el progreso de sus conocimientos, y contribuye a la igualdad de oportunidades de todos los alumnos, está en crisis. Las políticas de reajuste han elevado las deudas presupuestarias de las instituciones, el éxodo de competencias y el desempleo de los titulados han provocado una pérdida de confianza en este nivel de la educación (Dellors, 1996).

As Papadopoulos states, education is presented as "the gateway to future economic prosperity, the chosen instrument for combating unemployment, the driving force behind scientific and technological advance, the *sine qua non* for the cultural vitality of increasingly leisure-intensive societies, the spearhead of social progress and equality, the safeguard of democratic values, the passport to individual success" (Papadopoulos, 1995, p. 493). The multiplicity of economic, social or cultural objectives is not any news; however, it is indeed a novelty the insistent demand for educational reforms with the aim of achieving these objectives. Especially the economic imperative. In Latin America the political imperative of educational reform can be also noticed over the nineties. To this effect, neo-liberal policies are established in the Latin American context directed towards the destruction of "collective structures which may impede the pure market logic" (Bordieu, 1999). A new educational policy is configured with premises such as the erosion of the state, or "the failure of the state as the guardian of the public interest", the privatisation and the decentralisation of educational systems, and the emphasis on primary education to the detriment of the rest of educational levels (Arnové, 1998; Puiggrós, 1999).

However, a remarkable characteristic is that education is not the subject in itself, *per*

se, of attention but a tool at the service of other sectorial policies. As examples, we may mention its instrumentation in the active policies to fight unemployment fostered by the OECD (Lázaro and Martínez, 1999), and the increasing protagonism given to education in the strategies to fight poverty, supported especially by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), but also the Inter-American Development Bank, or UNESCO itself.

In the last few years we have assisted to a continuous series of International Declarations to fight poverty: World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen (1995); the Millennium Summit, New York (2000), or very recently in Monterrey (2002). Little by little, we can see that the compromises to eradicate from our planet poverty and the problems associated with it are being postponed: 2000, 2005, and now, 2015. 2015 has been fixed as the deadline for reducing absolute poverty by half, infant mortality by two-thirds, and succeeding in providing definite access to universal primary education. In all the cited pronouncements education has been pointed out as a first-rate tool for the global strategies to restrain the increase in poverty. However, international aid to development keeps decreasing, so much that between 1990 and 2001 suffered a 20% drop. The European Union commits to reaching 0.39% (far from the ideal 0.7%) whereas the United States will contribute with 0.15% of G.N.P. to aid development. Of all regions, Latin America is that in which there persist the most severe problems of poverty. There have been indubitable efforts made on behalf of education in the region, too. About them and their current situation we would like to discuss now. For that purpose, we will review in four sections: the role of international organizations in poverty alleviation, in the first place; and what have been the guidelines for educational reform in the region up to the present, in the second one. Sections three and four will complement the previous ones, acting as elements of contrast between the most

institutional discourse and the plain reality. Thirdly, we will map the current panorama that insistently undermines people's possibilities of development; concluding in the fourth section with the action guidelines expected for the future, trying to integrate the initial aspirations with a sensibility towards the reality of education in Latin American countries.

Education as a strategy for poverty alleviation: actions undertaken by international organizations

Although it has been proved through several studies that education itself does not lead to development since this is a far more complicated principle (World Bank, 1991), nowadays there is a minimum consensus on the evident and positive influence of educational action on the economic growth of the nations. From this precise scenario, education should be reconsidered both as a fundamental right to the social, political and economic development of the nations and as a key vector to poverty reduction. This has been shown by the different educational actions of the decade of the nineties, from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) to the recent seminars and work groups that have arisen since the Dakar Forum, April 2001, also fostered by the United Nations (UNESCO, 2000, pp. 73-89).

In line with the recurrent revalorisation of human capital and therefore of the role education can play not only in economic growth but also in the integral human development, most international organizations put their efforts to strategies that give priority to 'primary education' to the detriment of higher education, from which only a very small part of the population benefits. This is, for instance, the position that the «United Nations Development Programme» has been holding for a few years already, in line with other international organizations. They all ratify their 'conviction that education has an essen-

tial function in the continuing development of people and of societies, but they do not consider education as a miraculous remedy or a magical formula that will open the door to a world in which humankind will realize all its ideals. Instead, they look upon it as one of the main tools – like others but better than most- leading to deeper and more harmonious forms of human development, the objective of which is to reduce poverty, exclusion, incomprehension, free communities of oppression and war, etc.' (Delors, 1996, p. 13).

According to these premises, the international organizations have adopted several policies on poverty alleviation. Next, we will focus on the ECLAC, the World Bank and UNESCO.

The ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), analyses the concept of '*social vulnerability*', which is consubstantial to poverty. It is defined as a multidimensional social phenomenon that accounts for the sentiments of risk, insecurity and defencelessness caused by the material basis that supports them. It is the consequence of the implementation of new forms of development that introduce changes of considerable scope and that affect the majority of the population. All dimensions get affected thus by the effects of this vulnerability that spreads over every social strata (ECLAC, 2000, p. 49), so that it is possible to consider it a distinguishing mark of the society of the third millennium, inherited from the 20th Century.

In search of solutions to ease the high rates of poverty in Latin America, the ECLAC pays special attention to relating poverty reduction with strategies that pursue a higher equity among the inhabitants of Latin America. For that purpose, they have been promoting a philosophy with a cognitivist bias that is directed towards transformation since the 1980's. That will be achieved through the improvement of the conditions of access to

knowledge, as a *conditio sine qua non* for escaping poverty, together with social and economic measures (ECLAC, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1999, 2000). To this effect, provided that 'equity demands the coexistence of an egalitarian vocation and an attention to the difference', the objective pursued must keep a balance between both aspirations. The first thing needed in order to achieve this concerted strategy is to ensure universal education coverage up to secondary level, and to reduce the socio-economic gap that defines the quality of education depending on the background. Secondly, programmatic adaptations to specific groups must be implemented, curricular appropriateness must be sought on the basis of territorial realities, and special resources assigned to the areas of higher social vulnerability and precarious economy. One way or the other 'experience teaches that the most suitable programmes are those with an integral and multidimensional character, long term ones, focused on breaking the channels of intergenerational reproduction of poverty in homes structurally affected by it; not forgetting other programmes focused on solving temporary problems resulted from economic or natural conditions' (ECLAC, 2000, p. 6). Therefore, the educational vector is present in the policies of this organization in order to achieve a more stable, dynamical, integrating and sustainable development. Regarding particular educational demands, the ECLAC advocates for a series of goals. The most remarkable ones are: an education that fosters and consolidates compensatory programmes, and a policy that encourages educational continuity, considering the latter as a viable and appropriate investment. Another goal is an education that does not forget a pending task up to the present: a qualitative improvement of the situation of the teaching staff in the region, acknowledging that being exigent in the training of teachers has decisive and determinant repercussions on the quality of education in these regions.

Being aware of the changes suffered in the international context and that, as a result, other strategies should be implemented, the World Bank introduced in the year 2000 a solid proposal for fighting bravely the spectrum of poverty. The organization acknowledges that, on its basis, 'in a world where the distribution of political power is unequal and frequently very similar to the distribution of economic power, the functioning of state institutions can be specially adverse for the poor' (World Bank, 2001, p. 1).

On the basis of this premise, which affects both policies and procedures, the World Bank promotes a vision of education that contributes to improving people's lives and to reducing poverty, 'helping people to become more productive and earn more (because education is an investment, strengthening their skills and abilities -their human capital), improving health and nutrition; enriching lives directly (e.g. the pleasure of intelligent thought and the sense of empowerment it helps give), promoting social development through strengthening social cohesion, and giving more people better opportunities'. This aspiration is revealed by a multidisciplinary implementation plan articulated in different actions, most of them in collaboration with other international organizations (World Bank, 1999). So we can observe, from the educational ambit, the strengthening of a basic education for girls and for the poorest countries; the development of early intervention programmes (especially in health education); an opening towards new education formulas in accordance with the new realities in Latin America (distance education, open learning and the use of new technologies); and the consolidation of systematic reforms that pay special attention to matters such as standards, the curriculum and its certification, government and school decentralization; and the search for suppliers and financiers other than the government (World Bank, 1999; World Bank Group, 1999).

However, the World Bank has been blamed for the economic bias of its sectorial policies (Bennell, 1996; Lauglo, 1996; Jones, 1998). Regarding education, 'the World Bank has identified educational system with system and market [...] leaving essential aspects of education aside [...]. This procedure [...] becomes reductionism when the economic analysis is considered conclusive and on that basis, conclusions on the general problems of the educational system [...] and proposals for specific intervention in teaching/learning processes are launched' (Coraggio and Torres, 1999, p. 45).

The model of human and sustainable development according to which the man is considered the end and never the means is widely promoted by international organizations such as the United Nations. Especially UNESCO has proved a remarkable activism in accordance with the notion of development defended and published for the last ten years that crystallizes in two major milestones: the Jomtien World Conference (1990) and the Dakar Forum (2000).

The Jomtien Conference defended the motto of '*satisfying basic learning needs*', so that the principle of «education for all» transformed into a first-rate political goal through the six 'Jomtien dimensions' (expansion of early childhood care and development activities, universal access to primary education, improvement in learning achievement, reduction of the illiteracy rate and increase acquisition of knowledge, skills and values). In Dakar, taking into account that the educational activity did not cease during the interval of time between both, certain weariness, uncertainty and even uneasiness could be appreciated since the results had not met the expectations laid out (Ferrer, 2001, p. 129). In this context, marked by the relative failure of the proposals and the resulting search for more realistic alternatives, some aspects are reconsidered: the role of international organizations, the guidelines of the educational policy and, especially, its *modus operandi*,

that is, the action strategies to be carried out. The goals (now 'aspirations') appear more realistic and operative, translating the new motto, 'acquisition of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living'. Meanwhile, international organizations get involved ethically and politically calling directly on international co-operation (EFA, 2000; Little & Miller, 2000; Osttveit, 2000).

Within this logic of action, already known as 'post-Dakar period', the Regional Intergovernmental Committee of the Major Project for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (PROMEDLAC VII) adopted a series of principles and recommendations that crystallized in a document: the '*Cochabamba Declaration*' (UNESCO, 2001). Of an indubitable value as a statement and as a project, the Declaration emerges in a context marked by a realistic and resigned attitude towards the real achievements produced ('we declare: our concern for having not yet fully achieved all the goals proposed in the Major Project of Education'). That is not an obstacle however to find explicit references of new strategies for advancing in the educational reality of Latin America in aspects such as adult literacy, management, quality and efficiency of education, or the reformulation of the role of UNESCO itself. In relation to the most important 'challenges' raised as a consequence of the Dakar follow-up, there are some issues to deal immediately with. These are: gender equality in basic education; the importance of ideas and innovations, in which knowledge becomes a crucial weapon in economic growth (that will require a strategic advance in matters such as the use of new information and communication technologies, the consolidation of new forms of social organization, or the insistence on the role of human capital and education, etc); the quality of teaching in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, in accordance with the guidelines suggested by other organizations; and the consolidation of an increase in literacy rates, clearly connected to equity policies before a reality: repetition

and dropout rates are closing doors on the development of many sectors.

The latter is taking place in an unhopeful context where it has been argued that 'in the next fifteen years education in Latin America and the Caribbean will suffer the negative impact of economic stagnation, political instability and the decreasing governments' capability to develop long-term sustainable social policies [...] the economic and cultural globalisation will have a very strong negative impact on the region, increasing the already considerably high rates of inequality and social marginalisation' (UNESCO, 2001). Criticisms of international organizations have to be understood to this effect in this context. UNESCO in particular is criticised by advocating regional programmes, and therefore global, when the fact is that Latin American Ministers of Education conceive education as a national issue rather than regional so that each country should give priority to the educational levels that require attention most. Finally, and in close connection with this reality, the parallelisms and superpositions present in many of today's Latin American programs (Education For All-EFA; Major Project for Education, PROMEDLAC; PREAL [Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas], Inter-American Program of Education, etc) reveal the lack of coordination among the work dynamics emerged from each program. The aforementioned redounds to a disorder leading to a duplication and dispersion of efforts, an excessive cult of the event and of the document, an ideological defence of certain values to the detriment of others; a consolidation of ghettos and a profusion of client-oriented mechanisms (Schneider, 1995, p. 73; Torres, 2001, p. 111; Dyer, 2001, p. 325).

However, the policies put forward by the cited international organizations imply the importance acquired by education as a strategy for change. From that it follows that the educational reforms that have been imple-

mented in the region since the 1990's constitute the crystallization of the discourses analysed in this section, as set out below.

Brief analysis of the discourse of educational reform as a strategy for change

The priority granted to education in development strategies is due to the diagnostic power implied by education, on supposing that education constitutes the best factor for predicting opportunities in life (Boli, Ramírez and Meyer, 1998; Reimers, 1999). At the same time, there exists the conviction that education is the only variable that simultaneously affects social equity, economic competitiveness and citizen performance (Tedesco, 1998; Buchman, 1999).

However, and maybe in contrast to a more ideal level, 'if education is expected to help the poor exit poverty, first we will have to take education itself out of poverty' (Rivero, 2000, p. 132). This reflects a reality: education in Latin America continues to be, in many ways, a pending subject; and as a logical result, it becomes subject of continuous attention on the part of those who, one way or the other, are committed to achieve an education of quality that is at variance with equity. In such a context, several reactions and responses have been emerging since the decade of the nineties formally setting up as proposals for educational reforms. Some of them deal with very particular aspects (reforms on primary or secondary levels of education, for instance). Whereas others are characterized by being integral reforms that deal with different aspects of the education policies of the region, in order to configure scenarios that are more prone to development, and always under the aspiration to alleviate a good part of the exclusion and the constant risk of social reproduction through education.

Reviewing the evolution of the reforms on education policies undertaken in Latin Amer-

ica, three stages are distinguished with easily identifiable features (De Puelles and Torreblanca, 1995; Filmus, 1998; Reimers, 2000). During the first stage, which starts in the sixties, there is a tendency to identify equal opportunities with the expansion of the access. The strong quantitativist emphasis prevailing at this time can be interpreted, in fact, as a consequence of the optimism in economic matters, even reaching the point of becoming an obsession with management and financing as emerging key issues of the educational reforms (Molina, 1999). For its part, the second stage, from the late seventies to the eighties, is dominated by policies of a compensatory bias and the beginning of the rhetoric of positive discrimination, thus becoming the proof that the premise of quality stands as an unquestionable priority, as opposed to the advance of merely quantitative aspirations. To a great extent, the discourses held by UNESCO, ECLAC and other international organizations like the World Bank are the ones that promote and nurture this qualitative vision of education. Finally, the third stage, of which we are witnesses now, pursues the aspiration of reaching a forceful forthright action, and this is no other than to walk towards a real positive discrimination. At the same time, some aspects that are revealing themselves as structural in the region are being questioned. The inequalities found in academic achievements due to the extreme heterogeneity of learning contexts, the low results from a general point of view, the gender gap, or the distressing work conditions suffered by the teaching staff at all levels are some of the most significant examples (UNESCO-OREALC, 2000; PREAL, 2001).

In this sense, we find a varied classification of educational reforms on behalf of the great variety of contexts in which they are issued and developed. As a consequence, it is not strange to find a considerable educational inequality both *between* and *within* Latin American educational systems (Schiefelbein and Tedesco, 1997). Despite diversity, the initiatives of reform can be structured in

three large groups, on the basis of the goals they pursue (Carnoy and De Moura, 1997). The '*reforms supported by financing*', in the first place, are constituted by educational reforms that pursue a rationalization of education expenditure. They are directed towards reducing the budget of the central governments public sector in order to finance and therefore to give priority to education and training in the regions. The '*reforms supported by competitiveness*' have in turn the purpose of organising educational performance and work skills in a newer and more productive way. Now the sights are set on preparing a human capital of quality but also a competitive one for Latin America. Finally, the '*reforms supported by equity*', which reflect the most current trends in educational policy, consist of reforms aiming to foster the political function of education as a source of mobility and social levelling.

This classification gives an account of the reforms that have taken place from the 1960's onward, although it is acknowledged that none of these models are in their pure state (Hopenhayn and Ottone, 1999). It is rather the exposition of ideal models corresponding to different notions of 'reform' that present variations and even combinations in their practical and real scopes. With regard to this classification, thinkers, educators and experts in education have agreed to reflect on and to propose a series of elements that are being part of the current educational reforms in Latin America, and that therefore have become new channels of action whose study is completely necessary. Some of the elements present in the formal discourses will be set out below.

In the first place, *Decentralization of Education* as a formula for institutional management, or making decentralization become, as Aguerrondo (1998) points out, an organization constantly learning. In contrast with the centralized style of many of the educational policies of the 1990's, and after having proved their dysfunctionality, the

current reforms advocate for decentralized systems in the structures of management, administration and supervision of their respective educational levels. Secondly, the aforementioned leads to rethink *the Role of the State*, whose competences are being reformulated, because whilst there is progress in the reduction of its classical functions, it seems to prevail certain unanimity on the State's competences in planning, and others like compensation and evaluation (Tedesco, 1998, 2001) or concertation and control (Cosse, 1999).

The Teaching Staff Situation constitutes the third coincidental goal. It is shown by the fact that the success of educational reforms lies to a great extent in having a motivated personnel, open to changes and willing to generate transformation environments. In Latin America, very on the contrary, the teachers' situation is far off from reaching those ideals as more and more adverse obstacles are bursting into the current conditions of the collective, such as the loss of protagonism, the decrease in wages and income, and the drop in the levels of professionalisation (Schiefelbein and Tedesco, 1997; Rivero, 1999, 2000; Gajardo, 1998; PREAL, 2001). So, the reforms ought to pay special attention to the staff, aiming to enhance teaching capital, to invest in their training and to strengthen policies that support decent wages. The reforms should also influence on the levels of exigency in their professional practice, so that a possible solution would be the generation of a coherent and stable system of incentives for the teaching staff (UNESCO, 1998; Torres, 1999).

Other goals focus on: a preferable attention to *basic education and the promotion of primary education*, echoing strategies put forward by UNESCO, the World Bank and other international organizations; *professional and secondary education*, whose structure is also in process of reformulation and reconceptualisation; the adoption of new directions on *educational evaluation* more

sensible towards Latin American educational reality; or the emphasis on educational *quality and orientation*, among others.

In synthesis, these aspects do not by any chance exhaust the panorama of change and innovation that translates the spirit of the reforms implemented in Latin America since the 1960's, which are a reflection of the concerns of the international organizations that help drawing the different action lines for the current educational policies. However, the most recent publications have proven specially critical to the scarce advances in educational matters (Gajardo, 1998; Torres, 2001). They have issued more sensible and specific orientations before a reality that, as it will be demonstrated below, batters on the deficiencies of different nature generated by poverty and whose effects, far from lessening, reflect with the harshness of numbers a situation that spreads unstoppably.

Mapping the current situation: poverty as an endemic evil and its consequences on education

The latest balance of the economic situation issued by the ECLAC for the nineties, in contrast with the ominous 'lost decade' of the eighties, implies an unquestionable improvement in key aspects of the political, social and economic situation. However, even though the economy maintained an average growth rate of 3.2%, compared to the 2.4% average annual growth rate of the world economy, this growth was unstable and, over all, insufficient, since it did not generate employment in the constant expected rate, and it keeps depending too much on external capital (ECLAC, 2001).

Especially worrying is the persistence of poverty: more than twenty million people have been acquiring this little honourable status in the last decade. To this it should be added that although democratic regimes have been gradually substituting the ruling dictatorships, inequality has not been mitigated

however. Very on the contrary, it has increased in quite a good number of countries of the region, while social expenditure presents very low rates [i] (ECLAC, 2001). In absolute terms, the number of poor people has increased during the nineties in Latin America. In 1999 around 43.8% of the population was in poverty. Countries like Argentina, Brazil and Colombia are noticing an increase in poverty rates, as opposed to Mexico, El Salvador or Panama with a certain reduction in their rates. Another fact: 54% of poverty is rural, compared to 30% in urban homes. The first estimations on the current situation do not lead to optimism at all.

From a strictly economic point of view, the year 2000 interrupted an incipient recovery in the economies of the region as a consequence of the deceleration of the world economy, and so the regional growth ended being of 0.5%. The continuity of the current world economic crisis is going to have a very negative effect on the evolution of the economies of Latin America and the Caribbean in 2002: the worrying situation in Argentina is a good example of the problems that some of the countries of the region might suffer if there were no positive changes in the world economic situation. In this situation there is, logically, a reduction in public social expenditure on education [ii], health, social security and housing. Some of the most significant effects are: the worsening of social exclusion processes, the increase in institutional fragility and social vulnerability and the people's insecurity, due to unstable family incomes and precarious employment. All this determines the intergenerational transmission of educational and professional opportunities.

But furthermore, the huge inequalities evident in the distribution of income consolidate, certifying the lack of equity. There is an average difference of income between the highest and the lowest rates of almost 20 points. The Gini Coefficient shows that the countries with higher inequality rates are:

Brazil, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Colombia, Paraguay, Chile, Panama and Honduras. The rates are more moderate in Argentina, Mexico, Ecuador, El Salvador, Dominican Republic and Venezuela; while Uruguay and Costa Rica are the countries with the lowest inequality rates. As a consequence, from an occupational point of view, the significant increase in active population over the nineties and the weakness of the productive fabric generate an increasing unemployment. But in addition there are other effects: precarious unemployment increases, while the increasing informalization of employment strengthens in urban areas.

What happens to education in this scenario? Education coverage has extended considerably, as indicated by the PREAL (2001), although it also reports that most of the countries have not achieved 100% enrolment at the primary level. In average, from 1980 to 1994, schooling time of children in comparison to their parents has increased in 3 years both in urban and rural areas, from 6.5 to 10 in the first ones and from 3 to 6.5 in the second ones. However, in 1994, still 47% of urban youth and 73% of the young people living in rural areas had not been able to surpass their parents' educational achievement levels and to reach the basic educational capital, estimated in twelve years of schooling. According to the ECLAC, completing secondary education and attending 12 years of study has proved to be essential in the region to access well-being, and thus escape from poverty by having the opportunity to earn higher wages (ECLAC, 1997, pp. 60 and 66).

The 'social origin' variable continues to be determinant with regard to the educational opportunities received since the lack of equity in the access blocks one of the main channels of mobility for young people. This lack of opportunities proves to be especially dramatic when accessing secondary education. Thereby, in Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay and Venezuela, with

relatively lower secondary education coverage rates, 'only one out of six young people whose parents have less than six years of schooling succeed in completing secondary education. On the other hand, three out of four young people whose parents have more than 12 years of study reach that level as a minimum' (ECLAC, 1997, p. 65). In countries with higher coverage rates (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Panama and Uruguay), 51% attends twelve or more years of study in comparison to the 29% of average in the first group. For their part, in rural areas, there is a similar behaviour during the eighties and the nineties with regard to the maintenance of the proportionality in the inequalities of access to education tied to the 'educational climate' of the families. The ECLAC's conclusion is clear: 'it is disturbing that the efforts to extend education coverage in Latin America in the last 10 to 15 years have not translated into a reduction of the distance among young people from different social strata' (p. 68).

The parents' education level and the economic capability of the family continues to be determinant also at the primary level. About the middle of the nineties, in urban areas of Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Paraguay and Venezuela the rate of young people that did not attend more than eight years of study ranged between 25% and 50%; and most of them came from homes where the parents had not surpassed that educational level either. In Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Panama and Uruguay those rates range between 15% y 30%. For the same period, 1980-1994, UNESCO's studies, attending to learning outcomes, settle an evident association between social origin and the possibility to access an educational offer of quality (UNESCO, 1996). The ECLAC (1998) remarks that the educational reforms of the systems of the region directed towards the improvement of the quality that started in the nineties will probably succeed in bringing nearer the educational achievement of students from private and public education.

They will also have a direct impact on the reduction of educational inequalities among the different social groups. However, it indicates at the same time that 'a good part of the educational inequalities transmitted from one generation to the following still lie in the number of years of study completed by young people from different social strata, independently of the quality of education received by them'. In this way, an improvement of the quality may have slight effects if it is not followed by policies that seek to extend the stay of young students from middle and low strata in the school system. In all the countries, a very high percentage of these students do not stay at school the number of years necessary to acquire an appropriate educational capital, which actually corresponds to 12 years of schooling, as it has been already mentioned. Against this ideal situation, as the PREAL pointed out, in several countries between one-fourth and one-half of the children that enter primary level do not succeed in reaching fifth grade (PREAL, 2001, p. 8). At the same time, 10% of the wealthiest 25-year-olds have 5 to 8 years more of schooling than 30% of the poorest 25-year-olds (a situation specially evident in El Salvador, Mexico and Panama). This lack of basis limits their possibilities of finding a job that ensures them well-being and a sufficient income.

Correlating the above-mentioned data with employment and income opportunities, 'a very high homogeneity is noticed in the education-occupation-income bond that determines socio-economic stratification in the region' (ECLAC, 1998, p. 78). Thus, 'depending on the country, between 72% and 96% of the families in situation of poverty or indigence have parents with less than nine years of schooling in average' (p. 143).

From this situation of poverty and social vulnerability not even teachers escape. Although the exact dimension of this situation is intimately correlated with the magnitude of poverty in each country, teachers' wages

per hour are generally in the region between 25% and 50% lower than those of other employed professionals or technicians (ECLAC, 1998, p. 136), as follows from the different evaluations made during the period 1990-1997.

Another focus of concern and preferable attention lies in universal access to primary education. Although enrolment ratios have increased, most of the countries of the region have not reached 100% net enrolment in primary education. To this effect, countries like Brazil, Colombia and Honduras have not managed to reach this aspiration neither in urban areas nor in rural ones, whereas Ecuador and Paraguay have reached this goal but only in urban areas (ECLAC, 1998, p. 154). In effect, the crystallization of this premise, for which there is so much struggle taking place, involves different lights and shadows. On the one hand, even though there is an improvement in the situation of girls in primary education, and besides the fact that social expenditure recovered in the nineties in comparison to the drop suffered in the eighties; there is also a consolidation, on the other hand, of the problems of access for ethnic minorities both to schools in general and also to schools that meet their cultural needs. With regard to the mentioned social expenses, their growth reduced to 6.4% in the second half of the nineties, half the growth rate of the first half of the decade [iii].

In the year 1999-2000 the aforesaid inequalities persist. 'In rural areas two out of five children do not complete primary education, while in urban areas one out of six minors interrupt their studies before finishing primary school or they complete it with at least two years of delay, which implies most of the times abandoning school before completing 12 years of study ' (ECLAC, 2000, p. 172). Dropout and delay affect 40% of children that live in rural areas. Only in Chile, Honduras and Mexico a reduction of the disparities of educational opportunities between

urban and rural areas can be noticed. Meanwhile, Colombia, El Salvador and, in a lower extent, Brazil are the countries which present the highest disparities. And as a last fact, only in Nicaragua the gap between the ones and the others exceeds 50%.

To the phenomena of dropout and delay adds repetition. In 25% of the poorest homes the repetition rates in the second grade of primary education, 18%, almost quintuples the 4% registered among minors from the 25% of the homes with higher incomes. These disparities take place both in countries with low enrolment rates in the level (Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Dominican Republic), and in those with higher enrolment rates (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Panama and Uruguay). Such phenomena diverge, in addition, on the basis of the urban/rural binomial: in the rural areas of those countries only 7% of minors that live in 25% of the homes with higher incomes abandon school or complete primary education with delay. In 25% of the poorest homes, that percentage goes up to 26%. It is the derivation of the initial differences, which worsens along the level ending up being very evident in fourth grade.

The progress on the coverage and on the fight against desertion is, then, insufficient, as follows from the data presented above, demonstrating to be the most significant differences in secondary level education, in full contrast with the aspirations of the international organizations. While in primary education, although incompletely, disparities among different social groups have indeed been reduced a little, in secondary education the achievement differences among young people from different socio-economic status have not been reduced during the nineties. This way, there persists an important mechanism in the reproduction of poverty and access inequalities, for the differences of achievement depending on social origin are even more marked at this level. The ECLAC's estimation for the year 2000 was

that in urban areas nearly half the young population of 20 years of age would have abandoned their studies without completing the level or either having a big delay, while in rural areas nearly three out of four young people would find themselves in the same situation (ECLAC, 2000, p. 174). From that it follows that the most immediate challenges for regional policies on primary level in urban areas are the enrolment and retention of children from the poorest strata, from disintegrated families or those who do not value education. The fight against school desertion can be complemented by health and/or nutritional measures with the purpose of helping children to achieve well-being.

Finally, the numbers of the year 2000 to 2001 do not offer specially encouraging data in comparison to previous years since the tendencies already pointed out do not reverse but, on the contrary, they consolidate. Regarding education coverage, for instance, seven countries remain below 90%: Costa Rica, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Only Cuba, Argentina, Chile, Peru and Panama have a net enrolment in secondary education beyond 50%. (PREAL, 2001, pp. 7 and 29). In most countries of the region only one third or less of secondary education potential students are in fact enrolled.

One more remark on gender and ethnicity: with regard to the first, undoubted advances have been achieved, but it is clear that there still exist cultural segregation patterns in the interaction among teachers, teachers and students, and among students themselves (Stromquist, 1993). With regard to the second, in Latin America, even though racial and ethnic groups find themselves in a disadvantage situation, shown by the fact that indigenous adults in Peru, Guatemala, Brazil and Bolivia have, at least, three years of schooling less than the rest of the white population of the same country (PREAL, 2001, p. 10), there is a consolidation of the policies aiming at a sensibilisation towards

the mentioned minorities, as it is demonstrated in the following review of the state of the question.

Conclusions. Latin American educational reality. From institutional discourses to realistic strategies: future focuses of attention

In view of this reality and the current analyses of Latin American educational reforms, whose outcomes, despite the efforts made in recent years, have been described as at least 'poor' (Gajardo, 1998) or 'limited' (PREAL, 2001), there is still a long way to walk before the binomial of quality-equity become a viable premise and the key element to contribute to make societies more just. Especially in an international context marked by external debt, an evident burden which hinders educational achievements and aspirations 'by reducing availability of foreign currency for the educational system' [...] 'through the adjustment process which results in reduced real educational budgets' (Reimers, 1990).

This perspective plus the vision provided in this article of the present social and educational reality in Latin America are necessary to understand the 2001 Report of the *Task Force on Education, Equity and Economic Competitiveness in Latin America and the Caribbean* (an independent non-governmental commission composed of distinguished citizens from throughout the region who are concerned about school quality). The report reflects a reality in which very limited progress is recorded despite the efforts made by international organizations through programmes explicitly designed for that purpose, since 'quality remains low, inequality remains high, and very few schools report on the parents and the communities they serve' (PREAL, 2001, p. 6).

As a conclusion, and in view of a panorama full of contrasts, as demonstrated in the previous section, the Report proposes to ad-

vance in four aspects. In the first place, setting realistic standards for educational systems and measuring progresses until they are reached; in the second place, conferring schools and local communities more control and responsibility on education; thirdly, strengthening the teaching profession through salary raises, training reforms, and commitment with the community they work for; and finally, investing higher financial expenditures for students in pre-primary, primary and secondary levels. These measures coincide with the guidelines pointed out by some international organizations, yet in

essence they try to deal with local issues in order to have a more responsible and more involved education with regard to the reality of its social, political and economic context.

These projections coincide, in the main, with the proposals derived from the evaluation of the EFA Plans launched in the Latin American region by each country (EFA 1997, 1998 and 1999), which seek to achieve the aspirations exposed in the previous section as key issues in today's education, as chart I shows:

CHART I

ORIENTATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL ACTION IN THE EFA PLANS [iv]

	BOL	URU	CHI	PER	COL	VEN	PAR	COS	CUB	ECU	SAL	GUA	HON	MEX	PAN
Strengthening of basic schooling strategies(full-time, pre-school programs...) for combating delay, repetition and absenteeism	x	x		x				x	x						x
Design of appropriate strategies (increase in coverage, etc) in sectors of social vulnerability		x						x			x				
Increase in education budget		x			x	x		x			x				
Policies to dignify teaching function through qualification and professionalisation		x			x	x	x				x	x			x
Consolidation of Professional and Occupational Training programs for improving skills and employability		x		x		x									
Increasing and updating adult education plus intensifying permanent education for combating illiteracy		x		x		x	x			x					x
Decentralization and deconcentration strategies in educational management			x				x				x				
Active educational and social policies for collaborating with the families		x						x							
Preferable attention to rural and indigenous communities , plus linguistic minorities				x		x	x	x					x	x	x

BOL: Bolivia, URU: Uruguay, CHI: Chile, PER: Perú, COL: Colombia, VEN: Venezuela, PAR: Paraguay, COS: Costa Rica, CUB: Cuba, ECU: Ecuador, SAL: El Salvador, GUA: Guatemala, HON: Honduras, MEX: México, PAN: Panamá.

As a conclusion to the contents of the chart but also to all the previous sections, which have shown the state of the question from a discursive and an official point of view, the current aspirations pursue goals that are more realistic and sensible towards their own socio-educational reality. Only from this perspective can we appreciate that the educational policies directed towards combating illiteracy remain the most extended -judging by the latest results of the reports on 'Education For All' elaborated by the countries- followed by policies on dignification and professionalisation of the teaching staff, and strategies to reach basic schooling and to combat school absenteeism. Yet they neither forget those who seemed forgotten by education reforms: indigenous and rural communities, as also linguistic minorities, which are now the subject of preferable policies. The latter comes to corroborate thus the interest and attention deserved by people (boys and girls, families, teachers, indigenous, linguistic minorities, etc) in order to continue the fight against the spectrum of poverty in a strategic way, but effective as well.

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NOTES

[i] Even though social expenditure increases in the region during the nineties, from 10.4% to 13.1% of GNP, there do not exist real fiscal policies that allow a social redistribution of income. The countries showing higher social expenditure are Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama and Uruguay. The opposite one are for cases of: El Salvador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru and Dominican Republic.

[ii] The average expenditure in education, as a percentage of GNP, in 1990-91, is 2.9%. In countries: Argentina, 3.3; Brazil, 3.7; Chile, 2.6; Colombia, 3.2; Costa Rica, 3.8; Guatemala, 1.6; Honduras, 4.3; Mexico, 2.6; Nicaragua, 5.0; Panama, 4.7; Paraguay, 1.2; Peru, 1.3; Dominican Republic, 1.2; Uruguay, 2.5; Venezuela, 3.5. In 1998-99 there is an increase of 3.9%. In countries: Argentina, 4.7; Brazil, 3.9; Chile, 3.9; Colombia, 4.7; Costa Rica, 4.4; Guatemala, 2.3; Honduras, 4.1; Mexico, 3.8; Nicaragua, 5.7; Panama, 6.0; Paraguay, 3.7; Peru, 2.2; Dominican Republic, 2.8; Uruguay, 3.3; Venezuela, 3.8.

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Differences on public expenditure strengthen inequality as they concentrate disproportionately on higher education, as indicated by the PREAL. In this sense, despite the poor coverage and quality of primary and secondary education, the major portion of the resources concentrate on superior education, which clearly discriminates the poor that will never make it to university (PREAL, 2001, p. 10).

[iii] Obviously, regional heterogeneity is high, so we find countries with high and upper-intermediate expenditure rates, between 1000 \$ and 550 \$ annual *per capita* (Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Panama and Costa Rica), countries with intermediate expenditure rates, 300 to 400\$ annual *per capita* (Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela), and finally, countries with low rates, between 50

and 175\$ (Peru, Paraguay, El Salvador, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua) (ECLAC, 1998, p. 101). The global increase of the percentage directed to education is narrowly related to the process of education reforms orientated towards increasing quality and equity; even so, regional differences remain evident among the countries.

[iv] This chart has been elaborated by the author starting from the data offered by the countries after the evaluation of the 'Education For All' reports. Available at www2.unesco.org/wef/countryreports/html.

[v] There is no information available for this chapter.

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Abstract / Resumen	<p><i>The present article analyses the strategic role played by the educational vector in the alleviation of poverty at the present time. For that purpose, it articulates in three sections: in the first one, it analyses the most significant actions undertaken by international organizations on the fight against poverty. Secondly, it reviews the discourses of educational reforms during the 1990's, and the emerging topics of attention and interest within the latter.</i></p> <p><i>Finally, in the third section, it offers an overview of the state of the question regarding poverty in Latin America and how this is affecting education, social expenditure cuttings, the situation of subemployment; while socio-cultural and family origin prove to be strong determinants. In view of this results, the conclusion deals with educational proposals, which react critically and pursue a higher degree of awareness and sensibilisation towards these problems, coinciding with the evaluation guidelines of the 'Education For All' plans.</i></p> <p>El presente artículo analiza el rol estratégico que juega el vector educativo en el alivio de la pobreza en el escenario actual. Para ello se articula en tres apartados: en primer lugar analiza cuáles son las acciones que surgen desde los organismos internacionales más significativos en la lucha contra la pobreza para pasar, en segundo, a revisar cuáles han sido, durante en la década de los años noventa, los discursos subyacentes a las reformas educativas, así como los tópicos emergentes de atención e interés dentro de las mismas.</p> <p>Finalmente, en la tercera parte, se plantea cuál es el estado de la cuestión que gira en torno a la pobreza en Latinoamérica y cómo está afectando a la educación, al recorte en gastos sociales, a la situación de un creciente subempleo, a la vez que el origen sociocultural y familiar supone un fuerte condicionante. A la vista de estos resultados, la conclusión aborda las propuestas educativas que reaccionan críticamente y se encaminan a una mayor sensibilización y concienciación sobre estos últimos problemas, coincidiendo con las directrices de evaluación de los planes de 'Educación para Todos'.</p>
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