The Consequences of Neo-Liberalism on the Educational Prospects of Latin American Youth

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The category generally termed "Latin American youth" encompasses distinct multiple social and cultural sectors. In the 1960s, this category included a spectrum of young people--from those who received a university education comparable to that of their upper class European and North American counterparts, to those educated in indigenous communities, to those who dropped out of school at an early age. This spectrum reflected roughly the power hierarchy of the social groups to which these young people belonged, but public education was becoming more widespread and fewer teenagers were marginalized from society.

Steady economic growth grounded in development programs made it possible to predict a future in which young people would have access to education and full employment. The progressive programs of the 1960s and early 70s assumed that Latin America was simply an underdeveloped region that required external stimuli in order to increase education efficiency, as well as overcome economic and social inequality. If that prognosis had been correct, today the majority of Latin American youth would have a common basic education, and educational advancement or access to higher education would, in large part, not be determined by social class but rather by differences in taste, preferences, talents, and vocations (Puiggros, February 1997).

Neo-liberal Policies

The present situation is different though due to the implementation of neo-liberal policies throughout the region. However, there are those who still believe the current economic model will help poor countries and they argue the following:

The current development model has placed new demands on both citizens and the state. Globally-integrated, open economies require an internationally competitive work force, strong in science and technology. With the return to democracy after military dictatorships, people have made new demands on public services at the same time that government needs its citizens to be more informed and responsible. The decentralization of public administration puts more emphasis on participation, autonomy and civic responsibility at the local level (Puryear & Brunner, 1994).

Latin American countries will be hard-pressed to meet these challenges, given the interest they must pay on the growing foreign debt, the policies cutting state services (not only those that originated in the welfare state, but those that were part of the late 19th-century liberal state), the region's inferior position in the global economy, and the great mass of Latin Americans who have been discarded by deindustrialization. More than half of all Argentine workers, either unemployed or underemployed, eke out a living in the informal economy. Traditional full-time work with stable contracts is increasingly rare. Only one-third of the work force earns a fixed salary with social benefits (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo, 1997, p. 116). [1] Regional markets

have been crushed and commercial circuits remain limited to a narrow sector of wealthy people. Between October 1996 and May 1997, the richest 10 percent of the Argentine population earned 37.1 percent of the national income, while the poorest 10 percent earned a paltry 1.6 percent. In other words, the richest earned 23 times more than the poorest. [2] Furthermore, during 1998, an official inquiry situated the income of the poorest 10 percent at 1.5 percent. This implies that the situation of the poorest people suffered a new setback. It is important to consider that 55 percent of the Argentine workforce earns less than $700 a month, an amount insufficient to cover the cost of "Basic Basket of Goods and Services" (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo, 1998).

While social demands have increased, public resources have not. In the case of education, big cutbacks in public funding, in combination with an increase in poverty have eliminated any possibility of either improving the competitiveness of the work force or encouraging scientific and technological developments.

Today, hundreds of thousands of young people are excluded from both the educational system and the labor market. Secondary and post-secondary education has become more elitist as governments follow the directives of the World Bank, which throughout the 1990s, advised the state to shift funding from higher education to primary schooling. As a result, the quality of public education at secondary and post-secondary levels has deteriorated significantly, while private institutions for the elite have mushroomed. Differences in education equality and access among Latin American youth have widened dramatically.

There are profound quantitative and qualitative differences between the education young people received in the former educational system as compared to that received by youth today. Because of such changes, we are confronted with several theoretical and practical problems. We need to create programs capable of getting young people excited about study, work and, above all, the possibilities for their own future. In addition, young people should be trained in order to both enter the workforce and also assume their responsibilities as democratic citizens.

Twenty years ago, most Latin American youth worked and studied according to their social class and culture. Many left home for urban centers in order to start independent lives, participate in sports (from soccer in the streets to tennis in exclusive clubs), attend traditional festivals, movies, and watch television. Many were also politically active, the middle class predominantly in party politics and the organized working class in the labor movement.

Today, most of these activities are no longer open to young people. Moreover, the unemployment rate is particularly high among youth. In Buenos Aires and its former industrial corridor, unemployment among people between the ages of 15 and 19 shot up from 15 percent in 1991 to 42.4 percent in May, 1997. Among people between the ages of 20 and 34, the unemployment rate has climbed from 7.6 percent to 17.1 percent in the same time period (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo, 1998, p. 176).

The majority of these young people are unemployed, underemployed or trapped in so-called garbage contracts. Discriminated against by employers, they do not have access to

job training to improve their competitiveness in the workforce. Those young people who do have jobs earn low wages. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate among Argentine women is climbing, from 6.5 percent in May 1991 to 21.1 percent in May 1997, while unemployment among men is also rising, from 5 percent to 14.4 percent over the same period (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo, 1998, p. 176). Hence young people are also taking menial jobs to supplement falling household incomes.

Neglecting Youth

Many youth who leave school temporarily for work could be recovered by the school system. However, there are no mechanisms to make up for lost learning. Moreover, college accreditation is based on standards of a typical Fordist model (homogeneity of academic models, little access to long-distance learning, no legal changes in financial aid or accreditation for formal or informal learning or for schooling acquired in scattered periods), pushing the poorest into the informal system or tertiary activities where most end up frustrated. [3]

Furthermore, millions of young people are excluded not only from the income generating workforce, but more importantly, from the learning experience that results from work. Authors such as John Dewey and Hanna Arendt have discussed differences between exploitative child labor practices and work as a learning experience for children.

This distinction continues to be valid today, although experts in pedagogy and educational planning have not taken it sufficiently into account. In work inspired by Arendt regarding exploitative child labor practices in India, scholars proposed creative work as an alternative paradigm to the traditional dichotomy of exploited labor on the one hand and the rejection of child labor on the other. This semantic difference can be useful in the analysis of Latin American youth in the present era. Many of the region's young people have been denied creative work or the possibility of getting the education they need to do creative work. For this to change, there would have to be an equitable distribution of goods and services instead of the immense inequality that typically characterizes neo-liberal societies. Most young people lacking in training or work are destined to wander in the streets of Latin America's overpopulated cities, with little chance to organize politically and fight for radical change.

Although the situation for poor women is in many respects the most dramatic, they have benefited from cultural changes. In a study conducted by the Antiguas Caribbean Family Planning Affiliation, the results of which are applicable to the entire region, researchers found that until recently, early pregnancies were an important factor in the school system's rejection of young women. Today, however, young girls are less limited by early pregnancies and colleges are accepting them.

It is important to emphasize that the most successful educational programs for youth have job-training components. In Rosario, Argentina, school officials found it difficult to motivate young people to complete their secondary education; yet after they added a job-training program, completion rates increased significantly.

Since the beginning of the 90s, the educational efficiency of secondary schooling has

markedly worsened in certain regions. From 1994 to 1996, the number of students who repeated grades grew significantly in 18 provinces. In Buenos Aires, the number of students who had to repeat a grade rose from 6.3 percent to 8.84 percent. In the province of Córdoba, the number rose from 7.6 percent to 9.27 percent. In the northeastern province of Chaco, the number doubled from 6.9 percent to 12.85 percent. This dramatic increase of repetition rates in certain regions widens the gap in educational quality between the affluent and poor provinces. At the extremes, the province of San Juan had a 7.71 percent repetition rate while Neuquén had a 14.84 percent rate.

Furthermore, 57.8 percent of Argentine adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 from households below the poverty line do not attend school (either never attended or dropped out), compared to 26.3 percent of adolescents from households above the poverty line. Likewise, only 14.7 percent of poor adolescents from this age group still attend primary school, compared to 26.3 percent of more affluent adolescents. Twenty-seven and a half percent of poor adolescents (14-17 years) attend secondary school, versus 69 percent of more affluent adolescents. This polarization of adolescents is also evident in the fact that poor teenagers are more likely to drop out for good. Moreover, the increase in the drop-out rate is greater among poor teenagers than middle-class and rich teenagers.

In Argentina, Carlos Saúl Menem's government reformed education laws in 1993 and 1995 in accordance with the World Bank's directives, giving priority to basic education over secondary and post-secondary education. Upper grades of secondary school were closed and the eighth and ninth grades were added to primary school. As a result, the age mix within the schools has changed: teenagers and young children are attending the same schools, with the same school organization and teaching methods. Problems typical of adolescents, including drug use, have begun to show up in younger children. In some places, coursework has been hindered by teenagers coming to school hungry. For example, in schools in the province of Córdoba, the ritual daily salute to the flag had to be postponed until after the teens were given breakfast because students were fainting. In schools in poor communities, as in many secondary schools, teachers are confronting the problems of an alienated teenage population, including drug-dealing and deep despair.

Undermining Higher Education

As a result of these education policies, Latin American countries are producing fewer professionals, scientists and technical experts, which in turn undermines the basic research and technology that are indispensable for economic and social development. In the 1990s, neo-liberal technocrats created a battery of organizational forms, salary structures and value tables to measure the performance of teachers, researchers and students. They tried to apply the same productivity criteria in all countries, especially to large universities. A cost-benefit evaluation of output became a way to control educational demand, the goal being the reduction of investment in public higher education.

Not all Latin American countries are alike. Governments' capacities to negotiate, as well as pressures from university students and faculty, were important factors in determining the level of cutbacks. In the case of Mexico, professors have been required

to assume heavier course loads yet their salaries have not kept up with cost-of-living increases (Diaz Barriga & Pacheco Mendez, 1997). However, that country's inclusion in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) allowed it to maintain its national universities. The Inter-American Development Bank, and other banks, have financed university infrastructure, technology and programs to improve the quality of teaching (Maldonaldo, 1997).

Mexico's integration was different than that of Canada or the United States. First, its subordinate place in NAFTA reflected the powerful influence of foreign economic interests on the country's approach to education policy and scientific research. Second, the Mexican public university system has a long nationalist tradition. As a result, some of the government's reform efforts met with strong resistance from students and teachers.

Opportunities for higher education in Mexico decreased due to poverty and government policy. Compared with the rest of Latin American however, Mexican universities remain more intact. In Brazil and Uruguay private institutions of higher education have expanded while in the rest of South America, officials have over-estimated the capacity of the educational market to regulate the supply and demand of higher education. As a result, they have neglected to develop the sort of master planning that is indispensable if higher education systems are to grow and become more democratic.

Argentina has failed to make higher education more efficient in the neo-liberal sense or to create a high-quality, democratic university system. Universities can be divided into three groups according to the size of their student population: between 100 and 10,000 students; between 10,000 and 30,000 students; and between 40,000 and 185,000 students. The University of Buenos Aires is the largest with more than 200,000 students. On the outskirts of Buenos Aires, national and local political groups have created new universities that are not intended to grow beyond 3,000 to 5,000 students.

Lack of planning has also affected the criteria for financial aid to students. Public universities in the region have traditionally been free or publicly subsidized. Due to the economic decline of the middle class, to which the great majority of students belong, universities cannot charge fees, except for some specific services. There is a lack of diverse funding sources such as private payment, funds or scholarships from outside sources, or subsidies based on income. Furthermore, university work study programs frequently exploit the labor of students under the guise of apprenticeship or training (Instituto Programático de la Alianza, 1998).

The Mercosur countries need to resolve the problem of higher education, not only in order to compete in the international arena, but also to maintain internal balance. Relations between Brazil, whose economy is the most developed, and the rest of the countries in the region depend in large part on the ability of these latter countries to educate their lower classes. The political and social stability of these countries is tied to the democratic modernization of their educational systems, including training for both labor skills and specific jobs. These educational reforms must take place within the wider context of a development program and a more equitable distribution of GDP. Higher education should be linked to that development program and to scientific and

technological research (International Commission for Education for the XXI Century, 1996).

Conclusion

At the threshold of a new century, the World Bank's education policies have not produced the expected results. The whole system has been weakened without achieving a real improvement in the quality of basic education. Decentralization has introduced disorder, not efficiency, in educational systems, creating serious problems for societies that are growing poorer and more indebted (Senén González & Arango, 1996). The 1995 Delors Report, (a report on the Jomtien Conference on education for all), states that it is important to guarantee a secondary education that will adequately prepare students for university level education while diversifying the supply side of advanced education. The report also reaffirms the important role that institutes of advanced learning and universities play. Although constrained, the report represents the progress of the corrections that international agencies are beginning to make as part of the recent relative retreat of orthodox neo-liberalism. The advance of labor and social-democratic movements in Europe has its parallel in Latin America, with victories in big cities such as Montevideo (Frente Amplio), San Pablo (Workers Party), Mexico City (PRD), and Buenos Aires and Rosario (Partido Alianza). These new movements are discussing national and regional programs to confront the region's educational problems, including the crucial ones that shall have even greater impact in the not so distant future: youth, work and free time.

Notes

[1] These precarious contracts remove stability, vacations, social security and other benefits. In 1996, 6.1 percent of workers were employed in this way, and in April 1997 this number tripled, reaching 18.4 percent. In 1997 85 percent of those newly employed received jobs with these sorts of contracts (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo, 1997, p. 116).

[2] In 1974 the richest people, with 28 percent of the income, were earning 13 times more than the poorest people. In October 1990, the difference jumped to close to 15 times. Since neo-liberal programs have been applied by Menem's government, this difference has increased to 23 times. This disparity is even bigger if we consider that the bottom 60 percent of the population controlled 33.7 percent of the wealth in 1972 and only 16.6 percent in 1997. The richest portion of the population gained wealth at the expense of all the other segments of the population (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo, 1997, p. 113).

[3] In Argentina nowadays, 40 percent of the children live in extreme poverty. Every day 50 children under one year old die from poverty, malnutrition or bad hygienic conditions. More than 26,000 children are in state institutions, prisons or psychiatric clinics (Unicef Report, 1993). More than 4 million children and teenagers encounter daily the difficulties that arise from the small incomes of their families, the absence of psycho-affective stimulation, an extremely high school drop-out rate, limited access to health services, and the utter lack of any kind of stimulation for growth and individual affirmation (Unicef, 1993; SUTEBA, 1997).

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