

# Education



## The legacy of recent reforms: privatisation and deprivation

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**With fewer than ten years remaining until the deadline set for reaching the Millennium Goals, there are still 800 million illiterate people in the world. Strategies based on privatisation and competition do not contribute to the goal of *education for all*. On the contrary, the new education agenda exacerbates social and economic inequalities and compromises the quality of education and access to it.**

At the World Forum on Education in Dakar in April 2000, more than 160 countries committed themselves to attaining the goals and objectives of *Education for All* (EFA) by 2015. This meant ensuring universal primary education and literacy, gender equality in school enrolment and early childhood and adult education, with a specific commitment to quality education. At the Millennium Summit in September of that year, when the international community set the same deadline for meeting the Millennium Development Goals, it ratified and took ownership of two of the Education for All objectives – universal primary education and promoting gender equality and self-determination for women – on the grounds that they constitute “*an ambitious agenda for reducing poverty and improving living standards*” (UNDP, 2004:1).

Five years later, according to a monitoring report on Education for All prepared by UNESCO in 2005, the possibility of reaching these goals is seriously compromised. Although the number of children not enrolled in school has been decreasing in absolute terms, the pace is too slow to reach the goal of universal primary education by 2015, and among these uninvolved children, the percentage of girls is increasing instead of decreasing. Illiteracy

remains high: there are still some 800 million illiterate people in the world, and about 70 percent of them live in sub-Saharan Africa and South and Western Asia (UNESCO, 2005:2).

This situation, however, has not come out of nowhere. The alarm about inequality and the huge lag in education affecting millions of children in the world's poor countries was sounded after nearly two decades of implementation of the most recent generation of educational reforms. The purpose of this paper is to examine, through the particular national characteristics of these reforms, the traits they share and outline some areas that should be analysed in assessing their results and judging their ability to make a positive contribution to achieving EFA, with fewer than ten years to go before the deadline for meeting the Millennium Goals for education.

### Overview of the new approach to education

Broadly speaking, in the last decades of the twentieth century, education policy, sometimes reflected in reforms and sometimes in action – or omission – by governments, has ‘taken a new approach.’ There has been a shift from a modern, universalist, integrating model aimed at

educating citizens, focusing on the state's role as guarantor of educational opportunities, to a more individualistic and differentiating model aimed at educating worker-producers and focusing on the role of the market in guaranteeing that some consumers can freely choose educational services from a differentiated supply. This transition occurred at different, interrelated levels, from the most general (policies and new supranational stakeholders) to the most specific (government administration and school management).

### **The new international division of labour in education**

There has been a shift to a new international division of labour in the area of education and research, which has been called “*low-intensity globalisation*” (Teodoro, 2003), and is based on two main points: (a) the widening of the international gap in the production of knowledge, and (b) the concentration of decision-making power over the design and control of education policies.

In the area of knowledge production, there has been both a recognition and a widening of the gap between rich and poor countries, or to put it differently, between those that specialise in producing knowledge by strengthening their university education and research and development (R&D) systems and those that, because of prior conditions, end up concentrating on basic education programmes. Even when developing countries try to train scientists, they are not expected to produce knowledge, but are given the role of ‘following’ the knowledge produced in the developed world. In the words of the World Bank (2004:1):

*Because the world increasingly depends on science and technology, the complexity of which increases daily, developing countries must train groups of competent scientists who can keep abreast of the cutting-edge research being done in developed countries.*

This division of labour increases poor countries' dependence, creating vicious circles that are difficult to break out of: first, because poor countries depend on their scant purchasing power or international funding to acquire products derived from technological developments stemming from knowledge produced in the more developed countries (patents, franchises). And second, because they often depend on the knowledge of foreign technical and professional personnel for the use and

development of this technology. Finally, they also depend on the possible interest of more-developed countries in producing knowledge and developing technologies that are only applicable to local problems and contexts.

In the design and implementation of education policies, there is a division of functions between international lenders and other financial bodies (including governments), which offer ‘conditioned aid,’ and the governments of poor countries: the former design and control, while the latter act, mainly as implementers.

This concentration of policy decision-making in more-developed countries and international bodies creates poles of attraction for scientists, technical personnel and intellectuals in countries where knowledge production plays a central role, further exacerbating disparities in wealth and in the ability to produce new knowledge. For example, the European Union states that the goals of its higher education programmes include making its universities more attractive (*Erasmus Mundus* programme), while reinforcing immigration policies that discourage the flow of human capital from other regions. In Latin America, the phenomenon is notorious: one-quarter of the world's scientists live in the United States, while only 3.5 percent live in Latin America and the Caribbean. Ninety percent of the people who take part in scientific and technological activity are concentrated in the seven most industrialised countries. Migration not only exacerbates this gap, but also leads to a transfer from poor countries to rich ones: it is estimated that in the past forty years, more than 1.2 million professionals emigrated from Latin America to the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, implying a transfer of USD 30 billion, the equivalent of more than ten years' worth of investment in science and technology (Lema, 2001).

### **The emergence of new stakeholders**

New supranational stakeholders have emerged and have begun to influence the shape of countries' public policies, especially social policies, and specifically those related to education.

The first group consists of international lenders, such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, in conjunction with bodies such as UNESCO and UNICEF, which were created specifically to foster countries' educational, scientific and cultural development or address children's issues. These organisations' interest in education and their goal of influencing the reform of school systems in the less-developed world have increased



steadily in recent decades (UNESCO, 1998, 2004). For example, as the World Bank's web site indicates, in the past four decades the proportion of loans granted to governments for the design and implementation of education policy more than doubled. In more general terms, there has been an internationalisation of debate over education and of forums for consensus-building, with world conferences taking centre stage in the definition of trends regarding what can and should be achieved. The milestones that have shaped the debate over education in the international arena include:

- The World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, 1990), which resulted in the 'World Declaration on Education for All' and the 'Framework for Action: Meeting Basic Learning Needs.'
- In Latin America, the meeting of ministers of education in Quito (1991) and the proposal promoted by ECLAC and UNESCO in the document, 'Education and Knowledge: Basic Pillars of Changing Production Patterns with Social Equity' (1992).
- The report, 'Learning: the Treasure Within' (1996), also known as the 'Delors Report,' which had a great impact on experts.
- The World Education Forum in Dakar (2000), which offered an opportunity to evaluate the decade following the Jomtien conference, at which a new framework for action was drafted.

The influence of these bodies on the policies actually implemented has also depended on the various countries' level of development and economic power; while wealthier countries enjoyed greater autonomy in the design of their education policies at every level, and have often chosen to follow international trends, others that are more sensitive to pressure from the need for fresh funding for the implementation of social policies have had little choice about whether to accept the policy guidelines that accompany those funds.

The second group of stakeholders consists of private enterprise, business consortia, chambers of industry or what in generic terms are called 'stakeholders in the world of work,' which demand that governments ensure the availability of a work force that has certain qualities resulting from education, especially basic education. These demands are rooted in the collapse of the Fordist production model and the shift toward new, post-Fordist models, under which workers need new skills that respond to demands for polyvalence and flexibility in

adapting to changes stemming from the new pace of technology. Reports such as SCANS (Department of Labour, 1991), whose title trumpets 'What Work Requires of Schools,' began to emphasise a broad range of skills related to intellectual and emotional aspects of the whole person, including: basic skills in reading, writing, math, comprehension and oral expression; intellectual skills like creative thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, self-management and integrity; social and interpersonal skills, the acquisition, evaluation and organisation of information, comprehension, monitoring and correction of systems performance; and the selection, implementation and maintenance of appropriate technology. Like other reports of its kind, SCANS is constantly referred to as a source of inspiration for policy. Businesses therefore become entities that demand from governments: (1) a type of worker produced by the entire educational system, not just by technical training, and (2) a certain type of knowledge, to be created by knowledge-production centres, especially universities. In general, this new stakeholder's influence on defining the type of knowledge to be produced and the type of technological application to be developed as a result is quantitatively determined by its ability to fund, sponsor and purchase consulting services from higher education institutions that suffer from chronic lack of resources, and qualitatively determined by its interest in registering and taking advantage of rights and patents.

The emergence of these new stakeholders changed the previous balance of power in the field of education, which had been defined based on the design and implementation of modern school systems by the government and various civil society stakeholders, especially parents and teachers. It should be noted here that the central role of teachers and of the monopoly of specific knowledge defined as 'pedagogical knowledge' was lost. Instead, there emerged sociological, economic and technological rhetoric that reflected interests that stakeholders within the education system viewed as foreign to education. The school was no longer the place where curriculum issues were defined; instead, this was done by a series of power relationships defined by the new stakeholders: international bodies and private enterprise. Parents, who had traditionally been marginalised from the school, also played a role. This, in turn, led to a repositioning of the previous stakeholders, especially unions of teachers and students, which tend to resist interference by actors from 'outside' the system itself. These changes are especially

notable because they were accompanied by new approaches that began to dominate the design of education policy.

### **New government education policies**

The change in approach at the supranational level had its echo in changes in government policies, particularly in the definition of these policies' objectives (an equality-freedom rationale) and the subordinate role assumed by the government (a government-market rationale).

In education policy, the equality-freedom rationale is reflected in the tension between a model of education aimed at integration — with a single, equal curriculum for all based on content involving the development of a collective national identity, where the schools' freedom of choice is limited by the system's requirements for rationality — and a model of education aimed at respect and emphasis on family, religious, group and any other type of identity — through the creation of an education market consisting of institutions that compete with a differentiated, segmented curriculum offering. In the latter case, state support for the principle of equal access to education tends to be reflected in a system of 'school vouchers' that the government gives to parents, who turn them in to the school that they choose for their children. In intermediate cases, even when the voucher system is adopted, the government provides subsidies or tax exemptions to private schools, especially religious ones.

Chile is a classic example. Beginning in the eighties, under the military government, an education reform was launched that included, among other things, the use of private providers and the assessment of academic results. These changes, which accompanied the introduction of liberal, market-oriented economic policies, involved funding for both public and private schools that was proportionate to the number of students. This encouraged schools to compete for student enrolment. During the nineties, the system received renewed impetus from competitive mechanisms such as financing for projects to improve the quality of education.

The government-market rationale follows this approach. There has been a shift of emphasis from the government as principal education provider — and manager and guarantor of public education that is officially equal for all — toward an emphasis on the rationale of the market. This is particularly true in the provision and

management of education, and less so with regard to content and the assessment of its relevance. The impacts are clear. A comparison of the percentage of students in public universities in 1985 and 1998 shows that the figure dropped from 88 to 85 percent in Argentina, from 51 to 42 percent in Brazil, from 96 to 69 percent in Chile, and from 83 to 73 percent in Mexico (Camus, 2004).

This is only one aspect of a broader process of shrinkage of the state's functions in the face of economic liberalism and its withdrawal from the role of guaranteeing social welfare and equality. As a result, there has been increased interest in social differentiation processes, which are encouraged through incentives for the segmentation of the new education market according to variables related to pre-existing groups (families, local communities or religious associations).

### **School administration**

In administration, this assumes decentralisation from the central authority to other spheres of public authority (municipalities, local authorities) and/or contracting out or privatising services. The Educational Openness Plan (*Plan de Apertura Educativa*) implemented in Colombia (see box) in an effort to increase equal opportunity and the quality of education is one example of such decentralisation. It was implemented for the following reasons:

- i. Decentralisation of administration could facilitate a shift toward better adaptation of curriculum content to the different local and regional situations of which schools are a part.
- ii. The delegation of decision-making to the schools would help foster community participation in curriculum design. Greater community involvement (especially by parents) would contribute to the design of a more relevant curriculum and greater commitment to achieving pedagogical goals.
- iii. Over the medium term, the adaptation of the curriculum to the community's interests would improve the criteria usually used to evaluate the system, such as effectiveness, efficiency and quality, measured in terms of coverage, repetition rates and dropout rates. The idea was that the school would be more effective in reaching traditionally marginalised target populations or those with high grade repetition and dropout rates.



## Colombia learns

Using the slogan, *Colombia learns*, the Colombian Ministry of Education announced that the country had launched an 'education revolution.' The sector's plan for 2002-2006 stated that "*despite all efforts, Colombia is far from reaching all children and youth with high-quality basic education*" (MEN, 2002:7). Indicators of coverage, efficiency and quality show that progress has been slow and inadequate and enrolment rates are lower than expected. "*The greatest increases occurred in the nineties as a result of structural changes related to the 1991 Constitution. According to figures from the Continuous Household Survey, in 2002 the average number of years of education for Colombians over age 15 was 7.5, lower than that of most countries in the region*" (2002:8).

The education revolution — as presented — sought to provide the coverage and quality that the country needed to attain better social and economic development conditions and improve the population's standard of living. To meet this objective, the Educational Development Plan defined three basic education policies: expanding the coverage of education, improving the quality of education and increasing the efficiency of the education sector.

Within this framework, the "Godfather Plan" (*Plan Padrino*) was implemented by the Advisory Group on Special Programmes, which answered to the president and the Ministry of Education. Its purpose was to help achieve the goals for coverage and quality of education set by the current government by promoting social development projects that include components involving infrastructure, the equipping of schools and community participation. "*These projects are carried out through partnerships and joint efforts involving the central and local governments, the private sector, international cooperation and non-governmental organisations*" (MEN, 2004:1).

"*The projects are aimed at building local management and self-organisational capacity and building the social fabric with participatory methodologies. The programme is based on the infrastructure component as a catalyst for local development*" (MEN:2004:1). The programme benefits at-risk disadvantaged groups, such as communities displaced by armed conflict, indigenous groups, people living in rural and border areas, and people with disabilities.

The new trends include a shift from an organisational model based on the control of processes (through the formal rationalisation of procedures in accordance with the mindset of modern bureaucracies) to a model based on the measurement of results (by introducing criteria related to external efficiency or effectiveness, or demand-driven instruments). The creation of an education market assumes the generation of data regarding the quality of educational services provided by different schools, which should be subject to measurement and comparison. Similarly, the distribution of funds to the various schools can no longer depend on the application of uniform administrative standards but is tied to the relative success or failure of each school. Competition among schools implies that they must demonstrate their superiority to two main stakeholders: (a) parents or 'consumers' of the service, who will choose what they consider the best education provider and will reward it through vouchers; and (b) the government, which offers the opportunity to bid for additional funds to implement educational projects adapted to the social, economic or cultural context.

From a theoretical standpoint, this responds to the bond between the school and society, with the idea that

the educational system should not only be efficient, but should also be effective and meet the goal of providing relevant, high-quality education. It is often said that the attainment of these goals can and should be evaluated by those who demand the service, which means that the service should be responsive to its environment and accountable for its results. From a practical standpoint, this new emphasis on 'accountability' leads to the implementation of various mechanisms for measuring results and assessing the quality of education. Standard learning assessment has been introduced in basic education to provide input for improving quality and as a tool for comparing schools, regions and even countries through such initiatives as PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2004), the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (*Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación*, LLECE), or the joint UNESCO-UNICEF Monitoring Learning Achievement Project (MLA). For university and other tertiary education, scales of educational quality are created for institutions, using information from graduates' employers, peers and other sources to produce data that will help consumers choose educational services.

Quality scales not only have a segregating effect, however, but also encourage a race for the mercantile colonisation of the school (from advertising to strategies for building loyalty among young consumers), creating a tension with traditional pedagogical practice (Laval, 2004). Teachers also suffer from segmentation under the new policies (Whitty, 2000).

### Assessment of the second generation of reforms

The analysis in the previous section describes the poles of a continuum on which there are many versions and forms of compromise between the two extremes. The 1992 ECLAC-UNESCO document, for example, claims to take a middle ground by presenting criteria that combine an emphasis on citizenship with competitiveness, equity with performance, and national integration with decentralisation. These agencies, which distance themselves from the liberalising policies that began to be implemented in the eighties, also distance themselves from the old model of state management to stress the long-term strategic role of the production and dissemination of knowledge and the need for a stable financial commitment to this area. The new model's influence is visible in the incorporation of new stakeholders into the debate over education and the emphasis on accountability for results *"of education, of training in science and technology, and of the articulation of education with the demands of individuals, companies and institutions"* (CEPAL-UNESCO, 1992:18-19).

The state-run systems that the new liberalising policies were meant to replace were based on the assumption that only the equalising action of state policy could counterbalance a tendency toward the reproduction and exacerbation of social inequalities while guaranteeing the appropriate intellectual and emotional formation of all

children with the goal of integrating them into society. Less concerned about integration and equity, the new reforms appealed to the privatisation and liberalisation of schools, hoping that competition for funds would spur improvement in the quality of education. Freed from the 'heavy burden of state bureaucracy' and from their concern for equal opportunities, schools — especially the best ones, which were now autonomous — could rise to the highest levels of intellectual performance. Once freed from the burden of state standards, well-positioned schools in particular — those with a favourable economic situation and a wealthy student body — could reach international performance levels. Perhaps the system would not become more equitable, but it would reach a higher level of quality. But what has actually happened?

In general, as was foreseeable, the liberal educational reforms have had a negative effect on the equity of learning achievement among schools. In addition, however, and contrary to expectations, the quality of education has also been compromised. As reports from the 2000 and 2003 PISA tests show, in countries with a high degree of inequality among schools, students' performance is consistently below average. In Chile, for example, the 2000 PISA tests show both a huge variation among schools, with a test score point spread of 300 to 550 points, and very poor performance. Not even the 'Chilean elite' — upper-class students from the ninety-fifth socioeconomic percentile — scored as high as the average for students from the OECD. Chile, which no longer participates in the PISA programme, is now focusing on improving education in the 10 percent of schools that had the lowest scores. It is not strange, therefore, that the term 'school of ignorance' (Michéa, 2002) is applied to a system that trains — not always successfully — a minority for the elite spheres of economics and politics while leaving the rest in 'ignorance.'

### The secrets of success

Canada, Cuba, Finland and the Republic of Korea are four of the countries with the highest scores on international tests. What makes them so successful? According to UNESCO (2005:16), their success lies in the following factors:

- High regard for the teaching profession, demanding requirements for entering the profession and financial support for teacher education, resulting in a corps of teachers who are highly motivated and committed to their work;
- A solid, explicit vision of the goals of education and long-range education policy;
- An effort to expand access to education while improving quality.



## The impacts of privatisation and competition

Privatisation and competition tend to exacerbate social and economic inequalities and compromise the quality of education because of certain factors that are not taken into consideration.

There is a certain polysemy regarding decentralisation that has led to various types of errors with negative political consequences. There is confusion between two different processes that have diverse consequences: (1) the administrative or territorial decentralisation of educational services in primary or middle school; and (2) autonomy for schools in the area of curriculum design. Recognition of the need to balance the strongly centralised nature of educational administration through territorial decentralisation is often implicitly accompanied by a proposal for complete autonomy, making schools responsible for their own destiny both in terms of fundraising and with regard to the results of their educational efforts. Several studies of the results of various types of schools show that schools located in homogeneously poor situations face great difficulties in improving educational achievement and that it is very difficult for them to do so alone.

An educational system made up of schools with economically homogeneous and differentiated student bodies (poor schools with poor students and rich schools with rich students) will probably see an exacerbation of those differences and the resulting polarisation of educational achievement. If decentralisation forces them to draft their own grant proposals and compete for funds, the outcomes will be increasingly diverse. The schools that are better positioned at the start will use that advantage to compete successfully for scarce funding, benefiting (in terms of education) the more privileged students.

In curriculum design, there is confusion between the cultural differences that contribute to meaningful group and ethnic identities — which must always be respected, conserved and transmitted through the curriculum — and those that result from conditions of poverty. The latter should be understood as initial disadvantages that schools must try to overcome by encouraging equality, at the risk of a curriculum that has the effect of reproducing and amplifying inherited social inequalities. Not every difference between populations, therefore, constitutes a cultural trait in the terms in which curricula should be contextualised, as often occurs. In these cases, teaching that is adapted to the social and economic characteristics of the local situation, when this situation is marked by

poverty and a lack of expectations, accentuates social conditioning instead of attenuating it.

International experience shows that the maintenance of high expectations about students' learning achievement is one of the most relevant factors in explaining differences in performance. Greater demands on teachers, both during their initial professional education and throughout their careers, have consistently been shown to be a significant motivational factor that helps explain the students' good performance. Beyond expectations of student performance, content also appears to be relevant in the determination of high scores: broad cultural education, including art, poetry and classic literature, results in higher scores on tests in letters, regardless of the socioeconomic situation of the student or the school. This evidence should be taken into account when defining curriculum content for poor areas, as well as in transmitting the level of learning that students in a poor socioeconomic situation are expected to attain.

With regard to participation in the educational process, the participation of parents and other community stakeholders in the design of education projects or school administration can also exacerbate inequalities. In a system where school funding does not depend on the outcomes of actions by these stakeholders, the inclusion of parents in school life (often resisted by teachers) has a beneficial effect on learning: they commit to ensuring that their children perform well, they stay in touch with their children's learning process, and they help open up the school to the community. When the type and amount of funding that the school can obtain depends on parents' participation, however, it places the neediest schools at a disadvantage. All of these studies agree, and international experience also shows, that the parents' occupations and educational levels are two of the main factors in differences in students' development. When this conditioning, which mainly occurs at home, is combined with the unequal ability of parents to contribute to their children's schools, the difference in outcomes is even greater. The effects of family origin on school performance, which lead to inequalities, are aggravated by the very institution that should be reducing those inequalities.

Finally, a quick examination of the system of school vouchers or checks. Many studies have highlighted the problems stemming from the voucher system, especially considering its effects on children from the poorest households or those whose parents have the least education. First, as a service offered in an open market, educa-

tion is one of the services most affected by various considerations:

- Its 'quality' can only be appreciated over the long term;
- The cost of changing from one school to another is very high in resources of all kinds, including emotional;
- In practice, real possibilities for choice are severely restricted by limits on transportation or other areas, especially for the most disadvantaged sectors;
- The ability to make good decisions about complex issues, such as those related to education, depends to a great degree on the household's cultural foundation, placing the children of parents who have little educa-

tion at a disadvantage.

There is also a significant difference in education compared with other public services: the choice is not made by the 'user.' Under this system, the 'freedom of choice' touted by proponents becomes 'freedom of educational reproduction,' by which parents are granted the right to make decisions about education whose consequences could weigh forever in their children's destiny in the areas of education and work. These decisions will often broaden the children's skills and prospects for the future. But in many other cases, they may result in the schools' perpetuation of a limited destiny imposed by family background.

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