



REGIONAL SEMINAR

SECONDARY EDUCATION

IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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Initiative:



Campana
Latinoamericana
por el Derecho
a la Educación



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CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEBATE ON: SECONDARY EDUCATION AS A PROMOTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The *Regional Conference on Secondary Education in Latin America and the Caribbean* took place on May 29 to 31, 2013 in Bogota, Colombia. The meeting was reflective and analytical, bringing together people and institutions that influence public policy on education at the national and regional levels, and embracing as a basic principle the participation of Latin American and Caribbean adolescents and youth. It enquired about the realization of the right to secondary education, the extent to which secondary education in our region promotes rights as well as the purpose of education at this level. Below are listed the central ideas that arose in the three days of collective debate, which are offered with the expectation that they may stimulate other reflections as well as assist in the design and monitoring of public policy on education in our region.

A) UNDERLYING PROPOSITIONS FOR THE PUBLIC DEBATE ON SECONDARY EDUCATION

- 1) **Education is a fundamental human right.** This means recognizing that not only is education a right inherent to all people simply by virtue of being human but also that the right will be achieved to the degree to which its four dimensions are guaranteed: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. Given that an education that does not respect human rights is unacceptable, the right to education is realized only if it is capable of guaranteeing other human rights, such as dignity, participation, freedom of expression, and respect for diversity, etc. Implicit in the framing of education as a fundamental human right is the recognition that States are its guarantor and, thus, recognition of its character: public, free of charge and universal. It also means rejecting the notion that education is merchandized to be bought and sold for profit. The mandatory nature of education also implies an ethical and political commitment on the part of States to ensure the full realization of the right, in its four fundamental dimensions.
- 2) **The purpose of education must be aligned with human rights instruments, which establish the minimum floor.** Such instruments set out that education must be directed towards the full development of human personality and dignity and must strengthen respect for human rights. In addition, it should enable all people to participate effectively in a plural, democratic society. The participants of the regional seminar, male and female, point out that education should be democratic and participatory, aimed at social transformation, critical thought and the thinking subject. Education must teach people how to live with and among others, recognizing and valuing diversity and difference and promoting humanisation and *buen vivir*¹. Education must satisfy all of the dimensions of life: work-related, cultural, political and public.
- 3) **Education is a political act** since it makes available what humanity has accumulated to everyone. As a result, education must promote thought, critical reflection and understanding of the world and lead to the debate of existing paradigms, denaturalizing the false consensus that legitimize the status quo and shifting long-standing power dynamics.

¹ *Buen vivir* is an indigenous concept that implies living in harmony with others and with nature.

- 4) Schools must be contextualized as spaces of encounter and realization of human rights. They must value diversity, plurality and promote learning and experiences that are meaningful in the lives of each individual and community.** Being a part of a territory, questioning and dialoguing about local problems as well as broader social questions, and being connected to the larger educational community, schools are situated in a particular time and local, national and global space. Understanding the school as a place of encounter permits the recognition and interaction with “otherness” as well as the opportunity to know and recognize those that compose it. School should be a space to realize human rights, to recognize and value diversity, protected from all forms of violence and discrimination, including generational discrimination as well as submission, domination, punishment of difference, which implies a profound redistribution of power. School should provide learning opportunities and experiences that are meaningful for the present and future. To achieve this, the education system as a whole must be committed to equality and justice, bringing forth all necessary efforts and resources so that this commitment reaches the entire population. Only then can we say that our countries have a GOOD EDUCATION.

B) SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS ON THE SCHOOL SPHERE

- 1)** Recognizing adolescents and youth, male and female, as subjects of rights means acknowledging their identities and cultures and enabling dialogue with all of these, including school-based cultures. Today, many times education systems reject, repress, undervalue or discriminate against these cultures and identities. Recognizing and valuing them is a key starting point for a secondary education that promotes human rights.
- 2)** Adolescence and youth should not be seen simply as a stage in which to train and prepare for adult life but rather adolescents and youth, male and female, must be seen as full subjects empowered to participate on an equal footing with others inside and outside the education system. As such, there must be a recognized reciprocity between adolescents and youth, male and female, and the other subjects of the education community, such as teachers, managers, other education professionals, parents and others outside of schools. Simultaneously recognizing the existence of differentiated roles and functions is the basis from which to create transformative difference.

- 3) Adolescents and youth, male and female, must be assured their right to organize and participate, be it in school councils, social movements or other fora. The lived experience of democratic governance in educational institutions is key to their development as citizens and subjects of rights. Laws that impede such participation should be struck down and replaced with those that enable and foster it, be it inside schools or in the public sphere. The frequent stigmatization and criminalization of students and their movements and/or organizations cannot be tolerated. Student mobilization in the region has been and continues to be fundamental to promotion of public debate, generation of collective consciousness and advances in public policy.
- 4) Teachers, male and female, must be assured their academic autonomy enabling them to be reflective, critical and transformational professionals, in so doing recognizing the complexity of educational phenomena, valuing processes, not pre-determining the task of the teacher and avoiding a mechanical approach to the curriculum. Furthermore, working conditions should be guaranteed, such as established working days, adequate salaries, time to prepare lessons, undertake research and participate in debates and decision-making processes; professional development opportunities, and appropriate class sizes.
- 5) The political-pedagogical project (which includes the curriculum, school materials, administration, evaluations and experiences) must move closer to the world of adolescents and youth, male and female (their demands, cultures, knowledge, and expectations), ensuring that policy decisions provide differentiated responses. In this sense, curricula should be modified and built upon the different realities, contexts (e.g., urban-rural) and peoples (e.g., indigenous peoples) who use them.
- 6) The political- pedagogical project must recognize as well as dialogue and establish links with its micro and macro contexts, including with the aim of changing these. It must be sensitive to the needs and identities of its students (e.g., youth cultures, sexual and gender identities and other characteristics associated with identity) in addition to the situation of pregnant adolescents, those who work, those from displaced families, youth of indigenous and African descent, linguistic diversity, among others.
- 7) The political- pedagogical project must provide an education for life, with learning opportunities and experiences that are meaningful as regards the labour market, culture, health, politics and citizenship. As such, it should avoid the tendency to make standardized learning tests the epicenter of educational policy as this impoverishes curricula, learning and teaching processes in general and denies subjective experience, plurality and diversity.

- 8) The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in educational centres should not be done simply with a view to their use as a tool; that is, as merely “training users,” but rather from a pedagogical point of view as part of a comprehensive curriculum, understanding that ICTs are not neutral. On this basis, ICTs should be used for group projects that are dynamic and promote dialogue and encounter of youth, school and other cultures as well as for the surrounding world, thus overcoming the idea that ICTs are the only or central centerpiece for pedagogic innovation, strictly for individualistic use or the promotion of market interests. ICTs can make education and educational opportunities democratic to the extent to which they situate the adolescent/ youth as a proactive subject in the process of teaching and learning while still being attentive to the diversity of expectations and needs.

C) SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS ON THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

- 1) The school system should be strengthened and better coordinated. This means strengthening coordination horizontally (among schools) and vertically (among different educational bodies and levels from the local to the national). A strengthened system is pre-requisite for the full development of teacher’s role and the processes of teaching and learning.
- 2) The starting point for teacher training should be a humanist and sociological base which seeks to balance pedagogical knowledge and specializations. It should permit teachers to contextualize and act in accordance with the propositions outlined above. In particular, it should promote the recognition of adolescent and youth cultures, be consistent with a human rights-based education and promote meaningful learning. Continuing professional education for teachers should be free of charge, on-going and in-service, including within schools themselves, thereby, grounded in the context of the schools.
- 3) Democratic governance of schools is key to realize the right to education. The participation of adolescents and youth, male and female, in debate and decision-making at the school as well as the macro level, directly and proactively affecting the development of education policy and practice, is fundamental. In addition, the participation of teachers’ unions and social movements on the right to education must be guaranteed and their value and contributions acknowledged. Democratic governance enables changes to the power relationships which create public policies.

As such, it is necessary to address discrimination outside of schools and ensure a democratization of the process of defining public policy..

- 4) Evaluation in education should be guided by analysis and an understanding of what is happening in the education sector in order to bring about positive changes to the system, its actors and the processes of teaching and learning. It is worrisome, however, that the evaluation function is being distorted and used to stigmatize and blame students, teachers, families and schools. Often, evaluations are turned into a new system of measurement, classification and ranking of students and teachers, when it is the education systems that must be evaluated and improved from the macro to the micro levels. It must be pointed out that international standardized evaluations claim to be universal and suppose that cultural and academic capital can be demonstrated within the framework of homogenous measurements predicated on the illusion that anything can be evaluated at one-off opportunity and given moment in time. One of the risks of this approach is that the application and use of the results effectively erase the uniqueness of individuals, of peoples and fail to take into consideration that effects of education are felt, above all, outside of time and place. The governing paradigm of universal evaluation created by some international organisations and States, which is associated with and reduced to measurements and results, tends to censure different kinds of knowledge and ignores the relationship between the subjects of learning and knowledge. Formative and cumulative evaluations should be stressed in the classroom, and opportunities to reflect on evaluation should be part of initial and continuing teacher training. Additionally, it is critical that evaluation design be implemented with the participation of the education community, allowing a discussion of the categories and indicators that will be used in evaluations as well as the underlying logic. The relationship between the design and implementation of evaluations and democratic governance is, therefore, key.

D) SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS ON LAWS, PUBLIC POLICY AND SOCIETAL IMAGINARY BEYOND EDUCATION

- 1) Policy should consider the uniqueness of adolescents of youth. Equally, it is important to understand educational policies as part of a comprehensive system of public policies aimed at guaranteeing the full exercise of adolescent and youth rights, preserving the specificity that emerges from the function of guaranteeing the right to education and, at the same time, promoting linkages with all other public policies that reinforce the role of the State as the guarantor of all rights in this life stage.
- 2) The hegemonic media influences the collective imagination and tends to go against the identities of adolescents and youth, such as promulgating pejorative stereotypes, which criminalize and discriminate against the opinions and tasks of adolescents and youth, male and female, or promote consumerist patterns of behaviour. They tend to promote the idea the age of criminal responsibility should be low while at the same time suggesting that adolescents are neither capable of participating in political and public life nor are rights holders in law.
- 3) It is necessary to change the societal perception of teachers, expressly valuing them as intellectuals as well as reflective and creative professionals.
- 4) Policies and public budgeting laws should be implemented to increase the education budget and strengthen public systems. Adequate resources used in a responsible manner are a *sine qua non* to guarantee the right to education, although they are not the only precondition to a good education and must be linked to necessary reforms to curricula and governance..
- 5) The importance of framing education as a basic human right in legal frameworks and other more specific educational guidelines must be acknowledged. There have been advances in education laws in the region. On the other hand, it is important to develop laws that promote human rights beyond the education sector. For example, anti-discrimination laws and laws that support social participation are particularly relevant for education guidelines and other human rights.

- 6) It was observed that when the State abandons its role as the guarantor of rights, it tends to transfer this responsibility to schools. The State must assume once again its role as guarantor of rights in a holistic fashion promoting, in addition to a good public education, good public health, employment policies, cultural policies, etc. In this manner, it is key to frame educational policy from a comprehensive policy perspective that guarantees rights in every stage of life.
- 7) Advancing towards a secondary education that promotes rights requires a redefinition of the major axes on which public policies are structured as well as the promotion of debates on the relationship between the State and the private, between the universal and the specific, between the central and the local. In addition, it is necessary to revise the adult-centric nature of the bonds implicit in the relationship between State and citizenry and to better link policies that guarantee redistribution with those that guarantee recognition and participation.

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