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Reflections on Educational Reforms in Latin America

Abstract

A reform always implies an adjustment, a transformation, or a change. But one always hopes that a reform is for the better, and that it will benefit those who will be affected by the reform. Educational reforms have been seen in this way, since the world changes and we change with it. In this line of thought, we can dare to think that when an educational reform is considered, it concerns all of us, as we are teachers, students, managers and society in general. We have great expectations in all aspects, from economics, which in the end involves all of us, to quality, social reconstruction in the reduction of poverty, providing quality of life, and reducing the gap between the rich and the poor.

Keywords: educational reforms, quality, fairness, social justice

Introduction

Successive and different proposals for reform, driven particularly after the 1960s, have addressed almost all aspects of educational systems that are susceptible to modification, although they are often determined by external factors, and do not arise in the interior of the schools or the educational system. According to Zaccagnini (2004, p. 14) in discussion of educational reforms, when attempts are made to bring about great structural and/or organizational changes in the educational system, this takes place at one or more levels.

In Latin America various reforms of education at all levels have been implemented, from the first grade of pre-school one, through basic primary, basic secondary and undergraduate to postgraduate education. We can almost say that a new reform is introduced by each new president, or each new minister of education, in each country. From the 1980s, a series of educational reforms have been implemented, with different intentions and impacts. Martinic (2001, p. 19) makes the distinction between reforms of the first, second and third generation. First, during the 1980s, they would address the extension of the cover of education, and reforms are defined as “towards the outside”, because they promoted structural changes to move social and educational services away from central government. Education was administered and managed by the cities, or departments in our case, or by the private sector. Nevertheless, this decentralization was accompanied not only by an increase of the public apparatus, but also by a reduction of the cost of education. Salary reductions were imposed to fulfil certain criteria of efficiency,

especially with regard to the resource management, and directing the better use of resources, elements that continue to the present time.

The second generation of reforms addressed quality and the fairness. It is often said that the goal of achieving full enrolment has practically achieved, although the problem remains in the case of sectors where there are limited economic resources and individuals have difficulty accessing the educational system (Reimers, 2000, p. 8), especially in pre-school, secondary and university education.

In the 1990s, reformers shifted their attention

towards the ways of managing and evaluating the system; the pedagogical processes and cultural contents that are transmitted in the school... These reforms focus on the school and the quality of learning. Policies are promoted that grant autonomy and power to directors and teachers; changes in curricula and pedagogical practices; systems of incentives for teachers are designed according to performance and there are major investments in infrastructure, texts and other consumables, especially in the poorest schools of the region. This new cycle of reforms centres on the quality of education and promotes changes in the purposes and management of educational establishments, in pedagogy, in curriculum and in systems of evaluation (Martinic, 2001, p. 23).

The third generation of reforms, which is now in progress, focuses still more on the autonomy of schools and the intended pedagogical decentralization, with the transfer of pedagogical and curricular decisions from central government to the schools (García-Huidobro, 1999, p. 12). From this perspective, one would be concentrating on the education-learning and how it can be optimised in each institution.

Expectations of reforms

Each reform arises in a specific historical, social, political and economic context and therefore it is necessary to take that context into account when adopting, designing and implementing educational reforms.

In any reform there are implicit discourses that determine the forms that can be seen in the schools, visions that in one way or another reproduce the values of the society, relationships of power, and so on. And, of course, these hidden values shape what is good or bad in education, which is a good teacher, which bad, and which students are good or bad.

In this way, these political discourses establish the way in which we see educational reality, and define the way that scientific knowledge from research selects the right thing to do, or the proper thing to do, and whether it is valid or scientific. These discourses also direct our daily practices, almost without our perceiving it.

Quality and fairness

Educational quality and fairness are two edges of the same sword, on which the present educational reform is based. Both need the autonomy of the school. As noted above, educational quality is a social construction, that is politically, historically and economically determined. There are many different perspectives on the question, especially when it comes to decentralising pedagogy.

We can see the definition of the quality of education from diverse perspectives. As Torres (1995, p. 6) says, from an efficiency perspective, educational quality is, “how to administer the limited resources assigned to educational institutions correctly, with the object of producing the best possible educational results”.

From the foregoing, we can deduce that control of the system, the correct administration of the scarce resources, is increased, and in addition an optimisation of the contribution of the employees, both administrative and those engaged in teaching, is expected. This amounts to a need to render accounts at the end of every school year, in a process described as “accountability” (Schon, 1992, p. 10).

On the other hand we can speak of educational quality as effectiveness, in other words as a measure of the increase in the academic benefit to the student. This is value added by the school, not counting what the student brought with himself or herself at the beginning. From this perspective we must speak of the other components of the educational process, namely whether the teachers are effective, or whether they have specific characteristics that help them to achieve learning outcomes. Some question this theory to the extent that, if an individual has specific characteristics, these cannot be transferred to other institutions, as if they were things.

Other approaches focus on the internal processes of education and their products, from qualitative elements. This is how Coombs (1985, p. 9) describes the teaching / learning process, affirming that:

Quality has to do with the coherence of what is taught and learned, with the degree of adjustment to the needs of present and future learning, with concrete learning, taking into account the particular circumstances and expectations. The quality of education requires us to contemplate, in addition, the characteristics of the elements that are involved in the educational system: students, facilities, equipment and other means, their objectives, the contents of educational programming and technology; also the socio-economic, cultural and political context.

Nevertheless, we can affirm that educational quality at the present time is reduced to the obtaining of results, accompanied by an efficient administration of resources to do more with less and to ensure that the students are highly competitive. Of course, the students are evaluated in quantitative terms, in spite of the promotion of constructivist practice, which focuses attention on the learning process. We see that results are more important than how knowledge is constructed.

As Zaccagnini (2004, p. 16) says, it is a strategy that makes it possible to press education into the service of the globalisation process: insofar as the students develop certain competences, they are functional and productive in the labour market, which is more and more competitive.

From here it becomes usual and normal to rank schools, from good to bad, producing information which the consumers can use to “decide” which school is more appropriate for them, according to the standards of quality and competitiveness.

Educational reforms and social justice

The hypothesis that the education is great source of social fairness has been another one of the main motivations for the reforms.

We can state that all these reforms have, as a fundamental intention, to raise in a tangible way the quality of education at a low cost to the public. Strategies try to overcome the social crises and develop in line with international trends. One can see clearly that there is a general will and a consciousness of the need for and the importance of an education for all, in the strategies of development of different governments.

Nevertheless, a decade after applying prescriptions of deregulation and privatisation, social inequalities have grown at such an alarming rate that increasing poverty and unemployment are considered the main risk factors for the present processes of political democratisation and economic opening in our countries.

In Latin America the divisions in society reach serious proportions: the richest 10% have increased their income more than thirty times the increase of the poorest on the social scale. According to CEPAL (1997, p. 7), the data indicate that 46% of the population cannot satisfy their basic needs, and 94 million people, 22% of the population, are in a situation of extreme poverty. In our cities there are even some go to bed hungry, with only one meal per day, not to mention who do not even have one. With this panorama in view it is no longer tenable to believe that the spread of education it is the way to end the poverty. School coverage has been extended so that the majority now complete primary education, and this has only resulted in greater competition for employment. CEPAL (1997, p. 11) indicates that the minimum educational capital, in terms of access to a secure mode of living and the corresponding entry to the labour market, requires complete secondary education and have completed at least 12 years of study. In many countries, to reach that educational threshold means, with a probability of over 80%, "an expectation of an income that allows one to move out of poverty". When a person enters the labour market without having completed secondary education, one to three years more of study does noticeably influence the remuneration received, and in the majority of the cases has no effect at all in lifting the person out of poverty. However, incomes can increase considerably if skilled studies are added to the threshold of 12 years of schooling, that is to say, once secondary education is completed.

Inclusive education is a matter of ethics, social justice, democracy and the fairness; it is in direct opposition to the logic of the rewards, yield and efficiency (Thomazet, 2009, p. 23).

The context of our societies clearly limits the possibilities and abilities of the schools and educational centres to create equality where this does not exist. Education by itself is not enough to overcome inequality. What is needed is the integration of economic and educational policies with other policies, jointly oriented to resist the present inequalities that are found among our peoples.

Conclusions

Inclusive education and the changes in schools have some points of agreement, but also some discords. Now all reforms are described as inclusive, even though, in fact, the majority of them have not been implemented in order to, or cannot be implemented so as to, prevent exclusion or to limit it. Frequent appeals are made to democracy, justice and the fairness, but without fighting as necessary the processes and structures whose results undermine basic values and principles.

The programme “Education for All” of UNESCO (2010, p. 15) has exerted a remarkable influence, particularly when proposing a broad conception of inclusive education (to guarantee to all the right to the education, with special attention to the most marginalised), as can be judged from two recent publications (UNESCO, 2010, p. 21).

While they denounce the aforementioned negative impacts of the financial and economic crisis, they draw attention to growing inequalities:

[...] has their origin in social, economic and political processes that are deeply ingrained, as well as in the unequal relationships of power, sustained in political indifference (UNESCO, 2010, p. 24).

[...] the objective to reaching out to the marginalised has been translated into the negation of the right to education of many people, justifying the fact that there is not merely stagnation but even regression (UNESCO, 2010, p. 36).

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the aim is to invest knowledge that is a boundless good and that results in the production of goods for all in society.

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