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Presentation: Challenges Facing Education in the Era of Globalization in Latin America.

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Text:

Introduction.

Let me first thank the Teacher Creativity Center for sending me its kind invitation to participate in this International Conference on Globalization, Education and Social Change. I also thank all of you for attending this presentation and I wish both organizers and participants a very productive and successful event.

I have been given fifteen minutes to deal with a huge area which stretches from Mexico, in North America, and across Central America to the very end of South America. Around five hundred million human beings live in the area in nineteen countries. I do not even have one minute for each country, let alone that just to say the words globalization, education and social change would take me at least one second each. So, I leave to other speakers and to the participants the tricky task of discussing the meaning of these and the relationships amongst them nowadays.

The starting point.

In order to pay attention to the challenges facing education in the era of globalization in Latin America, let us first consider the starting point. From 1990 to 2002 there has been an increase in the adult literacy rate across the continent. All countries show progress and more than 90 per cent of their population aged 15 and above –in some even more than 95 per cent- “can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement related to their everyday life”. I will not challenge here these figures, although I have some doubts about their accuracy, mainly because many countries estimate the number of literate people

based on self-reported data. I will also keep to myself the conviction that average people need much more than read and write a simple statement if we want 'education, social change and globalization' to have a real impact in their wellbeing. I rather draw your attention to the figures shown in the *Human Development Report 2004* (pages 139 to 141) edited by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP):

Adult literacy rate (% ages 15 and above, 2002)

Argentina:	97.0%
Chile:	95.7%
Costa Rica:	95.8%
Uruguay:	97.7%
Cuba:	96.9%
Mexico:	90.5%
Panama:	92.3%
Venezuela:	93.1%
Brazil:	86.4%
Colombia:	92.1%
Peru:	85.0%
Paraguay:	91.6%
Dominican Republic	84.4%
Ecuador:	91.0%
El Salvador:	79.7%
Bolivia:	86.7%
Honduras:	80.0%
Nicaragua:	76.7%
Guatemala:	69.9%

Three countries lagg behind: El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. In the Human Development Index Rank, which lists all 177 countries of the world from highest to lowest human development, Argentina is number 34, Chile is number 43 and Costa Rica is number 45. At the same time, El Salvador is number 103, Nicaragua is number 118 and Guatemala 121.

Together with Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica, Uruguay (46), Cuba (52) and Mexico (53) are countries with a high human development (positions one to 55). The other three plus Panama (61), Venezuela (68), Brazil (72), Colombia (73), Peru (85), Paraguay (89), Dominican Republics (98), Ecuador (100), Bolivia (114) and Honduras (115) are considered countries with a medium human development (positions 56 to 141).

Of course, nobody here is surprised to see that countries with a medium human development are also the countries with a poor literacy record. Moreover, it could be argued that in United Nations jargon medium human development means low or clearly insufficient development, while low is its euphemism for nonexistent human development, which should be known by R.I.P. or may they rest in peace.

Let us leave the human development index here for a moment –we will need it later on- and let us turn to school data. What official sources say is that almost 100 per cent of school age children do attend schools in Latin America, although in some countries the figure is closer to 90 per cent and in Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras this figure is lower.

2001-2002	Net primary enrolment ratio	Net secondary enrolment ratio
Argentina:	100%	81%
Chile:	89%	75%
Costa Rica:	91%	82%
Uruguay:	90%	72%
Cuba:	96%	83%
Mexico:	100%	60%
Panama:	99%	62%
Venezuela:	92%	57%
Brazil:	97%	72%
Colombia:	87%	54%
Peru:	100%	66%
Paraguay:	92%	50%
Dominican Republic	97%	41%
Ecuador:	100%	50%
El Salvador:	89%	46%
Bolivia:	94%	67%
Honduras:	87%	...
Nicaragua:	82%	37%
Guatemala:	85%	28%

On the other hand, figures are much lower for secondary education in all countries except for Cuba, Costa Rica and Argentina. But these figures for primary and secondary education do not tell the whole story. According to Inter-American Development Bank data released in 2002,

“Overall, the region has made progress in primary education. More children complete their primary education. (...) Most countries in the region have increased their investments in education during the last decade. (...) Nonetheless, 18 percent of children still do not complete six years of primary education and 16 percent are repeating their grade. Perhaps more importantly, progress in terms of learning has been slow or nonexistent even in the most advanced countries.” (page 19)

The Bank adds, this time speaking about secondary education, that “many countries are paying increased attention to secondary education, which does require major capital investments to cover enrollment growth. Yet, as shown in this paper, the task of increasing school completion and improving learning is far from complete. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that repetition and low achievement in primary education inevitably result in repetition, dropout and inadequate learning at the secondary level.” (page 19)

For the sake of comparison, it seems that while only one in three Latin American young people manage to obtain a secondary school education, the number in Southeast Asia is 80 per cent. At the same time, Latin American workers have an average of 4.8 years of education, compared to six years for their Asian counterparts (<http://www.converge.org.nz/lac/articles/news990408a.htm>).

Explanation of the facts and proposals for improvement.

The general conclusion of the 2001 study by the Program to Promote Educational Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean (PREAL) *Lagging Behind: A Report Card on Education in Latin America*, is that Latin America is noticeably lagging behind other regions of the developing South in the education sector and the majority of students are unable to obtain a top quality education.

Once the picture becomes clearer for observers, these try and launch explanations and proposals for improvement. The official position (either an international agency or a governmental organization, this time the Bank) says in the typical diplomatic style that “in short, a significant effort will be required to provide a full primary education of quality to all children over the next decade. Equally important will be the need to increase levels of learning of all those who complete primary education to approach the region’s competitors in East Asia and Eastern Europe. (...) The details of the agenda will vary by country. For example, Southern Cone countries such as Chile have met quantitative needs and are now focusing on learning. Countries such as Brazil and Honduras face a more complex agenda, which includes further reducing repetition, increasing completion rates, and improving or at least maintaining levels of learning achievement. In addition, Honduras faces very real financial constraints.” (page 19).

The Bank recommendations include “improving teacher knowledge, pedagogy and commitment, with a focus on real and measurable changes in the classroom; increasing preschool enrollment, specially of at-risk children; providing adequate and appropriate teaching materials; articulating clear national learning goals; and improving the technical

quality and utilization of testing programs.” Other “experts” and “specialists” in educational matters declare that the poor quality of instruction is the problem.

The role of globalization in the education field.

Now we need to come back to the human development index and other sources of information about average people’s living standards, which tell us a lot more about the state of the education systems in Latin America than 100 books written by those experts. What should be known to everyone interested in educational progress and taken into account by policy makers, is that the first Millenium Development Goal, namely, halving hunger, has been achieved by three countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, while ten are on track (whatever the meaning of this new euphemism, although hungry people could give a more precise definition). The rest, that is to say, ten countries, are either lagging, far behind or slipping back, while another ten show no data, which clearly means they are much closer to these than to those.

Now let me ask the experts how they plan to increase the quality of education for pupils and students who go to classrooms with empty stomachs: with livelier textbooks? With better defined national goals? No wonder many children go to school to get a glass of milk or some other food. Be careful, experts will then say that enrollment is increasing and that some progress is being made.

In order to understand the school in the era of globalization we need to leave the classroom and move again and again into the society: people in slums, in unemployment lines, in the countryside, in search of opportunities through emigration. We need to check other figures than those of the educational statistics, figures like the following in Latin America and the Caribbean:

Living on less than 1 US dollar a day: 56 million.

Total population undernourished: 53 million.

People without access to improved water sources: 72 million.

People without access to adequate sanitation: 121 million.

(Source: World Bank, 2004, Unesco 2003, UN 2003)

Conclusion: globalization works against education.

Perhaps it is time to say a word about globalization and its effects on education. Globalization is just one more step of capitalism in its search for the maximum benefit of the powerful disregarding the weak, or paraphrasing Lenin, globalization is imperialism plus the Internet. The powerful get a first class education because they have the means to pay for it. The rest try to write simple statements about their everyday lives.

With raw materials prices going down, with structural adjustment programs designed in the North squeezing to the limit workers in the South, with capitals flowing from South to North, with an international aid system that only helps the donors, with economic arm twisting of the debt-ridden countries by the lenders, with the best educated people of these deserting for the rich ones, with the permanent threat of the New World Order boss, the breach between the haves and the have-nots is increasing.

Because of this, only four out of nineteen Latin America countries are members of the minority club of nations with high human development, at the bottom of it anyway. Another five are also at the bottom of those with medium development and the rest are in a little bit more comfortable situation. This should remain us that education does not take place in a bubble far from real life. Public expenditure and social services, education included, is going down. If a family has one or two people unemployed or underemployed, if children go hungry to bed, if most of the time parents have to make ends meet, how can they think in improving the quality of their children education?

You cannot have a good quality education if everything else in society is not good quality. Precisely because globalization means everyone for themselves, only those with the means can acquire a high quality education. The challenge Latin America faces, as it happens in any other developing area of the world, is to stop immediately the globalization process, to uncover its myths and its supporters, and to start a more human way of sharing the wealth of the globe, one in which education is an universal human right for everyone, not a commodity for the rich ones.

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