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Public Policy, Education, and Territory: Student Perspectives in the Humanities and Social Sciences (English Version)

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Quality in education: an economic or educational project?

La calidad en la educación: ¿proyecto económico o educativo?

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, a neoliberal narrative has emerged that extrapolates terms from the business and economic spheres to the educational sphere. In this context, Mexico adopted a series of educational reforms that responded to a unipolar world. This adoption was based on the National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education (ANMEB) promoted by the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari and which, despite being intended for that level, at least in name, reached other levels of education through other educational policies. The concept of quality was accompanied by others such as management and competencies, which generated a discourse through educational policies that framed education within the neoliberal dynamic, turning it into just another market product that was sold precisely on the basis of its quality. This position reached ideological levels, given that today a large part of educational institutions, teachers, and students talk about quality education as a goal to be achieved, despite its neoliberal origins and consequences. In this vein, it is necessary to ask what is meant by quality education under the parameters of neoliberalism. To answer this question, a brief historical-theoretical essay was written based on documentary sources. Using primary sources consulted in the General Archive of the Nation and secondary sources for context, the essay aims to shed light on the origin of the use of quality education and competencies in Mexico, as well as the influences of the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on educational policies and to assess whether these respond to the educational sphere or to that of production. Due to the length of the work, only the WB proposal will be addressed.

Keywords: Educational neoliberalism; Educational quality; Educational policy in Mexico; Educational reforms; World Bank.

RESUMEN

Desde los años noventa se inició una narrativa neoliberal que extrapoló términos del ámbito empresarial y económico hacia el educativo. En este contexto México adoptó una serie de reformas educativas que respondieron a un mundo unipolar. Esa adopción se realizó a partir del Acuerdo Nacional para la Modernización de la Educación Básica (ANMEB) impulsada por el gobierno de Carlos Salinas de Gortari y que, pese a que estaba destinada a ese nivel, al menos en el nombre, alcanzó los otros niveles educativos a través de otras políticas educativas. El concepto de calidad vino acompañado de otros como el de gestión y el de competencias, a partir de los cuales se generó un discurso a través de las políticas educativas que enmarcaron a la educación dentro de la dinámica neoliberal, convirtiéndola en un producto más del mercado y que fue vendida justamente en función de su calidad. Esta postura alcanzó niveles ideológicos dado que hoy una gran parte de las instituciones educativas, docentes y estudiantes, hablan

de educación de calidad como un objetivo a realizar, pese a sus orígenes y consecuencias neoliberales. En este tenor, es necesario preguntarse qué se entiende por educación de calidad bajo los parámetros del neoliberalismo. Para responder lo anterior, se realizó un breve ensayo histórico- teórico sustentado en fuentes documentales que, partir de fuentes primarias consultadas en el Archivo General de la Nación y fuentes secundarias para contextualizar, se pretende dar a conocer el origen del uso de educación de calidad y competencias en México, así como las influencias del Banco Mundial (BM), el Fondo Monetario Internacional (FMI) y la Organización para la Cooperación y Desarrollo Económicos (OCDE) en las políticas educativas y hacer un balance de si éstas responden al ámbito educativo o al de la producción. Debido a la extensión del trabajo, se abordará solo la propuesta del BM.

Palabras clave: Neoliberalismo educativo; Calidad educativa; Política educativa en México; Reformas educativas; Banco Mundial.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of education has been an issue since the 1990s in several countries, including Mexico. It is an issue addressed by local governments and by universities and educational institutions, which, on the basis of recommendations from international organizations such as the World Bank, define quality education as “ensuring that students actually learn” (Hanushek and WöBmann, 2007, p. 1), are adopted and serve as a basis for the formulation of educational policies. However, this is not the only conceptualization of the term “quality of education,” as there are other definitions from other organizations and institutions.

For example, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 states that, to achieve it, “education financing must become a national investment priority. In addition, measures such as making education free and compulsory, increasing the number of teachers, improving basic school infrastructure, and embracing digital transformation are essential” (United Nations, n.d.). However, it does not offer a definition of what quality education is. For the OECD, the quality of education lies in access, participation, and learning outcomes (2018, p. 31). For the IMF, quality is a “measure based on mathematical and scientific skills, a formula that also measures the quality of the workforce” (Hanushek, 2005, p. 16).

In Mexico, during the administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the National Program for Educational Modernization 1990--1994 was published, a document that preceded the ANMEB and that states that “We face the challenge of providing better education, quality education,” although it does not offer a conceptualization of the term. However, “The profound transformations that the sustained efforts of Mexicans have wrought on society and the changes in the contemporary world, translated into the interaction of markets and the dynamism of knowledge and productivity” (p. 9) and, for its part, the ANMEB established in 1992 that “the quality of basic education is deficient in that, for various reasons, it does not provide the adequate set of knowledge, skills, abilities and aptitudes, attitudes and values necessary for the development of learners” (1992, p. 5). Thus, it can be inferred that quality in education is the opposite.

DEVELOPMENT

Starting in the 1980s, a wave of reforms began in different parts of the world that sought to replace nationalist policies and those tied to expansive schooling. The origin of this wave can be traced back to 1983 with the publication of the report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative*

for *Educational Reform*¹ (Gardner, 1983), in which the US blamed poor education for the poor economy it was experiencing at the time, for the risk of destroying social cohesion, and for reducing its competitiveness in the world. The same document used the term “competent human capital” for the first time, arguing that a lack of such capital was responsible for the loss of US hegemony in terms of international politics and economics. As a result, the market economy became the ideological basis of education, with schools becoming centers exclusively for training students as future labor, i.e., prioritizing the economic sphere over a comprehensive education system.

The solution to this problem was to improve education through quality, an objective that was promoted by the large international organizations mentioned above. It was these organizations that, once they had infiltrated the development of educational reforms, established a course of action and the means to achieve it. The first step was to design a lean state, a state that was reduced to the mere administration of legal channels to maintain the conditions necessary for the implementation or development of neoliberalism and, at the same time, although it may seem contradictory, a strong state that was capable of adhering to the global market economy through the formulation and enactment of legal frameworks such as laws, regulations, and constitutional changes, among others. To this end, they framed their discourse in terms of being attractive to all social groups, such as “individual freedom, political democracy, labor flexibility, and, at the heart of their rhetoric, the notion of free choice of public services that best satisfy individual aspirations” (Ornelas, 2018, p. 53).

The World Bank

With respect to Mexico, in 1991, the World Bank conducted an analysis of educational development limited to the period between 1977 and 1990, an interesting period in that it covers the second half of Luis Echeverría’s presidency and the beginning of Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado’s, that is, the end of revolutionary nationalism and the beginning of neoliberalism. The document entitled *Educational development and costing in Mexico, 1977--1990. A cross-state time series analysis* by Juan Prawda and George Psacharopoulos revealed a significant increase in preschool coverage, which served almost three-quarters of the population of school-aged individuals, resulting in a proportional increase in the successful completion of primary education. Thus, the World Bank concluded that it was not necessary to reach a crisis point to implement savings policies in education, which was what allowed for this increase in school enrollment.

According to the World Bank’s assessment, the following data were reported: 98 % of the primary school-age population was enrolled, and 57 % successfully completed primary school, a figure that, while not the best, was one of the highest in Latin America at the time. Moreover, these percentages reflected a discrepancy within the country, since, by 1989, illiteracy in Chiapas, for example, was five times higher than that in the Federal District at that time. The World Bank found the answer to this situation in the economic crisis that Mexico had experienced in previous years through the following question: How has education been affected by the economic crisis, especially in the poorest states? (Prawda and Psacharopoulos, 1991, p. 1).

¹This report was commissioned by Secretary of Education Terrel Howard Bell, who appointed a group led by David Pierpont Gardner (from the University of Utah), who later became Secretary of Education in Ronald Reagan’s administration. The main objectives of this report were to evaluate the quality of teaching in public and private colleges, schools, and universities; compare U.S. schools and colleges with those in advanced nations; study the relationship between college admission requirements and students’ academic achievement in high school; and define the problems that must be addressed and overcome in order to pursue excellence in education. See: The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*.

Part of the answer to this question was that there was evidence that textbooks, writing materials, and teacher quality were necessary to achieve good student performance, thus introducing the term quality, not only in schools or education but also in teachers. On the basis of this hypothesis, the World Bank conducted a qualitative rather than quantitative study to determine how a recession or economic crisis affected education, “such as management style and the effect of class size on unit costs” (Prawda and Psacharopoulos, 1991, p. 1). Thus, education is beginning to be viewed not in terms of expansion but in terms of what class costs and how those costs are managed.

He provided data obtained from the SEP’s General Directorate of Planning, Programming, and Budgeting, through which he verified that despite almost 98 % coverage at the preschool and primary levels, only 57 % successfully completed that level, a situation that was not consistent with the 1982 six-year plans in the area of education, according to which the World Bank stated that the goal had been set to achieve 75 % completion of the final stage of primary education.² In the case of secondary education, the following is transcribed due to its linguistic importance:

The national average secondary absorption did not increase at the same rate as the primary completion rate and oscillated around an 80 percent plateau. As a consequence, further education opportunities were hindered for many primary graduates, especially in rural areas (Prawda and Psacharopoulos, 1991, p. 4).

This is important because one of the questions raised about neoliberal educational reforms is why they focus on the basic level.³ The above quote shows that when only 80 % of those enrolled in secondary education graduate, a significant number do not enter higher education, but it is necessary to remember that in the U.S. system, which is where all these neoliberal educational policies originate, secondary education is divided into middle school and high school, with students ranging in age from 11-14 and 14-18, respectively. In other words, when the educational policies proposed by international organizations refer to secondary education, they are talking about high school, which is similar to upper secondary education (EMS) in Mexico. Therefore, the concern that secondary school graduates, as stipulated in the document, do not enter further education does not make sense in Mexico, but it does in the U.S. This is the concern in the U.S. regarding the secondary level, whereas in Mexico, secondary school provides access to upper secondary education. This situation may explain the neoliberal reforms in basic education in Mexico and why the EMS was addressed years later.

During this period, the budget or unit cost, as the World Bank calls it, which refers to the cost per grade, decreased considerably, especially in secondary school, which was reduced by 65 %. Therefore, as more students are enrolled in different educational levels, the budget allocated, almost 90 % of which goes to teachers’ salaries, so their salaries are also negatively affected. In this regard, while preschool enrollment increased by 6,2 %, causing the student-teacher ratio to decrease from 39 in 1977 to 26 in 1990, in the case of primary school, the budget was reduced by 42 %, student enrollment increased by 1,4 % per year, and the number of teachers increased by 4,1 %, representing a 31 % decrease in the number of teachers over the same period; in secondary education, as mentioned, which was the most affected by the budget decrease, the student-teacher ratio increased from 17 to 19 per teacher, and in addition, there was no increase in the number of teaching staff; in contrast, there was a decrease in the number

² See: https://dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=4805999&fecha=31/05/1983#gsc.tab=0

³ For example, this article questions the logic behind this. See: https://www.uam.mx/difusion/casadeltiempo/09_iv_jul_2008/casa_del_tiempo_eIV_num09_09_15.pdf

of teaching staff. The World Bank stated that this was due to the strength of the basic education teachers' union, the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE). (Prawda and Psacharopoulos, 1991, p. 6)

Similarly, the reason for the reduction in the number of students per teacher in preschool and primary school was precisely the strength of this union, since a fundamental part of the negotiations prior to this period and even during the period studied was that the SNTE had managed to ensure that all teachers at the basic level were graduates of teacher training colleges and, on the other hand, that the expansion of preschool and primary education required the hiring of these graduates, but secondary education began to experience a shortage of teachers, either because most teacher training college students specialized in preschool and primary education or because of the decrease in salary. In other words, the World Bank was already identifying the culprit for poor education in Mexico: the teacher.

On the other hand, their results also revealed differences at the state level in terms of administrative management and population size, since the states with fewer problems in terms of preschool coverage, primary school completion rates, and secondary school enrollment were those that, in addition to having better expenditure management, were also those with smaller populations, especially rural populations, as it was concluded that it was more expensive to serve children in small, isolated rural communities than in urban communities or rural communities close to cities. Finally, the World Bank stated in 1991, "It also shows that cost-effective models have not been generally implemented to serve a more costly clientele" (Prawda and Psacharopoulos, 1991, p. 11). From this point forward, the report discusses profitability and costs, although the exception to this situation was telesecundarias (distance learning secondary schools) and some preschool and primary school models in some rural areas. However, although some states were successful in addressing the abovementioned issues, this success came at the expense of another aspect: quality. Although it was a hypothesis at the time, this concept began to be used in education in Mexico.

With respect to administrative management, the World Bank identified seven variables that affect educational development in the country, which are listed below:

- Management, which sought to demonstrate that states with better resource management, resulted in greater educational development.
- The unit cost of education was used as an assumption that the higher the cost used at a given educational level is, the more difficult it is for the state to develop education at that same level. (Prawda and Psacharopoulos, 1991, p. 12)

Under these categories, the World Bank concluded that the reason why preschool enrollment continued to increase and, moreover, the state covered it satisfactorily was that population growth negatively affected educational coverage and development. Although, as mentioned above, there were some successful preschool models in rural areas, the downside was that teachers generally did not want to work in those areas, and the few who did have low salaries, a situation that allowed that level to be maintained in optimal conditions but not the working conditions of teachers.

The report contained some seemingly inconsistent results, as over the years, primary school showed an increase in effective completion rates as a result of the optimal implementation of both federal and state policies. The contradiction lies in the fact that the states with the lowest federal income, such as Oaxaca, Michoacán, and Chiapas, were the states with the

highest primary school completion rates, since the conditions of poverty in which they found themselves were the reason why the state intervened more through specific public policies.

Although this seems positive, the World Bank report highlighted the importance of the budget because it established that costs were directly related to primary school completion rates. Therefore, if rural areas had the highest completion rates, they were also the areas that represented the highest cost to the state.

On the basis of the above, good management also had an impact on secondary education, which, although mentioned as being less effective than primary education, had a coverage rate of 82 % but needed to reach 100 %. Thus, according to their study, the World Bank concluded that at this level of education, the states with the highest enrollment rates and effective completion rates had reduced costs during the process of enrollment growth. In this sense, it can be inferred that poor administrative management leads to low enrollment rates and, by extension, low completion rates. The second part of the conclusion was the recognition of the decentralization process; the third part was related to the decrease in teachers' salaries as a result of the economic crisis, which, according to the World Bank, did not stop them from continuing to work, "although no measure of their work quality is available" (Prawda and Psacharopoulos, 1991, p. 20), where the concept of quality applied to teaching work is already apparent. Although there has been efficiency in coverage and completion, there are no data to determine whether educational quality has been affected, so it would be necessary to measure student learning, which would subsequently be obtained through the system of exams conducted by international organizations, such as the PISA. Finally, the World Bank concludes that, despite the results, there is no excuse for a country to implement cost-cutting measures in education even if it is not in the midst of an economic crisis.

To achieve this, Mexico promoted the decentralization of education and its integration into the OECD assessment in 2000 through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) created in 1997 and, subsequently, in 2002 with the creation of the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE).⁴ On the other hand, it promoted skills development.

In relation to skills, Bocanegra and de León, in their document entitled "Education and Social Change. Competitive education" (1992) addresses quality education and inserts it as part of the overall development of Latin America, since this type of education is the only one that has a direct relationship with development, owing to the promotion of production and, along with this, the strengthening of political, social, economic, and technological institutions and, consequently, according to this neoliberal vision, national unity, social cohesion, and a better distribution of wealth, respect for human rights, and adaptation to technology are generated, since "our societies are changing, production relations are finding new paths, we live in a world where openness is key. This is the context in which education in Latin America finds itself" (Bocanegra and de León, 1992, p. 7). In this part of the document, after describing the benefits expected from quality education, the term "openness" is used, which refers only to openness to the market and the globalized world, which means the opening of education, like any other

⁴For their part, the intellectuals of neoliberalism contributed their own views to the discussion. Pablo Latapí Sarre, who was one of the first to promote educational research in Mexico, which, as mentioned above, was proposed by international organizations; Carlos Muñoz Izquierdo, an economist from ITAM with a postgraduate degree from Stanford; and Silvia Schmelkes, a sociologist from Ibero, advisor to Miguel Limón during Ernesto Zedillo's presidency and president of INEE, in a joint analysis, the three proposed "the creation of a Social Comptroller's Office for Education to receive complaints about the pedagogical nature of the programs and content designed by the SEP, as well as complaints about the poor performance of teachers." (n.d., La Jornada, 1993), that is, the problems with education lay both with the institution and with the people dedicated to it, namely, the SEP and teachers. The CCE, or Center for Educational Studies, where these three figures worked, also criticized the state for maintaining control over textbooks and educational materials. The oversight they proposed probably materialized in 2002 with the creation of the INEE.

commodity, to the market.

In this sense, for neoliberalism, education serves, as already established by the World Bank, the IMF, and the OECD, to lay the foundations in the early years not only for men but also for women to develop the capacities and skills to succeed in “their period of greatest production,” which is adulthood. In other words, education is not comprehensive, nor does it help to form people; rather, it is a productive workforce. In these terms, although the concept of competence had already been coined in the U.S., not for education but for the world of work, with its theory of competencies at work from Harvard University, a theory also known as the competency model, it was extrapolated to education in the 1990s.

In this line of thinking, Bocanegra and de León (1992) establish that competency-based education is the “expression of the skills, abilities, and attitudes that are efficient and appropriate for managing the physical and social environment” (p. 7), which is why Mexico and Latin America need educational efficiency for the “production of competitive goods and services” (p. 7). Notably, there is still no mention of the individual or society and the advantages of education for comprehensive training; rather, its role is limited to the production of goods and services. Thus, under this approach, only this quality education, competency-based education, can lead the country to modernization. In this way, in 1992, it was still a challenge to “link the school and production spheres so that the education sector contributes to our inhabitants having the training required for productive work capable of competing with the global environment” (p. 7). It seems that they were preparing the country for its great opening to the market, the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the US and Canada. Education was then what would drive the country toward this opening, so it was necessary to promote the following:

- Competitiveness to generate a productive, liberating, and efficient structure supported by human, scientific, and technological knowledge.
- Competence to strengthen Latin American social solidarity, national identity, and culture.
- In the world of work, new production techniques should be incorporated.
- Competence to open up avenues for democratic social participation.
- The ability to streamline services so that they have a favorable impact on the well-being of the Latin American population in each country.
- Competence to advance modernization with full and active respect for human values, national culture, and the rights and pluralistic situations of our people. (Bocanegra and de León, 1992, p. 7)

According to the authors, these competencies promote quality education:

- Responses to social demands.
- Social participation and the ability of government organizations to contribute to national development goals should be promoted.
- Must be of high quality, reviewing its content and renewing its teaching and learning methods.
- This will foster the educational competencies of teachers.
- It will coordinate educational levels to ensure that students are trained in production and social welfare skills. (Bocanegra and de León, 1992, p. 8)

CONCLUSION

This is how competencies were implemented in education, and comprehensive student training was left aside, given that the primary objective shifted toward production. Although the

first two competencies seem to be based on valid objectives, one might wonder what is meant by a “liberating structure”, which, in this context, seems to refer to economic liberalization, the openness demanded by the unipolar world, and the consolidation of neoliberalism. The second competency is contradictory, since neoliberalism is based on individualism, which has generated great social and educational inequalities throughout its development, so this could be part of a misleading narrative to accept competency-based education. The third competency highlights the relationship between education and production. The fourth, part of this political narrative on democracy, is to maintain the system unchanged, a democratic system of social participation that, as we have seen, leaves the people behind, since social participation comes from large companies through NGOs or organizations such as the National Association of Parents, affiliated with the PAN party, and, regarding democracy, which has been a system that goes hand in hand with neoliberalism, in the sense that it allows the creation of the legal framework that neoliberalism needs for its development and consolidation; the last two are a summary of the above.

The consequences of implementing quality education on the basis of competencies respond only to production and the economy because, although quality education is established in point 3, this is reduced to updating content or topics; however, as has been shown throughout this work, these are based on production, and in terms of teaching-learning methods, they do not have a pedagogical basis, but, on the basis of the practices used by companies for production, an extrapolation was made and continues to be made to education and is disguised as pedagogy or didactics, although in reality, they are business practices.

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