

Alternative Basic Education

When the market wants it all

Alejandro Cussianovich raises the need for a vocational and professional transformation of teachers, and for Alternative Basic Education Centres to stop being marginal to the authorities and the community, and to link education and work in the context of increasing unemployment and deterioration of working conditions.

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In a global society marked by the dominance of exchange value over use value, education is a commodity, one that is wrapped in silk and colour paper. Moreover, where the State investment is comparatively meagre, or permanently delayed as priority, initiatives by the so called civil society not only increase, but they themselves are a sort of responsibility taken to remedy the non-compliance of an important right, in this case that of education as well as to protect the right of citizens to choose between private and public, and even to demand what it's worth for the public *a fortiori* it's also worth for the private.

A LAW THAT OPENED INTERESTING HORIZONS

Although not constituting a component of educational reform, General Law of Education 28044 opened significant and innovative perspectives

after lethargy and retreat in post 1970s educational reform. Among these contributions, Alternative Basic Education (ABE) raised a number of justified expectations among educators. But, like any other set of rules, the text of the Law did not specifically say how authorities understand the scope of the Law regarding ABE.

Articles that attempt to conceptualize ABE makes Basic Education (BE) a kind of ideal model of essential reference, parameter whose standards should be the measure of recognition, validation and certification of those who choose their education in ABE. This, at least, is a horizon that opens a front of debate because for some ABE is not a substantial alternative to the dominant model represented by BE, but just a shortcut: "One approach - says the Law (Article 37°) - which has the same goals and quality equivalent to BE..." And when characterizing the possible subjects participating in ABE, they happen to be the permanent excluded, the needy, those with limitations and problems to promptly enrol BE, or those who need to reconcile work and study. An ABE with serious risks to abound in the social imagination tinged with pessimism and devaluation that, in general, night school has printed as common sense, i.e., a second-level education for migrants, street vendors, workers, maids, etc.



AN EFFORT FOR A HERMENEUTIC ALTERNATIVE

Although the Law opened the possibility of implementing ABE, it still had neither a regulation (and this is most important) nor a qualified opinion of experts on the matter. In 2005 under the direction of architect Javier Sota Nadal, a study on how ABE and its organization should be understood, according to the team led by José Rivero, started. "The Other Education: General framework for the construction of the Alternative Basic Education", published by the Ministry of Education (Minedu) later that year, sets the general framework for the construction of Alternative Basic Education. Indeed, it was starting to build a new experience.

One feature that should exhibit ABE was to be centred on autonomy as a way to creatively respond to the new demands in the context of the first decades of the XXI century rather than established patterns in the dominant modern school culture. In this precise sense, BE is presented as a way that would, itself, be reoriented towards new approaches to the ABE proposed by the study. That could well be considered as an invitation to the real possibility of pointing boldly to start a reform in education and the official system offered by the State.

The study addresses all components of the implementation of ABE for the country and is able to offer an education system with better chances of forming citizens able to meet the challenges of future scenarios.

UNMET EXPECTATIONS

One of the first hurdles is the permanence of this severe symbolic power impregnated for decades associating EBA to conceptual modes of night school. Something like a name change that leaves behaviour patterns almost untouched. Thus, ABE was just putting some making up on the old practice of adult education and disadvantaged youth.

This is no longer a risk and becomes a practical translation that most teachers have done with ABE. And as night school mode was always the Cinderella of the education system, ABE is not a priority for investment and expansion in the country. That's why it is not offered to other social sectors and is focused on the poorest and most marginalized. ABE loses the renewing power that makes it transcend the whole system.

The other trend that may result in a reinforcement of what we might call the commoditization of



ABE is the proliferation of centres established to offer it (the ABEC - ABE Centres), the private sector has taken. In Lima, it is easy to see the offer of "accelerated courses" along Arequipa Avenue with slogans such as: "Study School in two years", "Alternative School" etc., ending in a sort of fast ABEC, Fast Education!

The excellent study of "The ABE situation and 2001-2010 education policy for Metropolitan Lima" (Chavez 2011:14) notes well how ABE is still focused on disadvantaged populations in the Law and its own rules. In addition, it is found that it has fallen dramatically in the last eight years: 40% in Lima and 35% nationally, which is to recognize that ABE is being captured by the private sector. It is this type of education that has been growing in the last decade, for in 2008 private ABEC accumulated 91% of the enrolment of non-school type (Chavez 2011:15).

Among these unfulfilled expectations, it is necessary to mention the serious doubts hanging over the quality of ABEC, especially the private ones. Not without reason the directors of ABEC say that the proliferation of private ABEC has prevented their supervision, to the point that they certify without assistance or learning assessment (Chavez 2011:21).

Finally, another trend is the small number of children aged 8 to 12 years who are accepted in the ABEC, mostly working children, arguing that their

natural place is the BE and not ABE. Additionally, the schedule of private ABEC includes Saturdays and Sundays.

CONSIDERATIONS TO KEEP THINKING

1. First priority: teachers

We know that there is no reform without transformation of teachers in both vocational and professional sense. For ABE, this is an absolute priority. Until training of staff and teachers in the new direction that requires ABE is ensured, it will be difficult to overcome the current dominant view according to which we have a merely formal "choice" comparing to what was being done at night school.

Creativity involving ABE - if we see it as recommended in the 2005 study report cited above - requires a process of teacher training and initial training, and even opening a speciality for on-service teachers. Without it, it will be difficult for ABE to be recognized for its potential to transform education.

2. Cultural transformation: absolute necessity

But if ABE fails to tear down the wall of marginalization that surrounds it from the higher authorities and the community itself, its current image will not help it to achieve quality education for all and along lifetime. That means a profound



cultural transformation, a new awareness of the urgency of reshaping national education. ABE is full with possibility.

This kind of education means a deep cultural change in this area. What ABE represents today is part of the discomfort of the educational culture at basic level. Regional Education Projects and, eventually, the Municipal ones, may represent an opportunity to regain the spirit that The other education tried to express, beyond its own administrative and institutional constraints.


3. Evaluation and monitoring as ethical requirement

Without regular monitoring of actual concrete experiences of ABEC, especially private ones, the process of commodification will continue unstoppable. It is not enough to issue a resolution to allow the opening of these centres. The scam would then be legalized, in spite of lack of quality. This is not a road that leads to equity and inclusion, but a poor imitation of progress in social justice and the fulfilment of human rights.

4. Work-Education: unavoidable coordination

One of ABE contributions is the link between work and education. In contexts of decrease of employment and deteriorating working conditions, it was necessary that, far from being an alternative to work, education would

contribute to qualify competences in order to shorten marginality and multiple insecurities of those of all ages and education levels who must survive on their own efforts and creativity. This was an ethical and political imperative. In the proposal of ABE in this field, there is a message for all educational reform effort regardless of age or social status.

Finally, it must be said that while the issue of funding is central, it is not enough to overcome the limitations observed in the implementation of ABEC, because what it is at stake is to point to a recasting of national education. 

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