

Dreams and Realities of Peruvian education

The national regulatory framework of education, guided by values such as equity, strengthening of democracy and inclusion, is not consistent with the reality in public schools. The expansion of private schools increases segmentation inexorably and, in this way, inequality in Peruvian education, which contradicts the values and objectives of the National Education Project.

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The Peruvian school system has changed and continues to change by action of market forces, supply and demand, new educational and social needs of emerging populations and the pursuit of business and profits of investors and entrepreneurs. The democratic and progressive dreams expressed by experts, officials and legislators in several documents in the first decade of this century are opposed to what reality shows as present and as future national education.

Is it possible to route the Peruvian school system towards the goals of the National Education Project and other political, legal and regulatory instruments? The following paragraphs reiterate the purposes of documents known, expressing alleged educational policy decisions for the medium and long term, and contrast them with what is happening in reality.

DREAMS: THE EDUCATION WE WANT

The early years of this century have been lavish in consultations, agreements, covenants, laws, projects and standards that define the education we Peruvians want, and which compromise guidelines and policies to move towards it. Among these processes and documents are the following:

- The **National Education Consultation** during Valentín Paniagua's government conducted by the Ministry of Education with a plural committee of experts and made through mass participation events across the country. It produced several documents and publications with diagnoses and proposals that served as inputs for the next government's initial policies and the subsequent preparation of National Education Project.
- The **National Agreement** signed by the central government, political parties, regional governments, unions, and social and religious organizations. It was an initiative of the government of Alejandro Toledo that managed to build consensus around a general proposition of social equity, democracy, decentraliza-



tion and economic growth. The signatories pledged to significantly increase the percentage of GDP allocated to education and to promote equity with quality education for all Peruvians.

- The **General Law of Education**, the result of extensive consultations and approved in the Congress unanimously, with the leadership of Congresswoman Gloria Helfer. It recognizes gaps and deep inequalities in access and outcomes of education, assuming quality, equity and the strengthening of democracy as simultaneous and inseparable purposes of an educational system renewed in its organization, inputs, processes and results.
- The **Pact of Reciprocal Commitments for Education, the Emergency Declaration of Education** and **Plan Education for All (EFA)** prepared by the Ministry of Education during the administration of President Toledo, involving labour, social, academic organizations, international cooperation and NGOs. Its starting point recognises serious deficiencies in the school system and proposes urgent measures for the short and medium term, aimed at overcoming the most critical issues in the context of a much larger

effort of the state and all stakeholders to improve the results and close the gaps.

- The **National Education Project (PEN)**, drawn up by a plural set of members of the National Council of Education, based on the work of a team of experts and fed by consultations in many parts of the country with the participation of experts and national and regional officials, principals and teachers, social organizations and unions, NGOs and other stakeholders. It is the most organized and complete expression of expectations shared by a large number of Peruvians with respect to changes that must occur in the medium and long term in the educational system to achieve equity goals in education, quality and good results in the educational institutions, revaluation of the teaching profession, renovation of school system management, higher education transformation and development of an educational society. The PEN includes strategies and concrete measures to be taken to move towards the education we want. This is a document formally approved by the Ministry of Education, supported by the National Agreement Forum, recognised by regional governments, and formalized by Supreme Decision of President Alan Garcia in 2007.

- In more recent years documents developing national expectations in relation to specific aspects of education policy have been generated. Among them it is worth mentioning the **National Curriculum Design**, revised in 2009 by technical teams from the Ministry of Education, taking into account expert consultations, which mainly condenses contents the country expects that children learn during their transit through the Basic Education. And it also emphasizes the **Law of the Public Educator**, corrected last year by the **Law of Teachers Reform**, which is the result of a process of development and consultation initiated by the National Council of Education and completed by the Congress in two periods. This Act adopts a meritocratic model of teacher management by the State hoping to reassess and recognize good teaching for the benefit of public school students.

In all these policy, legal and regulatory documents collect and reflect, with more or less detail and precision, dreams and expectations regarding the Peruvian national education system, its organization, its functioning, its principles, its aims and objectives, its processes and outcomes. While the emphasis and focus of attention are diverse, they all are - explicitly or implicitly - a set of social and political values consistent with the context and the stakes of the first years of this century, a time characterized by the reconstruction of political democracy, the recovery of hope and faith in the future. They are values of democracy, equity, inclusion, integrated and sustainable development, quality and relevance, multiculturalism, integrity and transparency, justice, responsibility and solidarity.

To a large extent, favourable or critical assessments of the management of the authorities in charge of education are guided by the principles contained explicitly or implicitly in the above documents. Today it is important to analyse the degree of alignment of decisions in the various levels of government and the public hierarchy, with respect to agreements or purposes of the approved standards. In this regard, the National Education Project stands out.

REALITIES: THE EDUCATION WE HAVE

Having spent 13 years of the new century and more than 5 years after formal approval of the National Education Project, it is pertinent to ask and discuss to what extent the reality of Peruvian education has or has not changed in line with the intentions, purposes, the objectives and goals of the documents mentioned in the previous section. The reality tends to be stubborn, refuses to change course and rarely walks in the direction the projects and plans point at; this only happens when the

political will to change is even larger than the opposing forces.

There is no denying that in recent years there have been some efforts to modernize and some isolated initiatives for change have been launched. But basically, the main features and negative tendencies of our school system have remained or worsened in this period, regardless of official documents and intentions of MOE officials or regional governments. To understand what happens in reality, it is necessary to analyse the forces that are actually determining the progress of the school system. Since 1980, or perhaps before, the Peruvian school system has been more dependent on market forces than on Congress laws or policies and plans of the government; it is governed more by the forces of supply and demand than by state officials; it responds more to the interests of the owners of schools and certain social groups than the common interests of Peruvian society as a whole.

During the last decade of the last century and the first of the current, in a context of economic growth and dismantling of the state, there were two parallel and complementary phenomena, in the logic of market society and market regulation of the school system:

- Steady growth and increasingly rapid private offering of schools, different in quality for different socio-economic segments of the middle class and popular emerging sectors, supported entirely by payments from families.
- A dynamic and aggressive entry of market mechanisms in the functioning of many public schools, in the form of fictitious mandatory or voluntary contributions; contributions in working hours or tasks, direct financial contributions, fees for equipment purchase or payment for professional services supplemental to those paid by the state, raffles, among others. Such contributions have led to the exclusion (or self-exclusion) of families who did not have the financial capacity to meet the demands of public schools.

In the process, rural populations and very poor people in cities, who attend public schools but they cannot make a significant economic contribution to the education of their children, have been relegated in schools financed exclusively by the public, which are the most precarious and, at the same, the ones with worst management and results. The rest of students are distributed in a structure of schools segregated by socioeconomic status, public or private, whose resources, quality and educational outcomes are associated with the economic capacity of the families of children who attend them.

TAREA



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In sum, a segregated school system regulated by the market, by supply and demand, in which each family purchases and receives the kind of education they can afford, has been built in Peru. Like any other product on the market, there is first, second, third, fourth or lower quality in education, depending on the size of the buyer's wallet.

In more recent years, in the XXI century and simultaneously with the approval of the documents mentioned in the first part of this article, paradoxically, the growth of net private education supply has accelerated strongly, with the multiplication of schools and for-profit schools for middle-class populations of emerging popular sectors. Some of these populations have changed the economic contributions that they formerly gave to state schools - which they could not control or predict - by direct payment of pensions to private schools, which are presented more reliable than the state for now.

Private schools treat families as customers and promise them a more personalized treatment, more participation in the education of their children and an effective vaccine against teachers' strikes, threats of corruption in schools and the state bureaucracy. In addition, private schools respond better to the aspirations of differentiation and social upward of these populations, who want to get away from the poorest.

For its part, the State never took radical educational reform needed to bring dreams to reality reflected in the General Law of Education or the National

Education Project. On the contrary, the inertia of a state management system loaded with conformity, insecurity, mediocrity, bureaucracy, beleaguered by union myopia, and infested by corruption remained: an ideal situation to generate mistrust and encourage students to flee to the private sector.

Enrolment in private schools is a majority in some cities of Peru. It is growing and it will continue to grow in the coming years. Even the teachers of the state schools are registering their children mostly in private schools. Some people predict that in a few years the schools of the state will receive only the children of the poorest families in Peru.

DISCUSSION AND PROPOSALS

The segregated school system Peru has now, bringing together children of every socioeconomic segment to exclusive schools for them and their peers, separate and distinct from those students from higher socioeconomic levels or lower, contradicts the values and objectives of the National Education Project, the General Law of Education and all political and policy documents mentioned in the first section of this article.

School segregation is incompatible with the strengthening of political and social democracy, since segregation leads to unequal and discriminatory assessment of the people according to the school where they study and since democracy implies equal rights and opportunities for all

of them citizens. The separation of children according to the ability of their families to pay also opposes integrative type of socialization needed for all Peruvians learn to live with all their country people, respecting and valuing diversity, sharing rules that apply everyone equally, in a cohesive and intercultural society.

School segregation is a denial of equality and inclusion claimed as priority objectives of national education in the documents mentioned in the beginning. The school system regulated by the market excludes and discriminates against children whose parents cannot afford the education they want for their children. The so-called “freedom to choose the desired school” is roughly determined by the purchasing power of households, which obviously determines the price range of education they can afford. Moreover, the selection process of children ends up excluding those below the range which private schools consider their “niche”.

A segregated school system also contradicts the goal of quality education for all, declared in the National Education Project, the General Law of Education and other documents. Research and international experience shows that the quality and outcomes of school education is uneven and decreasing when systems are pyramidal and segmented by socioeconomic status. The poorest always access schools with fewer resources and lower scores obtained in evaluations of learning, as it is happening today in the Peruvian school system. And shared learning among peers is severely limited when all students in a school belong to disadvantaged families with limited access to formal education.

The rapid privatization and growing segregation of the Peruvian school system blocks the possibility of building a democratic, just, cohesive, intercultural, inclusive society aimed at achieving a comprehensive and sustainable development that allows each child born in Peru entitled to have effective access to a dignified, productive and peaceful life.

The country needs that educational policies and national leadership aimed at reversing the trend of mass migration of middle and popular sectors to the private sector emerging school system, to prevent the consolidation of segregation, the insulation of schools and the social marginalization of the population in extreme poverty. It is important to improve rural education, as the Ministry of Education wants now, but it is also urgent to strengthen and improve the attractiveness of urban state education, to hold it to the popular sectors and the emerging middle class.

The teachers who work for the state should be the most interested group in recovering and strengthening the public school as preferred place of socialization and training of new generations of Peruvians. This is not only the future of teaching as a profession and as a guild, but also the effectiveness of the educational ideals of the great Peruvian educators - such as José Antonio Encinas and others - who dreamed of a universal, just, secular, inclusive and liberating school system, committed to scientific knowledge and, in turn, with the flourishing of all cultures and the integration of all peoples to progress and welfare. 