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Educational Reform from the Perspective of the Student

Abstract

Educational policies are tools that the state prepares to generate conditions that allow access to and retention in schools, with the consequent reduction in school failure, increasing the external yield and fulfilling the expectations of the internal agents (teachers, students, school managers), external users (families, society, employers, industrialists) and the great expectations of the national project and the political pundits who see education as the panacea to all the evils and crises of nations.

Keywords: educational reform, educational policy, student, Mexico

Introduction

In the historical, social, economic and political context of Mexico over the last 50 years, the educational system has designed and implemented a series of strategies that include structural and organizational reforms, in order to modernise and to make the different levels of schooling more competitive. It has made significant changes in curricular design, educational development, educational management, and accessibility to and fairness in education, all for the sake of raising quality and continuous improvement in educational standards.

Nevertheless, to speak of education, as a field of study and work, is enormously complex and delicate. “Complex because of the number and diversity of factors, actors and functions that make it up, and delicate because of the powerful forces that intersect in it and the multiplicity of repercussions and consequences that their actions and outcomes generate in society” (Zorrilla, 2008, cited by Sandoval, 2010, p. 5). Similarly Rama (1997) notes that complexity is the principal characteristic of educational policy.

To be able to make sense of educational policies and reforms in a globalised and neoliberal world, in a world that displays great changes, and what existed a second ago no longer exists, where the hegemonic countries govern policies and reforms in the countries that depend on them economically, a world where we are in the hands of the students of today and the future, who will be the decision makers of tomorrow, to be able to understand the past, present and future changes in educational matters, it is important to define what policy is, and what educational reform is, from a range of methodological and epistemological theoretical positions.

Educational policy

Educational policies are shaped by the cultural, political, social and economic aspects of the countries where they are developed, because their dynamic and

structures are complex. Their fundamental purpose is controlling processes for educational institutions. Pineda (2011) defines policy as a permanent activity that consists of the continuous organization and dynamic of the educational system, directed to reinforcing the *status quo* or social order.

Navarro (2006) identifies two classes of educational policies. The first focuses on quantitative expansion and raising the rates of enrolment, and these policies are modified frequently and include a set of marginal policies. The second focuses on developing the quality and the efficiency of education, and includes a set of basic policies that are very rigid and resist all fundamental change. He also refers to four basic policies of educational systems in Latin America:

1. Public/private participation in the market.
2. Free public education at all levels.
3. Absolute stability in the employment of teachers, the rules on hiring, promotion and retirement, that are practically impossible to change.
4. The continuity of the national reach and, therefore, the power of negotiation of the teachers' unions.

For the formulation of educational policies, different social and political actors can be identified. Three groups of actors are crucial in decision making, and have complex preferences. By manipulating other, different, actors they effectively have the power of veto over policies. Other actors, in spite of being the end users of the system, take little or no part in the formulation of policy. In addition, there also exists one external actor who deserves special attention on account of its great influence, namely the Executive.

1. The Teachers' Union exerts a dominant influence when great changes are made, and frequently feels threatened by the reforms, not for the effect that it has on their professional activities, but for its sustainability and power as an organization, since its members are captive and feel controlled by the union that represents them; it creates teaching posts, it controls appointments, and it negotiates pay and benefits. This power keeps union members under control, and without active participation in the proposals for policies and reform. Since the leaders are self-appointed, and often for life, the union inclines in favour of the party in power, in order to negotiate and obtain benefits of political patronage, as they can rely on the support of the union membership. The unions only promote changes that have been demonstrated to work, and over centuries they have developed an attitude that this is how things are done here, and this is how they will be done. Therefore, it is possible to ask: where is the innovation, modernization, and educational change? Only in the rhetoric.

2. The Executive (mainly at the beginning of its term of office) where policies and reforms have their genesis in the groups of technocrats interested in modernization, as described in national projects or national plans of development. The main intention is to improve education as part of modernisation, improved efficiency and national development, in order to maintain global political stability. Reforms only take place in words, but not in actions. Similarly, a significant proportion of policies and reforms are not joined up, and change or lose continuity with each change of government. In his sense it can be seen that reforms are thought of as events (not processes). This type of reform does not entail systematization and evaluation, nor does it involve feedback as to whether it is effective or not, and

nobody is held accountable after the reform for its outcomes. In this way reforms lack challenge and careful evaluation.

3. Regional Politicians participate in the reforms and educational policies on a smaller scale, but with the purpose of obtaining political influence, obtaining votes, and improving the local economy in the context of an inter-jurisdictional competition. Here the account offered by Oszlak (2003, p. 28) fits: “The state bureaucracy, administrative widow of successive governments and political regimes, ends up becoming an immense cemetery of political projects”.

4. The Actors without Voice or Vote who include society, employers, industrialists, educational managers, teachers, parents and students.

5. The External Actors, who, in spite of being external, wield great power. These include organisations of international finance, particularly the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, the United Nations Organisation for Education, Science and Culture, the Organization of American States, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the International Labour Organisation, among others, have found a significant way to influence the formulation of policies and educational reforms. The proposals of international organisations incorporate a positivist and mechanical conception of education, with a dichotomizing mentality (good-bad; works-does not work; top-down). These reforms can be described as “black and white”. They also suggest uniform reforms, that conform to pre-established models and linear development, that are presented as absolute knowledge, but do not necessarily work in the prevailing local conditions. Such reforms may serve as a datum point, but all reform depends on its location in specific circumstances. They also only identify partial reforms, where there is no holistic vision and only one facet or educational level is privileged. Then there are also the quantitative reforms, which are only concerned with numbers, and quality is reduced to quantity and measured with a few indicators. And finally there are the reforms to be tested by teachers (Torres, 1999).

Educational reform

Perez (1999, p. 145) comments that an educational reform, “Affects a broad landscape and presupposes a fundamental intention to alter the extent and direction of education”.

Educational reform is the interventions of policies intended to lead from above, at the macro and system level, driven by states/ governments and the international organisations (Torres, 2000).

For Martinic (2000), the educational reforms are great social and communicative processes whose success is underwritten by the participation of all the involved actors.

Zaccagnini (2004, p. 21) states that: “Generally in education, one talks of reforms when one sees the need to orchestrate a change in the structural organization of the system; when one changes the curricular design and the consequent curriculum; when efforts are made to modernise the system as a whole, imposing one that is more agile and effective dynamically in terms of institutional operation; when decentralizing the central bureaucracy; when making efforts to raise the general quality of education, for the sake of improving academic yield of students and reducing school failure; when trying to adapt and fit the educational

development to the demands of the labour market; when one wants to introduce changes in the pedagogical style of teachers; when one seeks to transform the institutional culture of schools; when one seeks re-orientate the criteria for the organization and institutional management of schools, etc.”.

Types of reforms

Oszlak (1999) suggests that within the reformist movement there are “two generations”. The first focused on reorganising management, finance and access to the system. Here we find reforms for financial reasons, which tried to trim the expenses of operation and the burden on the national budget and reduce the total investment of public and private resources in education. The second generation addressed the problems that affect the quality and outcomes of educational processes. This generation proposed reforms for reasons of competitiveness, which are oriented to prepare the population so that they have human capital of greater quality, new competences and improve the economic competitiveness of the nation. There is also a third generation, starting in the twenty first century, which proposes a series of reforms focusing on the effectiveness of schools, recognising that schools are integrated in all kinds of external networks, as well as internal ones, and are engaged in a new type of relationship with the new technologies, among other characteristics. These reforms have the purpose of increasing social mobility and social levelling, so that the main thrust of these reforms is that they should promote fairness.

As a student perspective

When low school performance is in the students of different educational levels, it is assumed that the blame should fall on the heads of teachers of different educational institutions. However, it is difficult as the problems lie, for the most part with other external aspects, not teachers in the classroom. Not producing good results, if the vast majority of students from different schools have an open mind towards their school work is because students’ internal difficulties prevent them from giving due attention to what happens in their classrooms. In many cases the teachers responsible for the work directly in the classroom think the student is present in body and soul in their school chores, when the reality is completely different, which causes the overall performance in school groups to be very poor (Noriega, 2003).

Conclusions

National projects cannot isolate educational policies and reforms from the generation of jobs, social health, and public services. There is an interdependence between education and the economic, political and social sectors. Similarly education, qualifications and research comprise an integral whole, and as long as they are seen as segmented and separate it will be impossible to bring about important changes in education in a holistic way. In the educational context in Hispano-America, it is possible to identify sectoral reforms that have been developed with a partial vision of the national system, and these reforms are

formulated between the unions and the Ministry or Secretary of education. Such reforms attempt to change only what is internal to the school, and ignore the fact that education is not isolated. Such internally focused reforms look at matters of educational supplies, infrastructure, equipment, plans and training programmes, methods and techniques of teaching, texts, libraries, laboratories, educational qualifications, and the organization and internal management of schools, etc., but without a budget that facilitates autonomy in the handling of resources with transparency and accountability. So long as the reforms have this limited focus it is possible to ignore private education, and to concentrate on the presumption that it is only state education that needs reforming.

The long hoped for change to education will only take place when there is the political will to listen to the views of great thinkers in education the professors, the educational managers, the industrialists and employers, the teachers, and, most of all, the parents and students. It is important to remember the expression, “Vox populi, vox Dei”, and not to forget that, “Vision without action is a daydream”. To create a real national project it is necessary that the mission and the vision are created inside all the groups, that empowerment bears the fruit of fairness and improves social welfare. It is not sufficient to think that only the head thinks and the rest of the population merely obeys decisions taken by others at their writing-desks, without seeing the internal and external reality of the system. The wages and conditions of the union leaders, political representatives and technocrats give them access to the opportunity for a different quality of life and decontextualises their decisions from the social, economic and political environment that affect the life, education and work of the people who are on the receiving end of their educational policies and reforms. Everything is not so rosy; just because there is a plan on paper (a proposed reform document), it does not mean that it will be put into effect and achieve results. Reform-action goes forward, to innovate, to create, to re-invent, from the foundation, in reality, to grow as professionals with the work competences that are needed, as people with an integral and holistic development, as a group with commitment and political and social responsibility, as a nation with dynamic and competent processes at the international level.

Mexican society should pay more attention to the problems of students in general, since it is one of the ways in which teachers are in interaction with those directly involved in this immense responsibility to educate and pass culture to students. One of the main problems of Mexican society is precisely in the sense that parents are unconcerned about the education of children, thinking that just because they entrust their kids to some teachers, who then have direct influence on their children in the classroom, is more than enough as students are in the best position to learn what in their classroom is developing day by day, missing a more equitable interaction between teachers, students, tutors and parents (Noriega, 2003).

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