

EDUCATION AND JOB TRAINING

Education and job training: balancing the imperatives of competitiveness with the necessities of equal opportunity

Summary of the conferences and discussions on Friday, September 19, 1997

Chair: Madam Lúcia de Carvalho

President of the Legislative Chamber of the Federal District of the Federative Republic of Brazil

Vice-Chair: Mr. Claude Boucher

Member of the National Assembly of Québec

Speakers: Madam María de Ibarrola

Director General of the National Teachers' Union Foundation for the Advancement of Teachers

Researcher at the National Council of Science and Technology, Mexico

Mr. Patricio Cariola, S.J.

Researcher, Centre for Research and Development in Education (Chile)

M. Pierre Van Der Donckt

Executive Director of the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education

Secretary: M. Charles A. Bogue

National Assembly of Québec

Madam María de Ibarrola has been Director General of the National Teachers' Union Foundation for the Advancement of Teachers since 1993. She has been a Full Professor of the Department of Educational Research at the Centre for research and advanced studies of the Polytechnical Institute since 1977 and a distinguished researcher of the National Council of Science and Technology since 1985. She is also a consultant for UNESCO in the area of technical education and professional training in Latin America.

Madam María de Ibarrola stated that the title chosen for the workshop recalled, on the one hand, that “the unavoidable competition” in the labour market demands appropriate preparation and training and furthermore, that it requires an analysis of the relationships existing between education and the labour market. On this point, she presented five theses dealing successively with training and labour, equality of opportunity in the field of education, and the relationships that exist between

education and labour in the Americas.

Madam de Ibarrola proposed, firstly, two dichotomic and representative scenarios of the current debates dealing with the future of labour in the XXIth century. The first scenario, characteristic of the situation in the rich countries, is centred on the effects of globalization and of technological advances, and may be viewed optimistically or pessimistically, depending on the viewpoint that one adopts. The optimists present, as inevitable and beneficial for economic development, the globalization of markets, the transformation of production systems and competition in the field of labour. This approach is based on an indispensable adaptation of labour force skills and of education programs, and goes as far as to propose the recognition of skills acquired on the labour market.

For their part, the pessimists argue that increasingly, the new technologies are replacing labour and require society to choose between a model in which a small part of the population work a great deal while the majority remain unemployed and live in dependency on the public system, or a model of work organization allowing a more equitable distribution of jobs, through reductions in the work week and work sharing programs.

The second scenario, which is characteristic of the situation in developing countries, is based on the inequality and heterogeneity of production systems. Here, the highly variable distribution of the gross national product (GNP) per inhabitant means that the competitors are far from being on an even footing. Indeed, a certain number of enterprises offer good-quality well-paid jobs that enable people to enter the middle class, while contributing a high percentage of the gross national product. However, these jobs represent only a slim percentage of the total, as the vast majority offer only irregular work, without a minimum wage or fringe benefits, paid holidays, social security or job security. In certain countries, large segments of the population are already observed who, through a lack of education, are entirely inactive and have no future prospects, while others must turn toward illegal activities in order to supplement their income.

Secondly, the scale of the changes that have marked the XXth century, and especially the last twenty years, requires more than ever that economic development be subordinated to democratic development and social development. The challenge for each society consists not only in becoming integrated within the new global economy, but also in creating worthwhile job opportunities for the

entire population, that will make it possible to reduce inequalities in all spheres of life, including the productivity of work.

Thirdly, Madam Ibarrola maintained that today, we are required to make very complex decisions in technical areas which, moreover, require certain basic knowledge, including that of a moral nature. A new type of literacy is setting in: a knowledge of mathematics and sciences is certainly essential, but knowledge on culture and basic technologies — without which we would not know how to avoid the errors and horrors of the past — is equally so. It follows that education must include the humanities, ethics and civic life, so that the young people will not simply become “working automatons”.

In the fourth place, equal opportunity in the area of pedagogy is far from being achieved in the Americas, despite the major efforts made in this direction. It is true that there exists an appearance of equality of access to primary-level education. On the other hand, the picture becomes darker when secondary school attendance is considered, and becomes catastrophic in the area of higher education. In the latter field, the distance between the United States and Canada, on the one hand, and the Countries of the South, on the other, is enormous. This has the result of opening an enormous gap between these regions as regards the number of qualified workers. These problems could not be solved without making fundamental choices, particularly between the centralization and decentralization of decision-making in the educational and pedagogical fields.

Finally, inequality in the area of education arises out of inadequate policies. It is not the teachers — all too often undertrained and underpaid — who are to be blamed, but rather the governments, who devote less than four percent of the GNP to education.

In conclusion, Madam de Ibarrola formulated a few recommendations:

- firstly, it must be ensured that a public and democratic education exists at all levels of teaching; in particular, the countries in the Americas must not content themselves with financing primary school and neglecting secondary school and university teaching, as in the past;

- secondly, particular attention must be devoted to the most vulnerable groups, namely young people, and especially to those who do not complete their primary school education;
- finally, education must be recognized as an investment. People too often tend to neglect it, whereas it must be given priority, since it proves fundamental to ensure future development.

Monsieur Patricio Cariola, S.J. is a Researcher at the Centre for Research and Development in Education, of which he was Director from 1969 to 1995. He is a State Professor and holds a Master's degree in Education from Harvard University. In 1978, he founded the Latin-American information and educational documentation network. He acted as rapporteur for Latin America at the World Conference on Education for All, held in 1990. In 1995, he received the Andres Bello Inter-American Education Award. He is the author of several studies on education in Latin America, and is currently an advisor to the Chilean Minister of Education

Mr. Cariola underlined the wide gap that has opened in the area of job training between the countries of Southeast Asia and those of Latin America. In 1960, these two regions were at the same level in this area; today, the sad reality forces us to realize that the Latin American countries are far behind the Asian countries.

Globalization, the growth of the economy and economic integration have meaning only insofar as one can inject added value into products. Certainly, national income can increase without value added, but then it will always remain concentrated in the hands of a very small group. In order that the fruits of economic growth may be better distributed, the citizens must be provided with adequate training.

It is true that we have made enormous progress in the area of higher education, as well as a major comeback in the area of secondary school education. These figures are deceptive, however, since the rate of registration in urban areas is considerably higher than that in rural areas, to which must be

added the weakness of preschool education in Latin America. This weakness is of capital importance, since the shortfall in the intellectual stimulation of children in the home tends to condemn them to never exceeding the level attained by their parents.

According to a study conducted by the director of the regional bureau of UNESCO for Latin America, it is undeniable that the performance of the basic school systems in Latin America is insufficient. Once again, this reality is too often concealed by misleading statistics. Indeed, nearly 45 percent of the pupils in primary school repeat their year of school. During 1990 alone, 17 million children occupied places that they should have freed up for other pupils, thereby generating considerable expenditures. The result: not only is the school system highly ineffective, but its shortcomings result in a huge proportion of functionally illiterate people. Given the direct relationship between reading and various levels of development, such a result is disastrous. Fortunately, this phenomenon is not observed in private schools and colleges.

According to Mr. Cariola, the cause of the phenomenon of repeating grades lies particularly in the passive spirit inculcated in the students. But another source of the problem is without doubt the fact that the children of parliamentarians in the Latin American countries almost exclusively attend private schools. Since they thus have little or no contact with the realities of the public school system, the decision-makers are hardly in a position to realize the pitiable state of education provided there.

Finally, the public school system should go beyond basic education so as not only to teach the use of modern technology, but also to transmit ethical values.

Mr. Pierre Van Der Donckt is Executive Director of the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education. He was head of the governmental mission at the Centre d'études politiques et administratives du Québec at the ENAP from 1981 to 1985, after having exercised the duties of Assistant Deputy Minister, responsible in particular for the Higher Education and Research Branch of the Ministère de l'Éducation, from 1978 to 1981. He held the position of Agent General for Québec in Mexico from 1985 to 1989, and conducted activities of cooperation in 23 countries of the

Americas. He is a member of the Board of Administration of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas.

Mr. Pierre Van Der Donckt centred his analysis around two themes: the importance of managing the major changes that have occurred since the 1960s, and the need for inter-American cooperation in the field of education. Firstly, while our education systems have undergone major changes in the past, the tectonic tremors that are currently shaking the world will cause them to undergo even more profound changes. Indeed, the current university model is worn out: without a radical reform, the universities will soon enter a crisis. The results so far achieved are certainly positive, or even spectacular. However, problems persist. These must be attacked with determination, despite the reduction in the financial resources available for the purpose, since education remains the key to economic and social development.

In primary school, the lamentable rates of participation and success of Latin American children are most worrisome. On the other hand, at the university level, too many students enter university and spend years there without really having the aptitudes or the will to succeed. In addition, the proliferation of private institutions has not been accompanied by rigorous and transparent processes to evaluate the quality of teaching. Finally, government initiatives often lack consistency, particularly with regard to the financing of the school system.

The world has entered into a relentless race in which chances of success depend on the quality and dynamism of the human capital. Even in Canada, we are called on to re-engineer the entire school system. This process is based on a new equitable pact between the social classes, which must not make those who are already vulnerable even more so. On the other hand, although we must concern ourselves for those who are at the back of the pack, we must also prepare those who are in front. And this must be done not only within national boundaries: we must open our post-secondary institutions to the rest of the world, particularly to all the countries of the Americas.

Secondly, any plan to transform education systems must take into account the context of integration and development of the countries in the Americas, who demand that new instruments of cooperation be implemented. Our vision of the Americas must not be limited to economic competition alone; it must be based above all on cooperation — hence the absolute necessity of providing young people with a truly inter-American education.

For this purpose, the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education proposes the creation of the College of the Americas. This project is inspired by the College of Europe, founded in Bruges in 1950, with the goal of inculcating in its students a broadened vision of the European continent. This new college will be set up starting next year, and will offer four programs, namely: a program on management and analysis of public sector policies; a student exchange program, called “Inter-Americas”, to enable young people to spend a year studying in a foreign country; a program devoted to the subject of integration in all its aspects — cultural, social and technological; and finally, ten networks of cooperation to form new professionals in an inter-American framework.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

During the discussion period, the focus returned to the problem of the resources devoted to education by the Latin American countries. Several participants considered that the budgets allocated to education must be increased, since it is clear that they are well below the eight percent of GNP recommended by UNESCO to progress out of underdevelopment.

Not only are the resources devoted to education insufficient, they are also spread out unequally, between North and South, needless to say, but also between cities and rural areas. In the opinion of some participants, it is important to dispense education mainly where the needs are the most pressing, and hence where the results are likely to be the most spectacular, namely in the more underprivileged rural areas. Moreover, the differences in education between boys and girls, a problem of a cultural nature, must be evened out.

The poor performance of the Latin American school systems as well as the problem of the repeating of grades were again raised. The repeating of a grade should be correctly understood as a symptom of the fundamental deficiencies of the educational system. The fact that a child must repeat his or her year of school does not necessarily mean that the programs are overloaded, but simply that he or she did not learn what was supposed to be learned, at the appropriate time. Too often, inadequately prepared and poorly paid teachers are trained “on the job”. Supplementary research should be undertaken in this field: one should not limit oneself to applying recipes found elsewhere, but rather, studies should be conducted in each country with a view to providing interactive teaching in

the classrooms.

However, the point was raised that in certain countries, particularly Brazil, success was achieved in dramatically reducing the number of dropouts through better financial support in the form of bursaries to low-income families. Moreover, repeating ought to be managed in a rational and economic manner by requiring repetition of only those courses failed, rather than of the entire school year.

Who must take up these challenges? The State? The private sector? The media? Parliamentarians? Some observers consider that too much emphasis is placed on the distinction between the public and private school systems; it is the quality of education that counts, and sometimes private school does more with less money. All nevertheless agreed that the State has an important role to play, but the precise nature and scope of that role are not easy to define. Certainly, the decision-makers and the citizens must be brought closer together, by decentralizing the decision-making and by being attentive to the input of citizens. However, an exaggerated degree of decentralization, which is unfavourable toward poor regions, must be avoided. In addition, the State has the duty to establish standards to ensure quality training.

The mission and responsibility of the medias in education were raised several times. They undoubtedly have enormous power and could be powerful educators, but everything is yet to be done to define the links that should exist between school education, on the one hand, and the world of the Internet and cable television on the other. Furthermore, there is little in the way of legislation to govern the medias and, in most of the Latin American countries, they do not take up the challenge of contributing actively to education.

In the case of parliamentarians, their primary role must be to seek a consensus within the population. They must also exercise better control over the development of the education systems, which implies the establishment of quality standards in this field. However, parliamentarians show a virtually total lack of awareness of the deficiencies of the school system and they do not possess the necessary information to accomplish serious work. Often, the elected officials who intervene in this area have only narrow financial concerns in mind.

The content of the school programs also constitutes a major concern: must the technical and technological literacy of the future workers be emphasized to render them functional and productive? Or instead, should young people be given preparation for their role as future citizens, by placing more emphasis on civic life, ethics and moral values? If the importance of a well educated and technologically aware labour force is indisputable, especially in the fields of health and environmental protection, some are concerned about the tendency to view education as only a preparation to exercise a productive job in a globalized economy. In their opinion, education has a much more noble vocation, namely to train young leaders for the future of the Latin American countries.

Indeed, education should be considered as an investment, but the governments too often act with a view to obtaining immediate results. The States should stop acting with a short-term view, advocating curricula that are too often designed on the basis of a shortage of resources; instead, they should develop long-term policies. From this viewpoint, the creation of the College of the Americas was favourably acclaimed.