



## EDUCATION FOR INEQUALITY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to show that social inequality, at least in Latin American context, is not something that just “resists to disappear” despite the efforts made in order to overcome that apparently undesired reality. Instead, these nations have inherited a five hundred-year-history of coloniality and are currently involved in and committed to a moneymaking atmosphere, prompted and controlled from abroad. They are somehow compelled to accept and implement educational policies aimed to create, maintain and expand social inequality. The objective of this paper is to raise awareness on educators about this reality as well as about the crucial need of reviewing their role in 21<sup>st</sup> century; and how to help learners in the development of an alternative common sense, one in which all people effectively count.

### Keywords

Education, inequality, globalization, neoliberalism

### RESUMEN

Esta presentación tiene por objeto mostrar que la desigualdad social, al menos en el entorno latinoamericano, no es solo algo que “se niega a desaparecer” a pesar de los esfuerzos por superar esa realidad en apariencia indeseable; antes bien, que las naciones herederas de una historia de cinco siglos de colonialidad y sumidas hoy en día en una atmósfera monetarista bajo en control y el impulso del exterior se hallan de algún modo obligadas a aceptar y poner en práctica políticas educativas tendientes a crear, mantener y expandir la desigualdad social. El propósito aquí es concienciar a los educadores acerca de esta realidad así como de la urgente necesidad de revisar su papel de cara al siglo XXI; esto con el fin de ayudar al estudiantado en el desarrollo de un sentido común alternativo, que sea inclusivo para todas las personas.

### Palabras claves

Educación, desigualdad, globalización, neoliberalismo

### INTRODUCTION

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It is heard frequently, almost like a slogan, that education is the solution to problems of poverty and inequality. Nevertheless, Latin American countries have shown that increased investments in education do not necessarily render a serious improvement *per se* in those matters. UNESCO, 2013 and UNESCO, 2014 reports on Education in Latin American and Caribbean countries recognize that social inequalities persist in the region, despite the money addressed there to education in the last decades. Following some quotes:

“In average, Latin American and Caribbean countries effectively increased the investment in public education as a percentage of their GDP, passing from 4.5 in 2000 to 5.2 in 2010. That means an increase of seven decimals in percentage and getting closer to the average investment in education in European countries and in the USA, where by 2010 was near 5.6 of their GDP. (p.37)<sup>2</sup>

However,

“...social inequality is a relevant characteristic of the region and represents a main challenge... Children from the poorest and most deprived strata continue to have less opportunities of attention... which could contribute to increase inequalities in future Latin American generations.” (p. 57)<sup>3</sup>

“The region is also characterized by a persistent and very high inequality in terms of income. In average, by 2010 only 21.7 of the youth between 20 and 24 years old in the poorest quintile of each country had finished high school. In contrast, 78.3 of their peers in the richest quintile completed that level of education. These high levels of inequality are quite the same in all countries of the region.” (p89)<sup>4</sup>

And, what about in higher Education?

“While only a 0.7% of the group between 25-29 years old in the poorest quintile completed higher education by 2010 in Latin America, 18.3% of their peers in the wealthiest quintile achieved that... So, the increase [in investment] has not solved the enormous social inequality in access to higher education.” (p.137)

These reports, as well as many other official and academic studies about the situation of individual or regional Latin American countries in terms of education, such as the “*Estado de la Educación en Costa Rica*” (2015), confront the relationship between the investments in education and the increase of social inequalities. They also show in detail the achievements and challenges each country or the region as a whole has reached or faces to overcome inequality throughout education. However, what is not easily found in those documents is that the educational system, in any of these nations, reflects, on the one hand, the

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by the author.

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effects of a centenary history of *coloniality* (Quijano, 2000), characterized by exclusion, elitism and segregation and, on the other hand, a mode of production that pervades all their institutionality, as well as every dimension of their national life and shows the same effects as coloniality: the neoliberal capitalism. Each of those two factors will be discussed in the following pages.

Accordingly, the main assertion stated in this paper is as follows: *Current formal education, at least in Latin America, is used to create, maintain and expand social inequality. This works as a means to pursue the interests of those who, for long, have taken advantage of the coloniality matrix, (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, 2007)) as well as of those who, in turn, today control the market (Fontánez, 2015).* And so, this presentation at GASI / SICOM 2017 Conference has to be understood: Not simply as *Inequality in Education*, but actually as Education Intended for Inequality. This means that no lenitive actions taken to mitigate the problem can be expected to make a difference. Funding the construction of new facilities, just raising salaries or establishing accreditation systems (Díaz, 2007) to keep an eye on what is taught and to accomplish standards in terms of formality are all addressed to render the same results. What is proposed here is to raise awareness on this topic among educators and other stakeholders in education, as a first step to start changing paradigms and creating an alternative common sense.

## **EDUCATION FOR INEQUALITY: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH**

As it was said in the introduction, social inequality is, in part, one effect of coloniality. But, in turn, coloniality is said to be “*the darker side of Western Modernity*” (Mignolo, 2011). In order to understand how formal education creates, maintains and expands inequality, it is important to analyze the epistemological approach underpinning educational systems in (most)<sup>5</sup> Modern-Western societies.

*Modernity* is understood as the civilization project of western culture and dates back to the fifteenth century, although still remains. Such civilization project is based on the capacity of humans to answer their inquiries, meet their needs and solve their problems in a rational way and according to the systematicity of the scientific method. As such, modernity was also desired to be taken to any conquered territory overseas. And it was.

What is referred to as Modernity’s “darker side” consists of a pretended superiority of a determined human group or elite, that which gave to itself the faculty to

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<sup>5</sup> “(Most)” is meant to indicate “not all”. Indeed, Finland, for example, is a western country too. However, that nation shows signs of having one of the best educational systems in the world. In fact, their education system, rather than being exclusionist, tries to integrate learners from all social strata in the same public educational institutions; as a result, students learn to share with others without prejudice. Also, more wealthy parents and stakeholders pressure in demand of excellence in public education, which benefits less economically favored learners as well. More information at [http://www.oph.fi/english/education\\_system\\_education\\_policy](http://www.oph.fi/english/education_system_education_policy)



classify other human groups in several hierarchies according to two concepts: *literacy/rationality* and that of race. The first, made a distinction among Europeans between those who had the privilege of education and those who remained as illiterate or were even considered as barbarians. The second concept, *race*, established a distinction in all kinds of orders, regarding Europeans as superior to others. This justified the establishment of multiple standards to value the extent to which something is true, desirable, acceptable or worthy; also, the extent to which “someone” is subject of citizenship and, eventually, of rights.

As Santos (2009) argues, a major problem with Modernity is the separation between scientific knowledge from vulgar (common sense) knowledge. In his *Discourse on Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau (1750) had already deplored such a distinction: “Men are perverse; they would be even worse if they had the misfortune of being born knowledgeable.” Later, Cuban José Martí (1891), evaluating what was wrong with Latin American independence stated that “it would have been the mark of a genius to couple the headband [of the Indians] and the professor’s gown.”

As a result, and following Santos (2009), in order to set an epistemological basis for knowledge production (and then for teaching and learning and for other educational purposes) it is important to consider not only scientific data and principles, but also psychological and sociological conditions where (and when) knowledge is produced. In Modern science, knowledge production and research has been influenced by Mechanism, a philosophical conception of science regarding how things work, only. In this conception, interference from human, religious or ethical values is not accepted. For that reason, Modern Science cannot be expected to offer solutions for democratic problems. Democracy implies the principles of equality and solidarity (Dahl, 2004), which are not objects for science. Therefore, since research is funded and driven by the interests of people in supremacy strata, Modern science is based on one epistemological approach that creates social inequality.

Santos (2009) also distinguishes between the “epistemology of blindness” of Modern science from the “epistemology of vision” (p.87) of the Emergent Paradigm, the one he proposes. The first is supposed to produce regularization and order, versus the chaos of ignorance. That epistemology is biased and creates a distortion in the representation of reality as well as in the consequences of research findings. On the other hand, the epistemology of vision is based on always questioning knowledge, in the extent to which it leads to more coloniality or, instead, to the emancipation of people.

As it can be seen, Modern science epistemology and coloniality are intertwined. Rutgers University at New Jersey, Professor N. Maldonado-Torres (2007) lists and explains three main forms of coloniality: A) Coloniality of self, which is coloniality in



one's life experience; B) coloniality of power, referred to the different Modern forms of exploitation and domination; C) coloniality of knowledge, or control exerted over the epistemology and knowledge production.

It could be said that all those forms of coloniality are present in educational systems along with the Modern “epistemology of blindness”. Teacher formation and teacher training, as well as curricula design and implementation have relied and still rely on several assumptions that subtly or openly are aimed to assimilate that. Here some examples:

Accepting or taking for granted the supremacy of some countries whose languages (and culture) is necessary to acquire as a condition to get employment in one's own; establishing pronunciation standards in foreign language teaching and learning that clearly highlight the supremacy of central societies and disregard peripheral societies where those languages are spoken too; emphasis on education for competition rather than on complementarity among people; a disciplinary approach to education in which each subject is studied in complete disconnection to the others and each field of knowledge and career is jealously kept avoiding “interference” from others; using “professional”, actually encrypted or incomprehensible language when talking to common people, turning decision making so difficult for them, especially in medical context and when asking for informed consent; etc.

Governmental and institutional signs of coloniality and Modern-based epistemology regarding education are, among others, the uncritical acceptance of the conditions “suggested”, actually imposed, by international financial institutions for funding national education; the acceptance of foreign control exerted by systems of accreditation of higher education, based on formality and bureaucracy under the disguise of quality and excellence.

All that is intended to classify people. Actually, it is intended to distinguish between those who are more or less capable to succeed in school and education and, in consequence, to succeed in the society. Therefore, it is remarked here that the Modern-epistemological approach adopted by Latin American formal education is historically and currently envisioned to create, maintain and expand social inequality.

### **EDUCATION FOR INEQUALITY: AN ECONOMICAL APPROACH**

In most Latin American countries as in many other regions of the world, capitalist mode of production, in its late version of neo-liberal globalization and its monetary system, pervades all dimensions of their social life and institutionality. That monetary system aims the accumulation and concentration of capital (Bryan & Rafferty, 2006); also, exerts all kinds of influence in individuals as well as in



institutions until the point of nearly taking control of States.<sup>6</sup> This is possible thanks to the influence of international financial institutions which, in the past, started to “favor” poor countries with credits for development, those which were never reimbursed and accumulated an unpayable debt (Sistema Económico Latinoamericano, 1994).

Due to debt, those financial institutions claim for themselves a sort of authority upon in-debt countries and their governments; they recommend, actually impose, policies to make the States more “efficient” and more able to refund their enormous liabilities. Those policies or strategies include plans for privatizing public services, funding development projects regardless destroying natural habitats, essential for people to live, displacement of local communities and many other forms of *accumulation for des-possession* (Block, Gray and Holborow, 2012). Local people in target countries are “educated” to accept “progress” as an undeniable goal and also to accept the inequality resulting from it as a “temporary disadvantage” associated to progress. Formal education is, then, thought to serve that *status quo*.

In what education concerns, it could be irrelevant how much is, then, invested in overcoming inequalities, both in opportunities of access and in results; in reality, the number of people who are expected to graduate and eventually be hired and obtain purchasing power is determined by market forces. The size of the market in a given country limits the amount of labor that is required (Sisto, 2009). People will continue to study and graduate, but job positions will not be available for all of them (Márquez, 2011). Meanwhile, those who reach high positions will be able to afford goods and services according to the size of the market, and that way the economic balance is kept. Today, cities witness such a reality when the use of geographic space shows clear delimitations: newly-built exclusive areas for educated people with purchasing power, gentrified areas for wealthy sectors too (Harvey, 1979), along with depressed neighborhoods and slums for those left behind in the frenetic and individualistic race for opportunities.

Educational systems have seemingly accepted this as a fact (López, 2008) and have assumed approaches related to the market. Today, the ultimate concern of students seems to be whether or not their diploma will assure a job for them. Curricula is mostly designed and implemented in accordance with material and immediate needs of learners, which are actually determined by the market (Flores y López, 2010). The role of educational institutions in forming people in a holistic approach (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), helping them to construct a life project and balancing sameness and otherness, has somehow faded in a hurry for preparing labor, preferably in the areas that market demands.

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<sup>6</sup> “Its theoretical roots go back to the Chicago School of Economics of the 1950s with Milton Friedman, who dreamed of reinstating neoclassical economics via monetarism (or controlling the supply of money as the chief method of stabilizing the economy)” Block, Gray and Holborow, 2012 (p.15)



The Monetary System, as a core structure of capitalist economic order, tries to obtain the most profit with the least expenses possible. For that reason, the availability, location, contractual stability, preparation and quality of teachers is decided according to economic factors (Bruns, Filmer and Patrinos, 2011). This eventually turns in a source of social inequalities because less favored strata are given less prepared or less qualified teachers (Puga, Polanco and Corvalán, 2015). Likewise, teachers tend to be made responsible for the lack of efficiency of educational systems, while real causes such as intended inequality and greed for privatization are unmentioned.<sup>7</sup> Many of these decisions are made based on recommendations of studies sponsored by the World Bank (Klees, Samoff and Stromquist (2012).

Once created, inequality is maintained by groups in power by any means of which they can make use. In neo-liberal capitalism, one subtle, but effective form is the use of language and discourse. Throughout speech power and discourse manipulation it is possible to fashion and spread a common sense among people, so that the interests of hegemonic power are normalized and assimilated with barely no opposition. Mass Media play a central role in this diffusion; however, education is not less important. Pierre Bourdieu (1985) calls this manipulation of discourse *symbolic domination*. Corrales (2003), comments symbolic domination as follows: “The one who possesses the monopoly of the word imposes the arbitrariness of his concerns and interests.”(p.239)

But, how is this symbolic domination spread out through educational systems? Neo-liberal worldview is deeply present in textbooks as well as in a series of fashion terms or vocabulary (Dean, 2008) that many educators learn and teach with scarce or no criticism, until eventually taking their meaning for granted. According to Block, Gray and Holborow (2012) “critical discourse analysis argues that neoliberalism has ‘colonized’ discourse.” (p.14) People finally just recognize as facts, for example, that job opportunities are scarce, that they have to keep on investing time and money on education, even acquiring big debts, although real compensation probabilities are uncertain. Inequality is, then, taken for granted and as such, assimilated.

This reality is rather neglected by higher education institutions, and learners are not helped to be aware of it. Careers with limited chances, if any, to place their graduates in job positions are still offered and promoted, both in public and private universities. Curricula is focused on preparing future professionals as if their job was guaranteed, rather than on opening alternative options for new graduates to be incorporated in social life and labor force. However, this happens because neoliberal market has brought higher education to deviate their role of

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<sup>7</sup> See documentaries “Waiting for Superman”, supported by Bill Gates, and its Latin American counterpart “De Panzazo”, both available online.



professionalization of people and knowledge production to a chaotic overflow of labor offer. Higher education became a profitable business, even though new graduates are being driven to uncertainty. This expands inequality.

## **THE ROLE OF LATIN AMERICAN EDUCATORS IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY**

So far, it has been shown how social inequality, rather than an uncompleted task for governments and institutions is something meant to be so. Indeed, this paper is addressed to educators and other stakeholders in education to consider that. Examining social inequality from its roots and intended purposes is probably the best way to envision alternative forms of human conviviality, one which is inspired by solidarity and common wellbeing. It is known that some western countries (like in Northern Europe) have achieved that, perhaps not in a perfect degree, but at least in such a way that allows all people to live well. And they have attained that mostly throughout an outstanding approach to education, one which is inspired by a common sense other than that of neoliberal capitalism: *prudent knowledge for living decently*. (Santos, 2012)

The role of educators, therefore, needs to be analyzed by educators themselves. They are in a strategic position either to cooperate indefinitely with the structure of coloniality and inequality that are discussed here, or to discover and implement in their professional practice and research new epistemological insights that serve as guidelines for them to promote an alternative worldview or common sense. In any case, their option will have a multiplier effect on new generations assigned to them in order to be formed.

It is said that the role of educators, as traditionally viewed, has nearly come to end. New generations are familiar with and have access to uncountable sources of knowledge and information, which easily would make people to think that teachers, mentors, lecturers and counsellors are not needed anymore. Certainly, their functions require to be updated, either in face-to-face or in virtual classrooms. Information technologies (ICTs) are helpful to make the teaching-learning process more effective (Ramirez y Casillas, 2015). However, regarding education for inequality it is important to say, firstly, that technology *per se* will not reduce inequality, as long as it is inspired by the coloniality matrix and colonized by neoliberal capitalism. Secondly, that educators have the crucial task now of getting awareness of what social inequality means and function as “content curators” (Ramirez y Casillas, 2015) to help learners in discerning how to think alternatively to the dominant and dominating paradigm. Thirdly, that educators need to share experiences with colleagues and learners of alternative thinking so that people start to think that another common sense is possible.

## **CONCLUSIONS**





This paper has been intended to show that inequality, at least in Latin American context is not something that just resists to disappear despite the efforts made in order to overcome that apparently undesired reality. Instead, nations loaded with a five-century history of coloniality, need to accept and implement educational policies intended to create, maintain and expand that. Those nations are involved in and committed with a moneymaking order, prompted and controlled from abroad by corporations and financial institutions as well as by domestic elites.

It has also been stated that the neoliberal monetary system, the current version of late capitalism, is continuously fed by research and studies sponsored by international financial institutions whose aims are focused on favoring the interests of grand capital. Among those studies are the ones addressed to influence (or nearly intervene) educational systems in the different countries, mostly for opening the opportunities for private initiatives to take control of education as a profitable business, which definitely yields huge gain for domestic elites and especially for multinational companies. This is a main source of social inequality.

Additionally, it was remarked the role played by Media and other sources of propaganda in favor of spreading a marked-oriented common sense which includes the acceptance of a sort of “destiny” of new generations to get involved in a production-consumption order. In that worldview, any chance for people to seriously think of alternative forms of social organization are not exactly denied, but shown altogether with the rest of alternatives displayed for them to choose, just like brands on supermarket shelves.

Education effectively contributes to this major source for inequality when textbooks and even specialized books and web resources are used uncritically and the market-oriented *Weltanschauung* is reinforced in learners. This has also regarded as an apparent symptom of coloniality of self, of knowing and of power.

Therefore, and this has been the main objective of this paper, it is crucial to start sharing among educators, scholars and educationalists alternative ideas to cope with current education for inequality. Despite self-censure many professionals in education impose to themselves for financial-institutional reasons, it is necessary to re-think the role of educators as content curators. In times when learners are overwhelmed and “*infocated*” or overloaded by information, content curators, transformed and committed with an epistemology of freedom and dignity will help them to discern the best of worlds possible, rather than “*la pensèe unique*” taught by neoliberal approach to teaching.

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