

Educational Reforms in Transitions to Democracy: Chile, Argentina and Paraguay

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This presentation analyzes the “educational discourse” of several Latin American countries during their transition to democracy. In a variety of national contexts, going through a process of political change, there have been discussions about the changing goals of the educational system. The underlying assumption of the new democracies was that education, reflecting the new goals of state and society, can deal with social and economic conditions and can contribute to the consolidation of political regimes. Discussions, visions and proposed policies were part of the most general debate, characteristic of transitions, on the causes of the countries’ problems, and on the strategies by which these problems could (and should) be overcome.

I will argue that the contents of discourse include new visions about the expected contribution of education. However, the policies, ideas and notions formulated by policy makers and intellectuals reflect the institutional characteristics of the different countries. Hence, the selection of ideas in the first stage of transition followed a path that, rather than change, was in continuity with prevalent orientations. For such purpose I will discuss three countries: Argentina, Chile and Paraguay that represent three different modes of transition to democracy. The differences in the educational discourse will tell us something about how political, economic and cultural policies differ in countries with different institutional tendencies.

Latin America’s transitions to democracy began as aimed at reestablishing the rule of law, respecting human rights, restoring civil society, changing the economic markets,

holding elections and others. In all countries there was thought about the role expected from education in shaping the new rules of the game. There was a general agreement among government and elite that knowledge, organized around new contents and methods, could generate new thoughts, attitudes and practices. These new patterns were expected to create subsystems capable of communicating new goals and serving as linkages between existent and emerging structures. In the three countries, the various educational projects formulated at the beginning of the transition, reiterated the belief in the power of education in the consolidation of the new regimes. The new projects expressed new visions of changing relations among social, economic, cultural and political spheres. They also formulated policies capable (as declared in the conference of Ministers of education) of dealing with “poverty, hunger, political stability, and social imbalances”. Policies were also concerned with the improvement of equal opportunities, the strengthening of national identity, the expansion of pre-school education, and the teaching and development of science and technology.

The new projects in the three countries have a similar structure that includes 1) a diagnosis about the causes of their economic underdevelopment, social inequalities and political instability (or over-stability as in Paraguay); 2) possible solutions within the generalized framework of the state and 3) a discursive practice dealing with the expected contribution of the different components of the educational system to the changing future. In the three countries the transitional governments named, at the very beginning, a committee in charge of elaborating the new notions and policies. Groups representing different activists of the civil society composed the committee: church members, teachers’ union representatives, intellectuals, community groups,

bureaucrats designed by the government, school heads, parents, students and others. The idea was that the proposed plan would be the result of an agreement achieved among all the participants.

However, the three countries are characterized by very different institutional characteristics. The analysis of the differences indicates that the educational discourse has been related to the modalities of transition. In Argentina, the re-establishment of democracy was not accompanied by a transformation of economic institutions: the economy was still largely based on import substitution and large-scale state ownership. This model was still hegemonic (it would only begin to change in the 1990s) and political and intellectual elites perceived rich countries as a menacing force, a threat to the nation's sovereignty. For this reason, education was mainly defined as an instrument for the defense of the nation's identity and a resource for national liberation.

Paraguay went through a mild change in its political institutions, for a large party of the political elite under Stroessner's party continued in power). The pre-existing economic institutions, and the articulation between state and society characteristic of the dictatorship, remained intact. So did the country's isolation from the rest of the world. The new educational discourse was an attempt to produce change at the symbolic level, to create the impression that the country was undergoing a major transformation.

Finally, in the case of Chile, the onset of democracy took place after a thorough transformation of economic institutions under Pinochet. The country had abandoned the model based on import substitution, and converted into a market economy. The

new institutions were hegemonic among political elites. For this reason, educational discourse reflected the relationship between school and society characteristic of market economies. Education came to be seen mainly as an instrument for the generation of human capital, and at the micro level as a mechanism for the provision to individuals of the cultural equipment that would enable them to participate effectively in a market economy.