

Educational Quality and Gender in Contemporary Educational Policies in Latin America

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of educational quality in the context of major global and regional policies proposed by international financial agencies such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, world-wide agreements such as those envisioned by Education for All and the Millennium Development goals, and global civil society as the World Social Forum and the World Education Forum. Content analysis of the discourse of these distinct and influential groups reveals that quality is defined and measured exclusively in cognitive terms and reduced to two basic skills: math and reading. Quality, therefore, is dissociated from processes of social change to which education should be a key contributor. Major global policies such as Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals do not consider the importance of inserting gender awareness in the provision of an education of high quality and their objectives see gender only as it relates to equal access to school by girls and boys. It is argued that leaving the treatment of gender out of the curriculum and failing to retrain teachers to recognize gender issues in the everyday practices of the school and classroom contributes to the persistence of values and practices that reaffirm arbitrary and asymmetric distinctions between women and men. The author proposes that from a feminist perspective quality must go well beyond access to include equal treatment of girls and boys in the classroom; a curriculum content that depolarizes gender identities' knowledge that affects people's lives such as sex education, domestic violence, and citizenship; and school practices to develop assertive and confident personalities in girls as well as in boys.

Keywords

Quality - Gender - Global educational policies - EFA - MDGs.

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The concept of quality stands as one of the most cited in contemporary educational reforms and policies in advanced and less industrialized countries alike. A careful look at the quality arguments and groups behind them suggests that at least three major currents are active, each making its own assumptions and seeking unique objectives.

These currents can be categorized as those that represent strong or compelling policies, as they are backed by international institutions and national governments, and those that represent weak policies, most based on claims that emanate from non-governmental groups. Among the strong education-related policies one can find two types. First, there are those associated with positions taken by international financial agencies, notably the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, which emphasize the increasing economic and technological context of globalization. These policies center on competitiveness between countries and thus assert that excellence must be sought through increased quality in schooling. Since the quality must be measurable, these policies emphasize testing of students and accountability of schools to determine performance. An extension of such policies is that schools of deficient quality should be replaced by better schools, presumably schools sensitive to parental choice such as charter schools or those created through voucher mechanisms. In these policies, quality is attained indirectly, through improvements in governance and administration that eventually percolate to the classroom level by putting pressure on teachers to perform to the best of their abilities and thus ensure student learning. These policies often end up equating quality with privatization, for parental choice seems to increasingly lead to schools outside the public school system. They are strong because they are linked to macro-stabilization measures proposed by international lending institutions.

A second form of strong policy is one linked with global policies such as Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These policies seek greater access to basic education, student completion of at least four years of schooling, parity between boys and girls in primary and

secondary education, and adult literacy. A reference to quality is present in EFA goals regarding basic education and represents a major advance relative to previous policies that focused exclusively on initial school access. However, the MDGs (which were enacted the same year, 2000) emphasize mostly access and fourth-grade completion, making no reference to quality in such objectives. The EFA policies invoking quality (as well as the MDGs) are strong but primarily at the symbolic level, as they represent ethical and democratic principles and worldwide acceptance. In practice, however, they do not come associated with the funding required for implementation. Such global policies affect national educational policies more rhetorically than in fact. Many countries have taken considerable time to produce action plans to address these global policies but action has been lagging (Stromquist, forthcoming; Torres, 2001).

Weak educational policies are those argued by groups outside official governmental structures. At present, growing segments of civil society are active in education presenting demands as well as mobilizing significant groups through annual meetings coordinated by the World Social Forums and the World Education Forums. These policies manifest a profound concern for the increasing social exclusion in the world and see educational quality as a means to counter the neglect of disadvantaged groups while fostering democratization and social justice. A demand salient in the world forums has been public education of high quality. Here, quality is argued less on the basis of precise testing of students and more on better and greater inputs such as improved school infrastructure and raised teacher salaries. These policies are weak since not only they are proposed by groups and institutions outside formal political power but they carry no leverage other than campaigns and pressure through mobilized citizens on government and international financial agencies.

It is interesting to observe that while quality is being defended either for the purposes of economic competitiveness or solidarity, the efforts to improve quality for discrete disadvantaged groups are feeble, and the importance of gender in the specification of educational quality or in its attainment is absent. It is as if gender has nothing to do with quality. But, is this the case? In this paper I explore the main educational policies affecting the Latin American region, how gender emerges in such

policies, and how quality is defined in discourse and practice. I move then to argue that quality from a feminist perspective requires features that are not recognized by current policies, and conclude with the assertion that gender needs to be inserted in definitions of quality if this concept is to make a contribution to policy formulation.

Education Policies in Latin America

As a whole, Latin America has close to universal access to primary education. Yet, it presents low rates of primary school completion, weak access to secondary education, and serious urban/rural differentials. Only two-thirds of students who begin primary complete it (Puryear and Alvarez, 2001). In 13 of 16 countries with data available, less than 90 percent of the students reach fifth grade (UNESCO, 1998, cited in Puryear and Alvarez, 2001). Secondary school gross enrollment levels are between 56 percent (Puryear and Alvarez, 2001) and 62 percent (UNDP, 1999), and have increased by only 6 percentage points in 10 years, compared to increases of 20 percent for East Asian and 11 percent for South Asia. Brazil, the region's largest country and one of the 15 largest economic powers in the world, has only 19

percent enrollment in secondary schools (Puryear and Alvarez, 2001).

Despite educational expansion, social fragmentation linked to social class and ethnicity remains high in Latin America. The average adult in the 10 richest percent of the population has 11.3 years of schooling, compared to 3.1 years among those in the 30 poorest percent of the population (OREALC/UNESCO-CEPAL, 2005, p. 25). This differential of 7 years of schooling is similar to what has been observed in India, a country with marked social caste contrasts.

In various international and regional meetings, Latin American governments have identified education as the single most important policy. This was certainly the case in the Second Summit of the Americas in Santiago, 1998, a meeting that reviewed the various development options for the region. Education objectives are also present in numerous global and regional plans. Yet, the specificity of activities to attain these objectives and the financial resources allocated for them lag behind the discourse.

Table 1 presents the four major global and regional policies guiding education in Latin America. All policies are concerned with the question of access to and completion of basic education. Differences exist, however, in the definition of basic education, with the Millennium

Table 1: Levels of education and objectives present in four key plans guiding Latin American Education.

Level of Education and Objectives	EFA (2000)	MDGs (2000)	Santiago Summit (1998)	PRELAC (2002)
Primary Education				
Length	Country defined	4 years	Country defined	Country defined
Target Year	2015	2015	2010	2015
Intended Coverage	100%	100%	100%	100%
Free	Yes	Not stated	Not stated	Yes
Quality	Yes	Not stated	Yes	Yes
Gender Parity	Yes, by 2005	Yes, by 2005	Not stated	Yes, by 2005
Secondary Education				
Target Year	2015	2015	2010	2015
Coverage	N/C	N/C	75%	75%
Quality	Yes	N/C	Yes	N/C
Gender Parity	Yes, by 2005	Yes, by 2005	Not stated	Yes, by 2005
Adult Education				
Liberacy	Yes	Not stated	Not stated	Yes
Lifelong Learning	Yes	Not stated	Yes	Yes
Target Year	2015	Not stated	Not stated	2015
Coverage	Cut by half levels of 2000	Not stated	Not stated	Cut by half levels of 2000

Development Goals (MDGs) proposing the modest duration of four years. Considering the special situation of Latin America, the Santiago Summit also identified objectives for secondary education and set the target of 75 percent coverage by the year 2010. The MDGs, which have attained visibility in recent years, do not argue in favor of free schooling nor do they refer to an education of good quality. The Regional Education Project for Latin America and the Caribbean (PRELAC), which covers 15 years of action, from 2002-2017, continues to pursue the objectives set at the Second Summit of the Americas but also endorses the EFA goals set in Dakar. It remains unclear what resolution will be taken by the Latin American countries as the MDGs and PRELAC do not always agree.

Gender and Education

According to official education statistics, female enrollment in Latin America is higher than male enrollment (although typically by a few percentage points) in 11 of 20 countries at the secondary school level, and in 12 of these countries at the tertiary education level (UNESCO, 2004). There continues, however, sizable clustering of men in engineering and technology fields and of women in the social sciences and education (Subirats, 1998), which reflects the different representations of women and men in society and their role in it.

Measures of human development that assess economic and social attainment indicate that women stand well below men. The Gender Development Index (GDI) developed by UNDP shows that in 2005 only 27 countries had a gap of less than 10 percent between men and women. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which assesses the level of political and economic power held by women, indicates that only one country (Norway) had a gap smaller than 10 percent between men and women, and that only 14 countries had a gap of less than 20 percent between them (UNDP, 2005). Furthermore, abundant evidence indicates that

class, gender, and ethnicity combine to create substantial conditions of marginality. Women not only face considerable conditions of subordination in society but poor, indigenous, and Afro-descendent women encounter even greater marginalization. Such is indeed the case in Latin America.

Since governments equate sex (numerical representation of women and men) with gender, most Latin American governments wrongly assume that the region does not face a gender problem. Gender not seen as priority in educational plans other than to improve access in cases where serious disparities exist, as revealed by studies conducted in Costa Rica (Umayá, 2006) and Peru (Muñoz, 2006). Some exceptions exist; a notable example is Brazil's recent efforts to modify the curriculum and improve the design of textbooks, which now contain wording that reflects an accurate and expanded definition of gender in education (Vianna and Unbehaum, 2006). The translation of such principles into daily practices, however, will depend on the training and support that school administrators and teachers receive on gender issues.

In the field of gender studies, a tension exists between gender as equality and gender as difference, with proponents of the former seeking total equality between women and men, and those of the latter taking into account the special needs of women (Phillips, 1998). Fraser (1998) maintains that the attention to gender requires two aspects: redistribution, or the modification of access to material goods (the economic dimension), and recognition, or the addressing of symbolic and cultural injustices manifested in stereotyped representations of women (the cultural dimension). These dimensions are considered to a minimal degree in public policy in education. Gender appears often cursorily in the context of equality of opportunity, a response comprised of empty slogans since specific measures do not follow, or responses that seek ways to redefine gender so that it becomes applied only to women in vulnerable groups, such as rural and indigenous

girls, rather than seeing gender as a phenomenon of social differentiation and arbitrary hierarchy that permeates society.

Global policies such as EFA and the MDGs promote the equality of women and men in education. Such policies promote access and to some extent permanence and completion—but only in basic education, not at higher levels. Neither of those two policies do not touch issues of content or the socialization experience in schools; in other words, they leave out the explicit and the hidden curriculum and assume schools as neutral institutions. Gender issues do not appear in regional educational policies in Latin America. Governments endorse EFA objectives and the MDGs in terms of access. But, like most other governments and international development agencies, Latin American governments do not acknowledge the impacts of the content and experience of schooling in shaping notions of femininity and masculinity. Therefore, the current reproductive tendencies of schools as well as the potential of formal education to incorporate changes in the socialization and conception of gender are ignored.

There is consensus among policy makers that it is crucial to work on issues of quality and equity (Reimers, 2000, UNESCO, 2005, OREALC/UNESCO-CEPAL, 2005). However, rarely do discussions of these issues and the subsequent actions proposed to address them includes gender. This is unpacked below.

Educational Quality

There are five main aspects to quality: its nominal definitions, its definitions in fact, its link to democracy, its link to the curriculum in general, and the various efforts in effect to increase quality in school systems.

Nominal Definitions

Several attributes are attached to the definition and measurement of quality. UNESCO's definition of quality refers to cognitive, creative,

and emotional development. The EFA meeting at Dakar underscored the existence of quality in four different moments: quality of students (healthy and motivated), quality of the process (teachers with pedagogical competencies), quality of the curriculum (relevant content), and quality of the system (characterized by good governance and equity in the distribution of resources (UNESCO, 2005).

UNESCO states that quality could be measured through several indicators: the student/teacher ratio, the percentage of trained teachers, the level of educational expenditures, and student performance. In the end, it selects an indicator quantifiable with some facility: the arrival of the student to the fifth year of basic schooling, which UNESCO terms "survival rate" (UNESCO, 2004, pp. 284-285). In my view, this definition of quality amounts also to student performance.

The EFA Global Monitoring Report recently issued a document centering on quality (UNESCO, 2005). This document offers a conceptual scheme to measure educational quality, one that, in considering the presence of various inputs and the final outcomes, which gives priority to literacy, numeracy, and life skills (p. 36). Elements that might contribute to a reconfiguration of gender do not appear in the scheme or in the discussion around it. The report's extensive discussion of educational quality offers nothing on the question of gender and citizenship. Plainly, quality is dissociated from transforming crucial relations in society.

An important document by institutions of the UN family (OREALC/UNESCO-CEPAL, 2005) defines educational quality as having proficiency in the skills and knowledge that are culturally relevant. The notion of cultural relevance has long been treated in global meetings addressing gender issues; in the end, it has been declared that culture cannot be invoked to maintain gender injustices. The U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes it explicit that human rights apply to all countries. The application of this principle to women is either unknown or

ignored by these important agencies. The OREALC/UNESCO-CEPAL document also recognizes the importance not only of access but also the need “to develop in children, youth and adults attitudes of solidarity and responsibility toward others” (p. 26). It remains unclear whether solidarity here extends to gender solidarity.

De-Facto Definitions

In practice, quality is narrowly defined: it is measured by standardized tests either nationally constructed or as part of international comparison efforts. Through such testing, school knowledge is reduced to two subjects: math and reading. Important as they are, these disciplines crowd out other subjects that have to do with the development of a full human being. Student performance is being increasingly used as a tool for school accountability, yet testing looks at the process of student performance only at the end, not at the beginning (the set of inputs) or in the middle (the internal and ongoing school processes).

Testing results indicate that Latin American students do quite poorly in international comparisons. The two Latin American countries that participated in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) of 1995 did very poorly, with Mexico refusing to make its scores public and Colombia finishing next to last in 8th grade mathematics of the 41 countries that participated (Puryear and Alvarez, 2001). In the TIMSS of 1999, Chile participated along with 37 other countries and found that only 15 percent of its students reached the international median benchmark in math (Lloyd, 2005, citing Mullis et al., 2000). Participating in the PISA testing in 2000, Brazil and Mexico performed well below the OECD average (Lloyd, 2005). In general, these international testing exercises indicate that developing countries perform considerably poorer than industrialized nations.

In terms of inputs, Latin America invested at all levels of public education in 1997-98 an annual average of \$137 per capita spending

(OREALC/UNESCO-CEPAL, 2005, p. 18) while the average for industrialized countries is at least 10 times higher. Poorly paid teachers often leave the school system or manage to have two or three jobs to survive economically. In terms of processes, many public schools operate on multiple shifts of about four hours a day; and in rural areas, these school days are even shorter. Few countries provide free textbooks and possess libraries or labs to augment the learning time. With these tremendous differences in financial expenditures in education and the limited time for learning that characterizes many developing countries, one can wonder about the appropriateness of the international comparisons of student performance.

Quality and Democracy

In public policy documents, quality education is seldom defined as education that moves students toward a better and more just society. Therefore, current school content is not questioned and transformed so that it becomes gender-sensitive and intercultural and promotes an inclusive citizenship. The delivery of education inequitable not only by class and ethnicity but also by gender (manifested in time given to girls, expectations toward them, gender stereotypes in textbooks, and various aspects of the hidden curriculum (Kabeer, 2005).

If education is to foster the common good and if women are a crucial set of change agents, then one needs to consider adult education, particularly literacy. The importance of adults is recognized in EFA and regional goals. It is not acknowledged in the MDGs, as literacy appears only as an indicator of empowerment and is limited to those 15-24 years of age, thus missing an important age segment crucial to the intergenerational transition. In 2002, UNDP devoted its *World Development Report* to the question of democracy. The issue considered the connection between democracy and gender only in the case of women affected by internal conflict (UNDP, 2002).

Feminist contributions on democracy and citizenship assert that democracy is gendered because the full citizen tends to be a man, since he enjoys the time and the domestic order necessary to act in the public sphere (Pateman, 1998; Preece, 2002). If schools do not talk about this, it can hardly be expected that they will develop open and transformative minds in the students and subsequently in the adult citizens. These feminist theoretical contributions do not seem to have reached many government officials and staff in international development agencies.

Curriculum Issues

In general, the curricula in Latin America for its primary and secondary schools are rich and well designed. The prescriptions tend to cover many subjects and, judging from the program of studies students have, numerous courses are held every day. Yet, with a large number of poorly trained teachers only part of the curriculum is covered during the academic year. Additional factors at work are the very heterogeneous classes teachers face and the still brief academic day and year in several countries. Especially in rural areas, there is considerable absenteeism by teachers and students; while the officially set number of hours per school year in Peru is 1,000, in rural areas students receive about 200 hours during their academic year. In many countries in Latin American region, schooling has been expanded by creating multiple shifts in the same schools. It is common for students in urban areas to attend public school in shifts of four hours a day, which usually amount to about three hours of actual time on task.

Few comparative studies of the curriculum exist for Latin America. A recent research, comparing four countries (Peru, Colombia, Chile, and Argentina), found that key problems at the implementation stage are linked to insufficient teacher training and the inability to adjust the curriculum to local conditions

(Ferrer, 2004). Typically, only part of the curriculum is covered and the opportunity to learn in the classroom is limited in public schools. Evaluations of student performance indicate that students on average answer 50 percent of the items correctly and that these results are used not to improve classroom teaching but to produce school and political accountability (Ferrer, 2004).

An extensive body of empirical findings—coming from education, demography, and health—indicate that education is indirectly but steadily linked to the empowerment of women, as it results in better mothers, less child and family illness, better nutrition, better maternal survival and well-being, better economic decision-making, less physical violence in the home, and greater capacity to deal with outside world. But education as currently provided has also negative aspects, one of them being that it “does not equip women to question the world around them and the subordinate status assigned to them” (Kabeer, 2005, p. 17). From a gender perspective, the curricula present some blind spots regarding gender, particularly citizenship and sexual education. Most textbooks in the region have undergone revision, primarily to modify the language and make it more gender inclusive. Books are of very diverse quality; the proper treatment of gender (as well as of ethnic and minority issues) depends on the book authors, as often gender-focused textbook boards do not exist. Recent examination of textbooks indicates that they still convey sexual stereotypes, particularly among reading books for early learners (Subirats, 1998; Muñoz, 2005; Graña, 2005).

Following global agreements, educational policy makers have attempted to place gender as a cross-cutting theme in the curriculum. This has been largely ineffectual because lack of gender training for government officials and educators has not produced a cohort of people who are knowledgeable of gender and thus able to visualize its dimensions when attempting to integrate the curriculum.

Interventions to Improve Quality

Two significant measures are being tried at present to improve educational quality, with the expectation that they will affect indirectly but effectively the functioning of schools and thus student performance: decentralization and privatization. While the exact mechanisms by which improvement occurs has not been theorized, the assumption is that the closeness of the stakeholders (or users) to the school will bring greater monitoring and identification with the school. Privatization assumes that the market works much better than the state. Decentralization assumes that human and financial resources will be better spent at local levels. But the empirical evidence indicates that if sufficient resources are not assigned to local areas, then quality will go down. And decentralization will serve, as many fear, to privatize schooling. Some link testing to decentralization in a negative way, arguing that national testing – as a means to impose some degree of uniformity (accountability) – in fact removes local authority from the curriculum and places it in the hands of a national, and sometimes supranational, testing bureaucracy.

Quality can be improved by measures that affect *all* students or by measures that tend to help the *most disadvantaged* by giving them special forms of assistance. This brings us to the notion of equity.

There seems to be lack of agreement as to the difference between quality and equity. While quality of course relates to some indicator of reasonable outcomes, the inclusion of inputs and process indicators creates some overlapping between these two terms. I noted earlier that UNESCO is now proposing the use of “survival rate” to measure quality (UNESCO, 2005). But the same document, when discussing equality of education, also refers to survival rate as the key indicator (pp. 284–295). Equity according to OREALC/UNESCO-CEPAL (2005) addresses situations of poverty. It does acknowledge that “other sources of inequality remain such as so-

cial class, gender, ethnicity, and territorial location” (p. 26), yet it does not elaborate.

In a study that examines a wide range of interventions to increase quality in Latin America, Anderson (2005) centers on student performance in language and math, and considers the provision of food, financial aid, transportation, and free uniforms as interventions to increase quality. Are not these interventions also a part of equity efforts? At what point do equity and quality merge?

Educational Quality from a Feminist Perspective

From this perspective, educational quality is an encompassing concept, requiring a definition that goes beyond cognitive performance and comprising values and practices that transform the notions of gender in society. Quality, then, would cover four components: (1) equal teacher treatment by girls and boys in the classroom, so that teacher expectations and practices consider each student as deserving of good teaching; (2) curriculum content that transcends the traditional disciplines and includes messages that can change the mentalities of new generations in favor of a gender identity less starkly polarized between masculinity and femininity; (3) provision of knowledge that affects the lives of female and male students, such as sex education, discussion of the widespread phenomenon of domestic violence, and the exercise of an autonomous citizenship–delinked, in the case of women, from maternity and marriage; (4) school practices that promote the development of personalities with assertiveness, self-esteem, and respect for democratic behaviors in school and society. It is crucial to incorporate these elements in the definition of quality; otherwise, the space to address content and practice is missed.

Concluding Thoughts

Despite the demonstrated contributions of women to social well-being and to economic growth and notwithstanding the large number

of conventions and international agreements highlighting the importance that is to be attached to the education of women, schools are not used sufficiently as terrains to modify gender relations. While women are gaining increasing participation in school, the curriculum and the experience of the schools still remain far from creating ways to promote agency, self-esteem, and confidence in women.

Education is a sector with few supporters and many summer soldiers. It is a sector with moments of great discourse and prolonged periods of neglect. The challenge of globalization forces many governments to argue about economic competitiveness instead of social justice and equity.

In a region such as Latin America, the battle for increased education is not merely at the basic education level, but increasingly at the secondary and tertiary level. Definitions of quality need to be amplified to capture the needs and situations of older students. Further, the concept of quality needs to be expanded to include personal gains along lines that go

beyond the customary reading and math. Quality in poor countries, if measured as test performance, ends up giving more financial resources to psychometricians than to the improvement of teaching. It will be crucial to frame education so that content of curricula, textbook content, and teacher training in gender dimensions are seen as central to the process of educational reform, for they constitute more direct interventions that decentralization and privatization are.

An important contribution remains to be made along conceptual lines. Developing more complete and socially inclusive definitions of educational quality is crucial. Quality for whom? For what purpose? How assessed? The measure of quality should not center merely on outcomes but also reflect on the inputs and processes that lead to these outcomes. The assessment of quality should go beyond quantitative indicators derived from standardized testing to explore more qualitative expressions of democratic processes, including the observation of less gendered practices in school and society.

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