

11-7-1997

# Analysis: Rethinking Education In Latin America

Guest Author

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

---

## Recommended Citation

Guest Author. "Analysis: Rethinking Education In Latin America." (1997). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/12430>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## **Analysis: Rethinking Education In Latin America**

*by Guest*

*Category/Department: Region*

*Published: 1997-11-07*

[The following article by Lucien O. Chauvin is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It first appeared in the October 16, 1997, edition of the weekly publication Latinamerica Press.]

Not an election goes by in Latin America without candidates promising to reform their country's educational system, offering solutions to better prepare students for the future. Despite decades of promises, education experts and politicians agree that education in the region except in Costa Rica and Cuba is in serious need of improvement.

In Argentina, where President Carlos Menem's Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) lost control of Congress in the Oct. 26 elections, the president promised to increase the education budget, including a pay raise for teachers (see NotiSur, 10/31/97). Teachers, who went on strike earlier this year and have taken turns on month-long hunger strikes since April, said the president's promise was a step in the right direction, but they feared it was only an election-year ploy. "We doubt the government's commitment to respond to teachers' demands," said Marta Maffei, head of the Confederacion de Trabajadores de la Educacion de la Republica Argentina (CTERA).

Although teachers' salaries in most Latin American countries have dropped in real terms compared to the 1980s, the decline in Argentina has been the most pronounced. Argentine teachers receive roughly 45% of their 1980 salary rate, according to UNESCO. Teachers want the education budget to increase from 3% of GDP to 6%, and they demand a 50% raise. The government has offered to increase the budget by 20% over the next three years. Educators currently receive between US\$200 and US\$300 per month in Argentina, where despite a drop in inflation to only 1% annually, prices are on par with the US and Europe.

The same is true in Peru, where teachers earn roughly US\$200 monthly, forcing many to take second jobs to make ends meet. "At times it is difficult to get teachers to commit to extracurricular programs because they need to leave right away for other jobs," said Never Tuesta, director of a bilingual education program in the Peruvian Amazon. "Most of our teachers work as taxi drivers or street vendors after school."

In Brazil, where Congress has reformed the Constitution to allow President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to run for re-election in 1998, the president has announced a US\$500 million project to keep kids in school. "I had announced that the money from privatization [of state-owned companies] would be used to pay the foreign debt, but I decided to make an exception to guarantee that all our children have the right to an education," Cardoso said on Sept. 25.

## *Experts debate educational priorities*

Regional leaders, however, say the problem with education in Latin America is not the amount of money, but how governments spend it. "The state does not understand that education is an investment," said Adrian Meza, rector of the Universidad Popular de Nicaragua. "The government sees it only as an expenditure." Enrique Iglesias, the Uruguayan president of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), says that during the past three decades most Latin American countries have dedicated resources to university rather than primary education. "In Latin America we made the mistake of concentrating our efforts on the universities," Iglesias said. "We strengthened the apex without paying attention to the base."

Iglesias, who is running for a third term as head of the IDB, has made education one of the bank's priorities. The IDB recently loaned Panama US\$58.1 million to improve primary education, with a goal of increasing the number of children who complete sixth grade from 78% to 90%.

Cesar Gaviria, secretary general of the Organization of American States and former Colombian president (1990-1994), says primary education is central to the region's development. The organization is pushing educational reform as a key to strengthening democracy. "All the studies show that investment in primary education offers a high rate of return," Gaviria said. "You can't expect sustained growth or prepare people to live in the globalized world if most can barely read and write. It is important to invest in universities, but higher education cannot come at the expense of primary education."

Latin American presidents appear to be picking up on the idea, proposing reforms for primary schools while cutting back or restructuring public higher education. Universities throughout the Americas are facing budget cuts, and new technocrat rectors are being appointed to turn the universities into money-making institutions promoting technical careers rather than liberal arts. Jorge Trelles, a Peruvian congressman and former education minister, predicted that, by the year 2010, departments such as anthropology, sociology and other "nontechnical" studies will disappear from Peru's public universities.

The Rev. Felipe MacGregor, former rector of Peru's Pontificia Universidad Catolica, said that idea is shortsighted. "I would ask Congressman Trelles to look beyond Peru, where he will see that universities are creating and strengthening philosophy and sociology departments," MacGregor said. "Students need to learn how to think logically before they can analyze numbers. Educators recognize this." Privatization reaches higher education One major trend in the region is toward private higher education. In the past few years, hundreds of private universities have opened in the region, sparking intense debate among educators. Peruvian education expert Carlos Callegari sees nothing wrong with private higher education. "Ten years ago, no one was thinking about setting up a university because there were no resources available for that kind of project," Callegari said. "Today in Peru, a private university can be a profitable enterprise," One example is Peru's new Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola, owned by former finance minister Carlos Bolona and former presidential candidate Raul Diez-Canseco.

Callegari said business leaders are interested in quality at a low cost, which should be the central idea behind education. "If you can offer students a good education that prepares them for today's market, then you should do it," he said. Other educators, however, worry about the quality of education at what they call "fast-food universities." Javier Soto Nadal, rector of Peru's Universidad Nacional de Ingenieria and former president of the Asamblea Nacional de Rectores, says the quantity of universities puts quality education at risk. "There are not enough professors, books, or laboratories at the national level to offer a minimum of excellence in higher education," Solo Nadal said. He wants the government to put a 10-year cap on new universities, a suggestion that has fallen on deaf ears as more than a dozen new schools have opened in Peru in the past two years.

A lone voice in the regional higher education debate comes from Cuba, where the state continues to play a major role in educating young people. Despite the country's economic difficulties Cuba's GDP dropped by 30% between 1989 and 1993 and is only now beginning to show signs of modest recovery the government stresses its dedication to education, one of the pillars of Fidel Castro's revolution. Cuba has Latin America's lowest illiteracy rate. Universidad de Havana rector Juan Vela Valdez says the trend to restrict higher education to a small elite able to afford private schools does not bode well for Latin America's future. "Governments are leaving higher education in the hands of the private sector, which is only concerned about making money," Vela said. "Profit and education should not be seen as going hand in hand."

But Jorge Ferradas, an education expert contracted by the Peruvian government to help redesign the country's primary education, says anyone should be allowed to open a private university. The school's success or failure, he says, will depend on whether students are satisfied with the education they receive. "If students want to pay a lot for a mediocre education, they should be allowed to do so," said Ferradas. "They'll realize their mistake when they graduate and find they are unprepared for the job market."

Ferradas' work with the Peruvian Education Ministry is aimed at educating students from first grade through high school in a comprehensive program that will prepare them for work or college. "The purpose of primary education is to teach children that learning is a process that will continue throughout their lives, whether or not they go on to university," Ferradas said. "This means learning how to live in civil society, to respect themselves and others." Future of democracy is education Education for the future, according to Ferradas and other educators, includes awareness of the environment, culture, and basic human rights.

In countries like Peru, which has more than 50 indigenous groups, it also means finding a way to implement bilingual and multicultural learning. These ideas were also addressed at the August summit of the Rio Group, an organization linking most of the region's governments. The central theme of the meeting, held in Asuncion, Paraguay, was "education for democracy." "Education cannot be limited to transmitting knowledge, but must contribute to forming the individual's conduct, which is indispensable if our democracies are to survive," said Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera.

At the Seventh Ibero-American Conference on Education, held in Venezuela in late September, Caldera said that education is the only way to combat "the scourge of unemployment, which breeds

misery, violence and backwardness." Statistics from the IDB and the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) support Caldera's claim. According to the commission, 210 million Latin Americans of a total population of 450 million live in poverty, and despite improved macroeconomic statistics, the gap between rich and poor continues to grow.

The UN organization says education, particularly at the primary level, is key to closing this gap. Latin American teachers agree, but say the neoliberal economic policies of most countries, which reduce the state's role in the economy, hinder improvement. In the 1980s, spending on education in Latin America fell from US\$164 per student to US\$118, and the downward trend continues. Almost 40% of children in Latin America repeat first grade and nearly half only finish primary school.

Latin American education experts say that the region risks losing a generation of children even as it stands at the threshold of the new millennium, which is already being labeled the "knowledge century." "Education faces extraordinary challenges," said Elba Esther Gordillo, a Mexican leader of the Confederation of American Educators, an organization of teachers from 24 Latin America and Caribbean countries. "To find a way to combine advances in science and technology while offering children and young adults the conditions necessary to successfully meet the unknown challenges of the globalized world."

-- End --