

Some notes on the struggle of ecuadorean teachers against standarized evaluation

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Background

Neoliberalism has created its own discourse in the social area. In the case of education, its ideology is reflected in a series of ways throughout the region, a sort of “Educational Washington Consensus”, which can be summarized as follows: the educational quality crisis is one of “efficiency, efficacy and productivity”. If one adds to that a “managerial crisis”, then we face “a State that is incapable of providing quality education” because the “mass movement to make education universal caused the downfall of its quality.” The solution lies in “competition” but for that decentralization and privatization to happen, people should be willing to “invest in the education of their children”.

This speech has been heard over and over again during the last few decades because of the projects by International Financial Institutions, especially the World Bank and the Inter American Development Bank. They have replaced specialized international bodies such as UNESCO in the fields of educational (and social) orientation. Bankers transformed into teachers.

However, in the case of Ecuador, the analysis of the educational projects; as well as the evaluating documents by the IADB and the WB, show that the projects have not achieved the efficiency that was promised, much less the quality.

In the integral audit of the Ecuadorian External Debt, three educational areas and a technological one were analyzed. The educational areas or credits were BID 834/SF-EC, subscribed in 1990 for project PROMECEB; BID 1142/OC-EC subscribed in 1998 for the “Redes Amigas” Program; and credit BM 3425/S-EC of 1992, for EB/Prodec. Those three are the largest, the most resource-intensive and the most powerful participants in the destruction of the national educational system, and they are also the results of an illegitimate debt.¹

In these projects, “...whose final purpose was to create decentralized educational structures in all things pedagogical, managerial and financial; the neoliberal policy is crystal clear. By separating the central ministries from the educational institutions of a homogeneous and/or geographical zone, the control is given to the community and parents,

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1 ISCH L. Edgar (2008). WB and IADB: a debt to impose neoliberal politics in education. Comisión para la Auditoría Integral de Crédito Público –CAIC-. Quito.

which can be interpreted as a strategy to transfer educational management to private actors instead of the State.”²

The intent of favoring the private sector is also noticeable in the hiring of consultants and NGOs to do the works of teacher training, private printing presses, and construction labor. Those tasks used to be in the hands of the Ministry of Education, which is now weaker due to this ill-oriented process.

The motivation behind is clearly not considering the reality of the country and the projects are nothing but a series of impositions. Some, of an economic nature, are similar to the credits (loans?) of old times. But others disregard the national legislation, and thus apply a separate set of rules from those of the existing educational system. Therefore, changes in the legal system are promoted and labor conditions are twisted outside of the Law. The orientation that is followed is foreign to consultation processes and national agreements.

Because of all of that and much more, the popular and academic sectors — of which the Union of National Educators (UNE) stands out— demanded an audit. UNE was right since even the project reports themselves acknowledged that the substantial changes, like the creation of school networks, were outside of the current law.

The responsibility of the IADB and the WB is somewhat accepted in their own reports when they speak of the inefficiency of the loan (PROMECEB), the reduced progress (Redes Amigas) and even of having ended and closed the projects without the compulsory assessment (EB/PRODEC). The figures of the basic education learning curve, where the loans were directed, were of little or no use to the objectives that adorned the signing of the external debt components³.

Curiously enough, if they had not failed or avoided in complying with their own evaluations, they would have proven that the loans were unnecessary. Just as unnecessary as tying the country to the conditions set by a multilateral bank, where the standardized evaluation proposal was born.

In 1992, the World Bank EB/PRODEC Project carried out the first tests under the name of “APRENDO” (“I learn”) to assess the understanding of math and language amongst the students. Although some consideration was given to the life conditions, the information was buried deeply and the “grades” were only used to promote another campaign against the reputation of the public education system.

Nothing good came out of those tests because after the results were made public, no other action was taken to promote Ecuadorian education. On the contrary, neoliberalism weakened the educational system more and more



by its budgetary reductions, the random fragmentation of the system and by placing all the responsibility of the whole system in the shoulders of teachers.

Not long ago, while speaking of the results of the “SER” tests, the Ministry of Education pointed out that the results showed that no progress had been made in twelve years. What was not mentioned was that during that time, the Ministry was headed by the same minister than in the two previous administrations (Raul Vallejo C). So for more than 5 years, he worked directly with the IADB and the WB neoliberal projects.

Teachers' evaluation and the current Ecuadorian government

When Rafael Correa first took office, he was widely supported since he had defended causes that had been popular for 30 years. In the beginning, while still trying to comply with his electoral promises, he significantly increased the social budget and he eliminated the “voluntary” enrollment fee of 25 dollars that had kept more than 300 thousand children out of school. He also offered school breakfasts and the delivery of uniforms in rural areas. The wages of teachers were increased, even if humbly, and there were talks of creating 12,000 new official teaching positions (no new posts had been created since 1998).

But later on, the government weakened its position, started showing signs of shifting to the right; and even violated articles of the Constitution approved in 2008. Furthermore, in spite of the existing funds, no efficient management was achieved, none of the 12,000 new positions were ever created, the contract-based system still remained, no substantial infrastructure improvements were made (beyond four schools “of the millennium” with new technology) but most importantly; no national educational proposal was presented that could in the very least justify the pompous and widely-used word of “revolution”.

The government of Rafael Correa is adding up more affronts against the popular sectors which for more than

² ISCH L. Edgar (2008). BM y BID: deuda para imponer la política neoliberal en educación. Comisión para la Auditoría Integral de Crédito Público -CAIC-. Quito. ³ PALADINES, Carlos (2002). *Íbid.* Pág 11.

4. ISCH L. Edgar (2008). *Ibid.*

thirty years defended the causes that made him win the presidency.

His liberal democracy regards all subjects as citizens and therefore, in a factitious way, as equals in society. But he is ignoring those who are the natural allies of the change process; those who are now questioning the role of Correa himself, as he has abandoned his initial positions.

Under this context and thorough a clever and intense propaganda, the government is acting in an authoritarian way, and has attacked indigenous populations, teachers, public workers, professors, college students, ecologists and communities who are defending their water resources from the abuse of the miners.

Was the problem with the teachers caused by UNE? The facts prove that is incorrect. On the one hand, UNE had not gone on strike since 2003, so the people who claim it is an annual event are wrong. Same with those who say it happens every time elections are approaching, since that was not the case either. UNE showed its support towards the government and the President several times, without “even asking a position as a janitor” in return. The support was given with the hope of one day seeing important proposals become a reality.

That was the situation when the Second Public Education Congress took place; which was organized by the Faculties of Philosophy, FEUE, FESE, the parents and many other actors who wanted to create a real educational plan. Clearly, the government had not been able to do so, but they loved using fancy words like “quality” or “warmth”; or using false phrases as the “literate country”. They even presented a fake award (SER 2008) to some schools only to backtrack later and say that they had only counted with provisional data. As a matter of fact, the definite results were not released until December 2009, but the key methodological elements remained hidden.

In 2008, UNE held its National Congress in the City of Loja and more than five thousand teachers welcomed President Correa, the first one in the guest list for such an important event. They gave him an integral educational proposal called “Education for Emancipation”. Obviously, while he was there, he neither insulted the leaders nor did he call them “the mafia”. He paid attention to the proposal and listened to the round of applause with which the teachers supported it. He also heard the booing directed to the Ministry of Education for not having delivered the 12 thousand positions promised in the beginning of the administration (up until November 2008, only 3,000 permanent positions had been granted, while 6 thousand teachers held a temporary job in accordance to neoliberalistic flexible labor practices).

Sometime later, UNE announced its position regarding how the new teaching positions and school authorities should be designated, which was a merit-based approach after the strikes. But the government had already closed its ears and started attacking the union. They did not accept

to debate the General Law on Education, which forced UNE to present the National Assembly with their first bill of law supported by the left-wing block (the Popular Democratic Movement and Pachakitik).

The government distorted the proposals, the leaders were disqualified and Rafael Correa himself called for the creation of a new UNE. In spite of having full media support, his attempt failed and it was a political defeat which instead of harming UNE, reinforced the teachers support for it. The decision was made to keep UNE, the most numerous union and the one with the best internal democratic mechanisms.

The conflict of the teachers’ assessment emerged under such circumstances. It was a process which violated the recently voted Constitution of Ecuador, since it was done without the existence of the respective autonomous body and with only a partial technical compliance. It was a standardized evaluation applied in a country of an ample diversity, based on a True/False or multiple choice format and of a very punitive nature. The only result that came out of it was the pretention of blaming the teachers for the educational crises.

The intention has been to hide —and forgive us for repeating ourselves— that the educational crisis is the fault of neoliberal education and of the IADB and the World Bank external debt projects; and of the governments that never accepted and of the UNE criteria. If the UNE proposals had been heard and applied; there would have been some sense in the accusations against the union. But it has all been due to the decisions of the anti-popular governments, something that does not happen with any other professional association.

Quite the opposite! Thanks to the social struggle teachers have fought in the defense of public education, it has not been totally destructed and the neoliberal recipe has not been fully applied, as was the intention, in the insisted “municipalization”, the vouchers, the “freedom” of the educational market and the greater flexibility of teachers.

Nobody in the country spoke against the evaluation nor did the many critical voices —including former ministers and UNE. It was a simple and total rejection against its nature and so they demanded an integral evaluation of the educational system not merely based on an exam. They asked for an assessment that would not only seek a grade, but that would analyze the causes, with an integral view on training, and that would seek corrective actions. That is why the majority of the teachers resisted in spite of the threats and pressures and even when facing the police forces.

The SER evaluation when applied to students

The Minister, with its own neoliberal perspective, thinks standardized evaluation is appropriate. But a government that was democratic in its origin should correct the cour-

se of action while still timely. Unfortunately, a neoliberal approach is now “fashionable”.

Let us go back in time. In June 2008, the tests were applied to the students and even though no details were given regarding how the people in charge were hired or what methodology was followed, the test drafts were published on the website of the Ministry of Education. An educational researcher and former director of the National Educational Planning Office, José Brito Albuja, pointed out in a study that the tests had more than 300 mistakes, many of them quite serious, since there were more than one right answer or no correct answer at all in the multiple choice section.

Allegedly, the new tests have corrected the mistakes, but they are kept secret. Some awards for the “best educational institutions 2009” were presented by “educational unit” (integrated preschool, elementary and secondary or junior high school — almost non-existing in the public sector) which were not even considered in the initial methodology. By the way, they “forgot” to award a “winning” high school. Anyway, their methodology remains a secret.

After the awards and because of the criticism they got from different sectors, they accepted that they only had “provisional” data, but that did not stop the Ministry from attacking the public education system. It was not until November 2009 when the final results were obtained, fact that only cast more doubt over their veracity. Up until the present time, no measure has been taken stemming from the evaluation and almost nothing has been discussed from the results. For instance, as far as the school infrastructure goes, the schools got a grade of 3.3 over 10⁴.

Teacher assessment

When finally the 12 thousand full-time positions were announced, the discussion centered around how to assess teachers. The jobs were meant for the people who had a precarious contract (which is forbidden by the New Political Constitution).

As unbelievable as it sounds, 97% of the people who took the reasoning test did not pass it. “According to the logical reasoning evaluations, the applicants obtained an average of 44/100 and 55/100 for the subjects they teach, two relatively low grades” according to Jaime Cardona, the Colombian civil engineer who has a Master Degree in Public Administration and who is in charge of the education standardization process of the Ministry⁵.

But instead of questioning whether there was something wrong with the test —because if we accept the opposite was true, it would mean that most of the adult Ecuadorian popu-

lation have rates below what is considered normal—the Ministry took advantage of the situation to attack the teachers, the universities and treated the designations in a suspicious way. What would a teacher do if 97% of his students did not pass a test? Would s/he not review it, rewrite it, validate it and apply it again?

Previously, in November 2008, a pilot teacher assessment was done with volunteers (who were offered a monetary gratification). Once again, the terms in which the people in charge of the assessment were selected remains unknown; as was the political context in which the results would be used.

Aside from the pedagogical and core-subject tests, an assessment of the school directives and parents was included. But the process had some uncorrected failures, as the following testimony shows⁶:

“The teachers who took the voluntary test last November complained about how little time they were given to prepare themselves for yesterday...The teachers were expecting to get good grades in this stage of the evaluation, because they say they did poorly the first time...Inexplicably, their grades were low, in spite of the fact that their self-assessment and the assessment of parents, students and directors were satisfactory; or there were notes on tests they never took...Samuel Riquero, professor of the 7th grade at the Enrique Vallejo School, pointed out that he got 39 points, even though his self-assessment grade was much higher, just like the case of his fellow workers and their principal...The leaders of the National Union of Educators (UNE) have denounced that many of the tests that were taken in November were lost by the Ministry of Education”.

There were multiple denounces, but the media ignored them and the Ministry discredit them. In spite of it all, and without any reports on any change or adjustment, teachers were required to take the generalized test under threats and claims that the teacher who failed it would be laid off. The President himself announced on national TV that the positions would be occupied by “high school students with short classes.”

What sort of evaluation has been proposed by the Ministry of Education?

There are several adjectives that describe the nature of the governmental evaluation. For instance:

UNCONSTITUTIONAL: Article 99 of the Constitution states that there should be an autonomous organization for evaluating the educational system. But since such entity does not exist, the Ministry (which is not autonomous) is in charge of the process.

ILLEGAL: As acknowledge by the Minister when he sent the amendments to the Law to fire the teachers, after having applied the process and having computed the results.

⁴ “Education got 3,3 over 10 in infrastructures and equipment”. *Expreso Journal*, February 11, 2009. Guayaquil, Ecuador.

⁵ “ ‘Elegible’ Teachers with notes in red in their evaluations, article by the *El Universo Journal*, June 7, 2010.

DISCRIMINATORY: It is conceived with only one type of professional in mind: one who works for the State. Nothing is said about teachers who work at a private school, as though they did not belong to the educational system. Wouldn't it be good if the ministers and the representatives took the test?

DECEITFUL: A test cannot measure the quality of the whole education, neither can it measure the quality of teachers (James Popham from the University of California asks: "How much can teachers know when they have survived without even the basic conditions?")

ETHNOCENTRIC: It does not take into account the cultural or geographical differences. It is irresponsible to evaluate something while ignoring its reality and its applicable working conditions.

EFFICIENCY-OBSSESSED: Neoliberals see everything through the eyes of economic efficiency. For them, it is cheaper to train 30% instead of all the teachers. The idea is to train only those who fail, and forget about the rest.

PUNITIVE: It was meant as a tool to lay off people, not to educate them. It is a reward or punishment approach.

STIGMATIZING: If the students learn about the "level label" that is given to their teachers, their relationship is damaged. It affects the authority and the rights of the teachers.

EXPENSIVE: Not only from the economic standpoint, but also in terms of the classroom hours lost.

PRIVATIZING: It helps to destroy the trust in public schools and the social value of professors.

PARTIAL: Teachers are judged separately from the whole educational system.

QUANTITATIVE: It only measures, but it does not evaluate. It does not evaluate the performance of such a difficult activity as teaching.

The proposal caused immediate reactions and conflicts. The government did not hesitate in announcing its repressive measures, or in sending policemen and army troopers to intimidate the teachers, with the support of the right-wing press. It even attempted to put one town against another one, and parents against teachers. It organized a national gathering in Guayaquil on May 29, 2009 with a very poor attendance in spite of the blackmail and threats that were reported many times over.

By then, UNE had already made a call for resistance under the auspice of Constitutional Article 98 that states: "the individuals and the collective groups can exert their right to resist vis à vis the actions or omissions of any public authority, people or legal non-state entity that might infringe upon their constitutional rights or do so to demand the acknowledgement of their new rights."

The resistance on the one hand, planned a boycott of the tests and most of the teachers refused to take them. On the

other, an integral evaluation proposal was presented stemming from the classrooms and not from a desire for standardization.

The stoppage becomes compulsory⁶

The counterattack was an attempt to economically strangle the organization by preventing the voluntary contributions (which are voluntary as is the affiliation) from reaching the financial department of the Ministry; as well as by blocking the discounts teachers are given in certain stores with which there is an agreement. This was done from the highest authority spheres and from the Social Contract to structure another union, but again they failed.

A little time later, teachers were included in a governmental bill of law called "the Organic Law for Public Servants" which sought to eliminate eight wage components: basic wage, seniority, educational and family income, pedagogic compensation bonus, and the border and Amazon bonus (Napo and Galapagos) and the retirement incentive. This would have a serious impact on their income and rights.

This is how the government forced UNE to go on strike. In spite of the dire conditions, the union leaders never stopped expressing the need for a dialog and kept their doors open. In the mean time, the government rejected everything, accused and insulted, forgot the 30 years of neoliberalism and blamed the teachers for all the problems of the educational system. That was the beginning of the massive strike, accompanied by big public actions that would grow even larger with the solidarity from CONAIE when they started their own uprising.

The UNE platform included the following:

To have five thousand schools reopened; transform one-teacher schools into multiple-teacher schools (complete schools); comply with the promise of full-time positions and stop the temporary contracts; infrastructure for the creation of the eighth years of basic education program for the current schools; a National Education Plan that is free, of a high quality and that involves teachers, students, parents and all the Ecuadorians. A Pedagogical Model that breaks away from the out-of-date teaching practices, the foundations for an Emancipating Public School that unifies the learning process with community and with social development.

Compliance with the governmental commitments, like a timely payment of \$25 per student in basic education, \$30 for students in the high school, accountability of the Ministry of Education to guarantee that a proper attention is given to the popular sectors.

⁶ This fragment is taken from an article written by the author for La Tendencia Journal No 10 entitled: "The government and its conflict with teachers."

An Intercultural General Organic Educational Law that guarantees a free and high quality education, the participation and social controllership from the Congress of Education with Social Participation and the involvement of Educational Communal Councils in each Fiscal Educative Institution, every "Fisco-misional" and private school that allows for the participation of students and parents in the educational process. Accountability for the Professional Teaching Degree Law that eliminated the requirement of being a professional educator to be able to teach and established the evaluation as a sole cause for a lay-off and which made the educational institution officials and directors su-

bordinated to the Ministry of Education (which took away the teachers right to defend themselves, being represented and the surveillance according to the Law).

Prevent the laying off of 2,657 teachers against Constitutional Article 98.

Rights as the border bonus, a dignified wage and a retirement plan, the timely payment of the discounts for IESS contributions, the official appointment of thirteen thousand popular educators and the rejection of the proposed Organic Law for Public Servants.

Abolition of Executive Degree 1780 that hands over the legal authority of the Amazonia, Galapagos and Esmeral-



das to the catholic missions, as well as all State resources destined to education, health, highway administration, and communication means, fact that threatens the victory of secularism after the liberal revolution and Eloy Alfaro.

This platform was hidden from the public with the help of a great part of the media by arguing that the quarrel was only about the teacher evaluation. That is false, and the concessions granted by the government to reinstate the dialog prove it.

Unfortunately, the repression caused the death of an Amazonian indigenous teacher by the name of Bosco Wisma, who curiously enough reflected the unity of the teachers' movement and the indigenous one. It was not until that unfortunate event that the government opened up to dialog while the strikes went on, the indigenous groups marched in a national demonstration followed by the teachers in a protest that gathered more than fifteen thousand people. The beginning of the dialog gave rise to three initial agreements, the suspension of the strike and the start of the high level negotiation tables.

The dialog is bearing fruits, because agreements have been reached in numerous aspects of the Organic Law for General Education to improve education, like the incorporation of the principles of "Education for Emancipation": teachers, students and parents are guaranteed their right to participate; teachers were withdrawn from the Public Servant Law; the National Autonomous Evaluation Institute was created along with the school of governments (or communal councils); the indigenous movement recovered DINEIB; UNE proposals for ten different category tiers and dignified wages have been accepted; people in the Mountain Ranges have taken their evaluations, and no sanctions were exerted against the teachers who exercised their right to practice resistance.

But many other issues are still pending. Up until December, there is still the question of how to guarantee the right to education, the role of the municipalities (which is still open to interpretation according to the Law since the Constitution is not specific about it); the structuring of the educational circuits through a bidding and the change from the old tier system into the new one. The position of the Ministry is an economic objective of not granting higher wage increases to the already existing ones while UNE is defending the view that teachers should be remunerated according to their academic achievements, merits and seniority so that the new systems acknowledges wholly what the life of teachers is worth.

Education is an area of vital importance for the future of a country. That is what the world says. Different studies and specialized international organizations state that no reform will be successful without the active help of teachers, or even worse, if they are treated as enemies. They also agree

that having a unified and proactive guild is a positive trait to value. The government, the teachers and society as a whole should be aware of that because the dialog needs to continue. It should be promoted and publicized to open new spaces, so that without any prejudice or stereotype, new ways can be paved.

UNE has spoken of the need to hold a national debate on democratic ways, of the participation of parents, students, teachers and society from the very schools for the construction of a national educational project and the evaluation of the whole system, its history and the responsible parties. Quality public education requires financing but it also requires a new appreciation of the social work of a teacher, of a democratic management, of dignified working conditions that guarantee that the roof of a school will not fall on the heads of the children as what happened in Guayaquil where many were injured and others killed.

It is now up to the State to respond to the challenges that are supported by countless studies by UNESCO, the Education International Agency and other specialized organizations.

If we look back and remember what has happened with the dialog with the indigenous movement, the higher education and communication laws, we can conclude that the actions of the popular sectors are a strong wake up call for the government, but they also provide a chance (the last one?) for it not to deviate from the course that has earned the support of the majority. It would be very positive if, along from the dialog that resulted from the confrontation and the strength gained by popular organizations that are going back to their starring roles, a full rapprochement is finally achieved.

The best example is the electoral victory in Bolivia, where the support for the President who was sensitive to social movements is constantly growing. We must think about the future of a change process and the forces that are required to maintain it and of the orientation sources it should have. If not, the people will become disappointed once more and their stand could be radicalized or the Right-wing would take over the full control of the political establishment. The game is not over yet.

