

Contributions to a political and social agreement on long-term education proposals and policies: Post-2015.

On May 20th of this year, the Business Chambers of Uruguay sponsored an event on education, “Shaping the future: the Post-2015 Education Agenda” in which leading academics from various political and party affiliations convened in their personal capacities.

The aim of the conference was to create a space for plural and productive dialogue that put the convergent points of the various [political] platforms into the record, and from these established a manner of agreeing upon [the issue of] achieving a quality education with equity and relevance for [in] the country. The conference consisted of two panels which focused on compulsory basic education (primary and secondary levels) and teacher training and professional development.

Efforts will be made to highlight and rank the points of consensus with the firm intention of contributing to the creation of a better future for Uruguayan education. Educational changes with medium- and long-term perspectives require, as a point of departure, the fabric of consensus, commitments and agreements that extend beyond party lines to reach a politically-sustainable state within a period of no less than a decade’s time. In this sense, it can be said that the meeting of May 20th achieved its goal, not only convening numerous institutions and actors concerned about the fate of national education, but also by confirming that among the various proposals there are multiple points of consensus towards shaping the future.

Thus, it is possible to summarize, in a few points, the main issues upon which there is understood agreement between the convened experts. It is around these and other points of consensus that we, leaders of the future Government of the Republic, in strong accord with all of the political parties with parliamentary representation, should be able to commit to an Educational Agenda with a long-term perspective whose vision allows it to offer each student in the country a real opportunity to learn [in] through a variety of settings and educational offerings, [as well as engage in] continued lifelong learning. Democratizing educational opportunities contributes to greater cohesion and social integration.

The most salient points of consensus are summarized by eight themes:

(1) Strengthen the education system with a holistic vision

The educational system should be [approached] with a long-term systemic view which transcends those visions that analyse the educational process as fragmented or through piecemeal interventions. Education in general, and particularly the education system, has serious difficulties changing and adapting to demands originating from [a context of] profound changes on a global, national and local scale. Among other things, it is suitable to mention some of the waves of the new era such as the production and socialization of knowledge in a variety of formats, knowledge increasingly accessible to the public, the speed of information movement, the speed of development of new knowledge and the early expiration and limited time between knowledge, innovation and technological application as a result.

These changes give rise to the need for an educational project that transforms without exception, that is transversal and comprehensive, relevant, capable of arranging the system to overcome gaps between cycles, public and private offerings, formal, non-formal and informal [education]; that clearly explains goals and objectives and criteria and indicators for monitoring and evaluation. It must clearly articulate “why”, “what” and “how” to educate, how

to direct (existing and additional) educational resources, how they will be evaluated and will support learning so that each and every student can continue his or her studies with equal opportunities.

The implementation of a transformative project requires strong and sustained political leadership to endure the changes so that what results is an imperative that strengthens the role of the Ministry of Education and Culture, in fluid and ongoing collaboration with independent bodies that are capable of integrating, proposing and helping to develop an educational and social project for the country that strengthens inclusion, cohesion and development.

(2) Focus on the school to support quality learning

The education system should strengthen the school in its republican role of socializing in the universal values common to all, while respecting the differences of a plural society as an asset and source of inspiration to expand opportunities for educating and learning. On the other hand, the school should contribute to strengthening empathy and constructive relationships of respect and confidence between teachers, students, communities and families. Among other things, this implies that the school must fully assume: (i) the role of promoting and achieving quality learning in diverse social and cultural contexts; (ii) establishing that which is basic and essential for every student to retain; (iii) forging spaces where students can develop their creativity, starting with a curriculum that is friendly for both teachers and students; and (iv) promote the construction of educational realms of quality that engage and facilitate collaborative work between pre-primary, primary and lower-secondary levels under a unitary and binding educational vision.

(3) Strategic alliance between education and other social sectors

Social, coherent and articulated policies in both conception and operation are the gateway for the development of effective educational policies. Among other things, it is worth noting that: (i) policies for children, land, family and education form an integrated whole; (ii) the home must be in close interaction with the school; and (iii) efforts must be made to provide attention and comprehensive care for all children 0 to 5 years old. In recent decades, the school has been asked to assume increasing responsibilities and functions due to the absence or weakness of other organizations and agencies, and to take charge of tasks that respond to a wide range of social needs and, in many cases, are new to schools. In this sense, it seems appropriate to define publicly and politically what we expect from education and the action of other social actors, by way of working coordinated and jointly with schools, knowing that today [education] cannot only be limited to the task of teaching without generating empathy and synergy with the community and family environments, nor without an integrated social policy framework.

(4) Basic education and youth, starting with a common curriculum framework

The purpose of basic education for ages 4 to 14 and youth education, age 15 and older, is expressed by a common curriculum framework, structured around transversal competencies, citizenship and life skills. The framework promotes: (i) graduate profiles, curricula and assessments aligned with the competencies; (ii) personalized education that caters to the individuality of each student; (iii) teachers and professors who share an educational vision and common training paths; and (iv) teachers who use assessment to reflect upon and reconsider their teaching practices.

(5) The right to learn and the prominent role of students

Framed in strengthening the right to learn, diversity of learning processes should be promoted to generate renewed institutional and pedagogical practices for schools and classrooms so as to allow each student to be the protagonist and regulator of his or her own learning. Under this idea, it is important to transform learning and teaching conditions in problem situations so that students seek out and mobilize higher-order cognitive skills [over] simple repetition or application (using contributions from neuroscience— brain more receptive to learning at an early age), at the same time as non-cognitive skills such as emotions, values and attitudes. Emotions are the foundation and [provide] support for learning.

Meanwhile, they should look for alternative strategies to overcome homogenous propositions which claim that everyone learns the same things at the same time, in the same manner, and according to the same rhythm. Working with diverse expectations and student needs, [according to] their ways of learning and relating, strengthens the learning process. Likewise, online strategies and resources that are complementary to classroom behavior can help respond to this diversity, customizing educational plans.

It is also necessary to highlight the importance of reading comprehension as a condition, so as to not limit understanding in different fields of knowledge.

(6) Work as a transversal axis of training

Work, understood as a central focus, helps renew the relationship between education and work, and seek educational solutions that help increase, in a complimentary way, equity, productivity and competitiveness. It is possible to customize the educational trajectories that combine education and work, as well as conceptualize and implement plans with various combinations of both. Inevitably, these new ways of relating and combining education and work enable us to strengthen educational opportunities related to work, as well as provide greater leeway for [the realization of] combining internships and residencies. Also, labor and educational guidance is required at all levels of secondary education, supporting the related insertion of occupational offerings into higher education.

(7) Rebuilding trust in teachers and strengthening the teaching profession

The teaching profession should be valued and socially recognized which is required to restore its value and social prestige. Teacher training should be of a university-level, regardless of the type of institution in which it occurs, and [it] must combine training and knowledge production, in order to aim for academic excellence.

The teaching profession implies re-conceptualizing the articulated initial training with training throughout the year by practice in the profession, the teacher's career, and knowledge production of what it means to learn and therefore, to teach. Also, [it means that] attention must be paid to recruiting young people to the teaching profession, defining the graduate profiles of teachers and professors, retention policies, and encouraging young people who have chosen teaching to continue in this way with a strengthened motivation and commitment.

Another issue is public education's shortcomings in postgraduate education; thus [it is important to be able to provide] an opportunity for all teachers who wish, to continue their academic training.

All changes and processes of transforming education are made with and through teachers. Similarly stated, the need for a substantive change must exist in the cultures of schools and

teachers in a way that overcomes the idea that the teaching profession is an individual task and moves towards [the concept of] teaching teams that build collectively (eg. through communities of practice, knowing that a teacher's best advisor is another teacher). To do this, we must recognize that a teacher's work does not only [consist of] the contact hours in front of the students, but also hours of planning and working with peers to strengthen curriculum plans and pedagogies, and their effective implementation in the classroom.

(8) Evaluate to motivate and sustain learning

The various evaluation levels systemize education and establish priorities. Therefore, we must reconcile and complement participation in international assessments with the formative and summative assessments that take place in schools. Evaluations as a whole should serve students so that each student is able to regulate his or her learning. Similarly, it is necessary to understand that the information derived from them is crucial for educators to use the results to reread, redefine and refine their pedagogical practices. Assessment must fulfill its fundamental role of strengthening the learning processes, and in no way [serve as] a factor that contributes to the stigmatization and punishment of students.

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