

## Book Review

# From Design to Implementation of Educational Policies: New Challenges, New Actions

**Luis Alan Acuña Gamboa**

Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, Mexico

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**Post to:**

Luis Alan Acuña Gamboa  
Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, México  
11ª sur oriente número 565 interior 15, between Carretera Villaflores and  
5ª oriente, Colonia Obrera, C.P. 29080, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, México  
Email: acugam2319@gmail.com

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José Gimeno Sacristán presents the compilation of nine conferences given by teachers (including himself) who took part in a summer course at the Menéndez Pelayo International University (Spain) entitled «La reforma necesaria: entre la política educativa y la práctica escolar» (*The necessary reform: between educational policy and school practice*) like this book. Each and every one of the chapters of the text is extremely interesting; however, as a consequence of the intended line of analysis in this review, we dispense with chapters III, IV and VII, entitled «Los hitos reformistas: la viabilidad de las reformas y la pervisión de las leyes» (*Reformist milestones: the feasibility of reforms and the perversion of laws*) (Manuel de Puellas Benítez); «Iguales, ¿hasta dónde? Complejidades de la justicia educativa» (*Equals, to what extent? Complexities of educational justice*) (Mariano Fernández Enguita), and «El profesorado: entre el binomio de la seguridad-certeza y el triángulo riesgo-inseguridad-incertidumbre» (*Teachers: between the pairing of security-certainty and the triangle of risk-insecurity-uncertainty*) (Jaume Carbonell Sebarroja), since they address topics that partly diverge from the central theme, which is to reflect on educational policy.

### Educational reforms: pros and cons

Gimeno Sacristán questions the rapidity with which reforms (educational policies) take place, reflecting on the possible reasons why. These abrupt changes in the national education system may be the result of a consensus on the functions of the educational system. Educational policies or reforms are intended to demonstrate how the education system should work —administratively and pedagogically— forcing to consider the existing clash between policies and the reality of those implementing them (teachers). This discursive-operative conflict could be the consequence of the determined resistance from powerful groups (policymakers or designers) to «divulge, propose and even force people to do what, from above, is considered to be good practice» (Gimeno Sacristán, 2006, p. 27). The ephemeral life of educational policies, coupled with the subjugation of teachers by the current group in power, causes a high level of uncertainty about the changes created by each reform in the agents responsible for implementing them.

Talking about *reform* and *quality* in the education field is to talk about a diverse world of meanings where each individual —from the role they play in education— creates a definition of these terms according to their interests or the domination to which they are subject. While those who create the design are free to establish the intentions of the programs to be put into action; that is, it is highly likely that in any reform that is proposed and implemented there will be emulation between the comprehension of the real purposes and the implementation of that reform in the school context: *mastery of the trade tricks*. These problems, which arise between decision-makers and teachers, occur due to the adaptation of educational policies and study plans and programs from other countries for which they were designed. Because of the persistent unhealthy comparisons made between nations, merely as a «necessary» action of the globalized world, problems are also *globalized*. This is where the big international organizations exert their power, by way of «suggestions» about the actions that developing countries should undertake, mainly for improvement in education: Mexico is a clear example, although there is a chain effect.

Gimeno Sacristán (2006, p. 35) says that «every education reform needs the confluence of everyone participation, [where] the diagnosis that is done to take stock of reality must also be shared». Flaws in the design and implementation of educational policies are the result of a relationship of emulation between policymakers who silence the teachers' voices in decision-making and, on the other hand, of teachers who do little or nothing to transform their professional practice.

An educational reform inexorably needs to have arisen from the consensus of all the voices which, in one way or another, are involved and play a role in education. If this is not the case, any change is doomed to failure.

In this regard, Antonio Viñao mentions that these reforms are efforts to improve education through an ideological posture —endowed with great symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1996)— which the state puts into action, from its various different levels, to respond to social needs in education. Viñao classifies educational reforms into four types: *structural, curricular, organizational, and political-administrative*. *Structural* reforms are those that modify levels, stages, cycles, titles and/or certificates that are issued after studies are completed, as well as their academic value or effect. *Curricular* reforms refer to efforts to establish a concept of curriculum in direct relation to the contents, methodologies and assessment of teaching. Reforms of an *organizational* kind affect teaching organization and structure; and lastly,

*political-administrative* reforms are those that change the «way of governing, administrating and managing education systems», as stated by Viñao (as cited in Gimeno Sacristán, 2006, p. 44).

The most common reasons for the failure of any educational reform are also listed: a) lack or scarcity of financial resources; b) political changes and fluctuations; c) incorrect diagnoses, unrealistic objectives and schedules, unforeseen events, contradictions and inconsistencies; d) lack of social and political support; e) specific problems depending on the type of reform that is proposed and which are not expected or which are minimized by reformers; f) resistance and opposition of a union and corporate nature, and; g) lack of historic perspective. Insufficient budgetary allocations to implement reforms, the regular succession of the power of political groups, poor visualization and scheduling of policy actions, a lack of adherents to the new proposals, and discrepancies between the official discourse (Bourdieu, 1996) and the reality where it is implemented, coupled with the lack of hindsight of previous reforms that place the current reform at *zero*, cause the greatest problems in education policies in a given six-year governmental term.

To counter this, a successful educational reform should «have broad social support [being placed] at the margin of political fluctuations, propose long-term objectives, form part of a broader set of cultural [...] family and social changes and improvements» (Gimeno Sacristán, 2006, p. 58). In order for these ideas to be achieved, it is necessary to understand that those responsible for designing educational policies must position themselves and take possession of the reality in which policy actions are intended to be implemented, if the reforms fail it is because everyone makes a reading of the reality from the position that they occupy within it.

Jurjo Torres Santomé says that in Spain there are two opposing hegemonic ideological lines that influence every educational reform: *the neoliberal and the conservative*. In the case of the Organic Education Law (LOE by its Spanish acronym), the neoliberal stance was focused on discrediting or deprecating the unions and cuts in the pension system; in the education field, the neoliberal movement sought to weaken—as far as was possible—the public network of schools. «Transforming the education system into a big market, [...] dictating standards of school performance [and building] rankings of schools [and teachers]» (Gimeno Sacristán, 2006, p. 156). This leads to the creation of misconceptions about schools and teachers, prioritizing or stigmatizing the training given; a view supported by unreliable information.

The conservative line of thought seeks the consolidation of educational systems by controlling content, content that tends towards the imposition of *official* or legitimate knowledge. Therefore, conservative ideology wants to impose its truths through classroom content by way of educational capital, since this educational capital is «the guaranteed product of the accumulated results of cultural transmission ensured by the family and [...] by the school» (Bourdieu, 2012, p. 26).

The education reform in the 2012-2018 governmental period in Mexico seems to have characteristics of both ideological lines from a vertical view of supporting the *oppressed*, since Mexican education currently seeks to consolidate knowledge that has little or no innovation under a scheme of external assessment of this knowledge. This reform continues to denigrate the figure of the teacher through the implementation of measures aimed at quantifying even the qualifiable. It is through this kind of policy assessment measures that the state ensures control over the education system (Gimeno Sacristán, 2006); however, who assesses the evaluators and who promotes the concepts of quality, competence, standards and indicators?

Torres Santomé stresses that under this educational model based on competencies, «teaching is thus reduced to a technical task and its conceptualization as an intellectual, moral and political job disappears» (Gimeno Sacristán, 2006, p. 177) and the student is responsible for their own academic success or failure. Therefore, educational policies based on this model are redeemed from all responsibility; however, in this multidimensional topic of standards and indicators, it should be asked: what are the *quality* indicators and standards against which government action is assessed?

### **School and mass media: current reality and what should be in a changing society**

Ángel I. Pérez Gómez (2006) argues that education cannot be understood as it was in the past. To ensure that the school meets its requirements, considering the needs of a society of information and perplexity, it is essential for it to address two challenges: «To promote the construction of a relatively

autonomous subject and stimulate social cohesion» (Gimeno Sacristán, 2006, p. 95). These changes are the result of transformations in areas of excessive production and consumption, in power, and in everyday experience. A consumer society is also an economy society of knowledge, *ad hoc* to a postindustrial economy in which children, young people and adults reconstruct a culture and identity tending towards continuous innovation: *it is not a matter of satisfying needs, it is a matter of competence*.

Nowadays, humans are being formed through the mass media, especially television, videogames and all spaces and times that have no defined space or time. Television has become the main development space for children; however, one should not forget the verdict of Popper, Condry, Clark, and Wojtyła (2006) that «television is a bad teacher» and as Neil Postman mentions (as quoted in Gimeno Sacristán, 2006, p. 98): «Television, the mass media communication, videogames, etc. are becoming the most influential stage [...] in the formation of values of our children, teenagers and even adults».

Television, as with other media, is responsible for sending fragmentary and biased information to citizens; what, then, is the challenge for the school in light of this situation? The school is subsisting—as a training institution—in an academic way; that is, with more information and less knowledge. The current challenge of this institution is the holistic training of autonomous individuals, capable of making use of the fragmentary information from their contacts with the mass media to convert it into knowledge and, then, into *thought and wisdom* (Gimeno Sacristán, 2006).

The academicist school has had problems in attending to students; these issues relate to the scant—if not non-existent—attention to diversity, where homogeneous teaching only highlights the sociocultural differences of the learners, but without attending to them. Secondly, it confirms the lightness of school learning, since the sociocultural and demographic contexts of the students are not respected, meaning that learning is not everyday information, which makes data easy to forget and gives it little relevance. Finally, Pérez Gómez affirms that the school is not accomplishing the requirement of training for life in society. Therefore, the challenge for the school in the 21st century is largely to educate individuals who make the information society evolve towards a knowledge society, developing relevant learning in students, with value in use and not in exchange knowledge.

Miguel G. Arroyo studies the conception of school and educational policies that are designed to attend to the needs of the institution itself. Arroyo conceives school as a gift from the state to its ignorant people, where those in power construct and reconstruct educational policies. In this regard, social movements have played an important role in the design of educational policies, since these movements are built under an *oppressed* view of class, where the elite and the people fulfill very specific roles: the former benevolently supports the deprived, the «masses». Furthermore, the presence of these social movements has succeeded in redirecting the political-educational debate towards the political objectives and meanings of education as a right of citizens and the primary duty of the state. Thanks to teachers' movements—which, on the reflection of the author, are social—the education system retains its public status and it is understood that the right to education cannot be isolated from the denial of other rights.

One of the areas that Arroyo sees as being central in the design of educational policies is corrective policies for violence which arise in the school. The concern over this situation is such that policymakers design programs for prevention and management of disorder that fit well into Foucault's *Panopticon*; that is to ensure security, one of the most pressing needs of today's society (Bauman, 2013). Is it not the case of what happened in Spain years ago, now the reality in Mexico and its famous political action against bullying? Stigmatizing students as *rebels*, *problematic*, and *dangerous* leads to school and social exclusion, thus violating the right to education, since these are punitive measures that, far from producing a benefit, may worsen the situation. This should not be understood as a solution to the problem; however, «the temptation for educational policy and the school system is increasingly to distance from the logic of rights» (Gimeno Sacristán, 2006, p. 132); with the working classes or vulnerable being those most threatened.

Cándida Martínez López states that «an Education Law should be for everyone, but, fundamentally, should include and promote the skills of all and respond to the challenges of current society» (Gimeno Sacristán, 2006, p. 184). That is to say, both the Education Law and education policies—as an expression of the project of Nation that gives meaning to the Law—should be decided and put into action to attend to and improve the educational needs of the students, where past experience is revisited in order to overcome their problems. Therefore, the author proposes five challenges that the school agenda should consider

in its quest for educational change: (a) the school should improve education and the performance of the educational system; (b) public education must facilitate cultural and social integration; (c) the educational system must make significant changes in the processes of initial and ongoing training and motivation of its teachers; (d) the students should be the focus on which educational policy is decided and put into action, and; (e) the school should be a place of learning for individual and collective decision-making; it should be a democratic scenario.

A second question that Martínez López wonders —do decentralization and autonomy are used for the purpose of making everyone's right to education more effective?— leads her to the conclusion that the implementation of all decentralized education systems requires them to be able to guarantee three conditions: «1) establishment of common objectives, 2) a developed and proven assessment system, and 3) an effective device with resources to implement compensatory measures» (Gimeno Sacristan, 2006, p. 188). The author concludes by pointing out that the state should work in three directions: (a) to agree concisely on a basic and common education for all; (b) to strengthen coordination mechanisms from institutional loyalty and co-responsibility, and (c) to provide the necessary funding to schools to progress in the challenges they face. Martínez López is convinced that not everyone wants to transfer the power or account for their actions; however, she conceives of the idea that this is necessary to achieve the goals that schools currently set themselves.

*The necessary reform: between educational policy and school practice* is an interesting book which is essential for those of us researching the processes of decision-making, design, and implementation of educational policies. The invitation is open to all those who, in analyses of texts such as this, see the construction of new knowledge in the state of the issue. It should be made clear that this reflection is not intended to serve as a summary of this elegant text, but rather to create curiosity and the desire to read this magnificent piece of work.

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