



The ethical challenge in reconciling educational rights.

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Opinions about our education system depend on our national vision. If we strive to become a prosperous country that generates opportunities for its citizens in a knowledge-driven society, we must be prepared to produce goods and services with high know-how and technology content. Our companies must compete on the basis of entrepreneurship and innovation and our citizens ought to be prepared to constantly learn and relearn. Our current education system is not equipped –or even designed- to adequately prepare our citizens in achieving these goals.

Though this dysfunction has existed for decades, technological change has greatly increased its consequences. Unlike other countries, Uruguay has not tried to conceal its educational shortcomings. Our country voluntarily undergoes international evaluations like the PISA tests or the Mercosur university accreditations and, a few years ago, the National Education Assessment Institute was created with the mandate to assess regularly and independently our pre-university education system.

Nevertheless, criticism and self-criticism are not enough. To achieve sustainable change, reforms must be made. Successive governments have tried to improve educational outcomes. A substantial increase in the public education budget allocation has been one of the most important efforts undertaken. Legal changes have been introduced, extending compulsory education from pre-school to upper secondary levels. Political governance of the autonomous, -two billion dollars a year- National Education Authority was profoundly changed introducing internal elections for some of the top officials. The most ambitious change was the widespread incorporation of technology, connecting all primary and secondary schools nationwide and handing out computers to all teachers and pupils in state schools.

These initiatives and projects show the willingness of successive governments to make investments and implement large-scale changes towards improving education. However, these costly efforts have hitherto yielded limited or ephemeral results. We have managed to increase student numbers, but completion rates have stagnated and the quality of learning is declining. More than 30 years after democracy was restored, the vast majority of low-income teens do not complete secondary school or enter university, and the performance of our students in international tests is increasingly poorer.

Our educational deficits have not and will not be resolved merely by increasing budgets, changing administrative election procedures, or introducing more computers. These changes are necessary, but they are not sufficient. These huge economic and political efforts have not entailed educational improvements because improving education in Uruguay is not a problem to be solved. Improving education in Uruguay is a dilemma to be reckoned with. A dilemma to be tackled from an ethical and moral perspective, rather than from an economic or technological one.

Educational reform is a dilemma because it reflects a conflict between two rights. On the one hand, the right of institutions and corporations to maintain their historical habits, benefits and privileges. On the other hand, the right of new generations to access an education system that adapts to their needs and offers them the opportunity to access quality learning to become productive citizens in the knowledge society. It is possible and desirable to reconcile both rights, but we must acknowledge that they both exist, and that in certain circumstances, one of those rights may prevail over the other for ethical, moral or social interest reasons. In the past, Uruguay has opted not to make this choice. But, if we do not choose between these two rights, inertia and power prevail.

Resolving our educational dilemma requires facing costs in the present in order to gain improvements in the future. We need to listen to the needs of those without a voice, the youngest members of society. The right to learn must be given a sacrosanct value. Schools should be sanctuaries for their pupils, especially for those coming from unstable homes and scarce family support. We need enough self-confidence to believe that we can export technology and innovation, just like other countries which were once poorer than us. Overcoming our educational dilemma requires the conviction that the right to a quality education is an essential democratic right. It requires the ability to value our educational past without turning it into a cage, preventing us from imagining a future that is different and better adapted to a new society in a new century.

Arbitrating between rights is never an easy task. However, this is the dilemma faced by our society and the challenge our leaders must ultimately be tackling.

