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THE DISSATISFACTION OF THE LOSERS

Pisa Public Discourse in Ibero-American Countries

In Buddhism the term “Duhkha”, related to suffering, is difficult to translate. It consists of a feeling of discontent, dissatisfaction, discomfort, disillusion or frustration, normally produced by not having something one desires or misses. We can say that the reaction to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in the Ibero-American countries has been one of “dissatisfaction”. The population is discontented or dissatisfied with appearing in the successive PISA Reports, which help to determine their respective policies, as “losers” in comparison with other countries. It seems as if the official educational policy intended to improve the situation by showing – with the legitimacy granted by an external international test – that the situation is quite bad.

The use of the word “loser” may be debatable, but – in the popular experience and discourse – PISA is perceived primarily as a ranking or horse race, in which some countries have not been able to compete appropriately, or they have ended up in much lower positions than they expected. The news media prioritize the results of the ranking, reinforcing the dichotomy of “winners” and “losers”, between countries that offer a good education and others that provide a mediocre or poor one. Thus, a Spanish newspaper, referring to PISA 2006, used the title: “once again the PISA report puts Spain, in questions of education, at the end of the line of the developed countries” (*El Mundo*, 11/12/07).

On the other hand, feeling dissatisfaction is a necessary state that precedes improvement. The educational administrations, in order to reduce this dissatisfaction, find themselves obligated to present declarations or reports showing that, in reality, the results are not all that bad. A well-known Spanish professor (César Coll) titled his commentary about the PISA 2006 data, “far from the social aspirations” (*El Periódico*, 06/12/07), indicating that the real question is that the results “do not correspond to the desires and expectations of our society, and they reveal a situation that is stagnant or has worsened since the beginning of the cycle of PISA studies in the year 2000”.

The analysis of the discourse in the Ibero-American press shows that PISA has a high impact on the way teachers, parents and governments look at education. The results show that the majority of the articles about PISA simply refer to it as an instrument to “measure” the quality of the education. Conversely, governments

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increasingly use references to the PISA results to add legitimacy to their projected actions to increase efficiency. Thus, they frequently present this argument: “we are going to propose such and such reforms, because, as shown in PISA, our country is lagging behind”

COMPARISON AS A WAY OF GOVERNING

PISA does not want to be limited to a comparison, as it also attempts to compare the “performances” of the different educational systems in order to improve their efficiency in a globally competitive world. In fact, the original goal was to provide countries with measures of their strengths and weaknesses, by analyzing their situation in light of the performance of other systems. The instrument, by establishing one unique pattern on which to base the measurement of the different countries, produces a distribution where the educational systems occupy a relative position. Specifically, the way the information is presented, by classification tables rather than in alphabetical order by countries, leads to a superficial reading, limited to comparing the rankings (Mortimore, 2009). Moreover, according to the study by Figazzolo (2009), the news media have generally adopted the perspective of the rankings when referring to PISA, sometimes blaming the teachers for the poor results.

It is debatable whether to compare countries like those in Ibero-America, which – with the exception of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) – are at a disadvantage in economic development, rate of schooling or educational level of families compared to the mean of the OECD. The ability of a country to reach certain levels of education and quality depends, to a large degree, on its level of development. However, PISA is much more than a ranking of countries: it reveals interesting data about correlations between students’ achievement and their socioeconomic backgrounds, about the most appropriate way to organize schools, or about how to increase the equity of educational results. This information should lead to a search for alternative ways to improve teaching, for example, by training the teachers or improving their work conditions, in order to achieve more egalitarian educational systems while increasing quality. Andreas Schleicher (2006), Head of the Indicators and Analysis Division (Directorate of Education) of the OECD, outlines the PISA goals with regard to educational policy as follows:

The purpose of PISA goes far beyond the mere supervision of the current state of students’ learning in the national educational systems. The information provided by PISA should allow the politicians in charge to observe what factors are associated with educational success, and not limit themselves to making comparisons between results in an isolated way (p. 23).

Within a more global framework of harmonizing the educational globe (Tröhler, 2010), PISA situates educational policies in a worldwide competitive space. In doing so, it becomes a specific way of regulating education. This comparative framework leads to the search for solutions with regard to what works in other countries, learning from the competitors. Professor Fernández Rizo (2006), former

director of the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education in Mexico, pointed out:

In complex topics like those related to education, there should be various referents, as none of them would be adequate alone. Therefore, it is not irrelevant to compare ourselves with the more developed countries, as distant referents, to a certain extent ideal; but it is necessary to complement this comparison with others, for example, with similar countries, with our own situation in the past, and with the goals that have been set for the future (p. 162).

After pointing out the deficits, it is possible to converge gradually with the more advanced countries. Through the publication of its results, PISA wanted to provide the necessary knowledge to make political decisions about the most appropriate educational reforms for improvement. Schleicher (2007, p. 351) argues that “PISA can provide policy makers and practitioners with effective tools to improve quality, equity and efficiency in education”. In this way, it acquires a growing influence in defining the national educational policies. This knowledge, stemming from the evaluation of competencies, becomes an instrument for governing.

Linked to the emergence of processes of “transnational regulation” of education (Barroso, 2006), PISA has become a regulation mechanism that inscribes the educational questions in a new space: international and “objective” measures of results. The main purpose was to provide indicators about the efficacy of the education system of each country in comparison with the others. Therefore, it has contributed to making the public aware, that is, creating a social construction, about the relative position of each country in international space. All of this makes PISA much more than a survey and a set of associated reports, as it organizes very wide-ranging social worlds and uses sophisticated means of policy and knowledge coordination (Carvalho, 2009). PISA has become a tool produced within the scope of research that supports and “takes part” in the task of coordinating public action in education.

The *Knowledge & Policy* Research Project studies PISA “as part of the construction of a multilateral space for the creation and exchange of “knowledge for policy” (Carvalho, 2009, p. 5). The PISA texts can be read as narratives that produce knowledge for politics. More specifically, the construction and diffusion of PISA is a *Knowledge-based Regulation Tool*, understood as “technical-social instruments (based on knowledge and generating knowledge) that disseminate a particular kind of knowledge in order to shape the behavior of actors in a given policy domain”. PISA contributes to organizing specific relationships between those who emit the reports and the potential recipients: “capitalizing on and participating in the construction of this normative setting, it institutes comparative logic as a form of administration and government” (Barroso & Carvalho, 2008, p. 78). PISA can be considered as an organization capable of spreading and legitimizing a certain type of knowledge (the comparative evaluation of competencies) for the regulation of educational policies and action. It becomes,

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then, a regulation instrument, based on the expert knowledge of an organization like the OECD (Noaksson and Jacobsson, 2003; Mahon and McBride, 2009).

PISA, furthermore, has been the vehicle for a specific type of curricular knowledge: an approach based on competencies, which, in the long run, has caused the different Iberian-American educational policies to be oriented within this framework. As pointed out (Afonso & Costa, 2009): “Defining PISA as a *Knowledge-based Regulation Tool* means that it is conceived as an example of the complex and circular relationship between knowledge and policy: PISA as a policy instrument produces knowledge; PISA as a research instrument produces policy” (p. 6).

PISA A MEDIA DISCOURSE: NARRATIVES OF DISCONTENT

In the Ibero-American setting, PISA has managed to occupy the public educational space like no other type of report or survey. This media success is due, without doubt, to the design of the instrument itself: worldwide application, attention paid to the validity of the instrument, periodic regularity of the survey, generation of its own data, participation that depends on the respective public authorities, policy based on evidence, tests focused on competencies and not on curricular contents (innovative concept of “literacy”), etc.

Diverse analyses have been performed about how the *mass media* have presented PISA in the different Ibero-American countries (Ravela, 2006; Ferrer et al., 2006; Massot et al., 2006). The association of trade unions that make up the International Education (IE) carried out a study in 2008 (Figazzolo, 2009) to analyze the impact of PISA 2006 in the debate on educational policies, focusing especially on how the media reported on the PISA study, the conclusions reached by the governments, and the reactions of the trade unions. Instead of creating awareness in the different sectors and encouraging them to get involved in improving the quality of the education, in Spain and Latin America “the effects of spreading the results generally involve looking for someone to blame, discrediting the educational system in general, and the feeling that no matter how much is being done, it is not getting them anywhere” (Ravela, 2006, p. 298). Thus, it is common to use the results as a means of confrontation between the government and the opposing party.

Validating the saying that “good news is not news”, in the Ibero-American world the PISA reports have been presented – with a certain degree of sensationalism – as the dissatisfaction of the losers in a race: “last in line”, “failure”, “the worst in sciences”, etc. One of the studies points out: “the information offered by the media did not involve an appropriate rational analysis and produced a catastrophic distortion that was quite negative for schools” (Massot et al., 2006, p. 390). An informative simplification based on slogans or, in some cases, manipulation by not presenting all the data, distorts the reality and conditions public opinion. As Figazzolo (2009, p. 26) points out: “media have often advocated the implantation of those features that characterize high-performing school systems into low-performing education systems, regardless of the various contextual factors”. This role increases when, as has occurred

generally, instead of going to original sources of information, the public limits itself to what the press says.

In general, the Ibero-American public's perception of PISA is conditioned by their prior political and ideological position and especially within the framework of the educational debates at the time in the country in question. Rather than performing an in-depth analysis of the results from the PISA study and their implications, the desires and aspirations of each group, including the education administration itself, are projected in them, producing a biased or incomplete interpretation. This type of interpretation has meant that the PISA results have not had any relevant pedagogical repercussions. Thus, each of the PISA reports has been received from a political and ideological duality, serving the educational policy that interested each ideological group, and producing an ideological manipulation of the results.

In contrast with other countries like Germany (Kotthoff & Pereyra, 2009), where they led to a widespread debate that questioned the educational policy and system, in Spain the first PISA results were hardly noticed, receiving at most a self-serving political use. The news media also gave superficial information, but only during fifteen days in December. Thus, the newspaper *El País* presented the headline: "Spanish secondary students, among the worst in the developed countries – 16% of young people in Spain reach the age of 15 with difficulty in reading correctly", and even –in an alarmist way– talked about a "catastrophe in education". As one study concluded (Massot et al., 2006), there was a lack of analysis and diffusion of the results of the PISA study, a lack of a culture of evaluation in the educational setting and, finally, an excessive politicization of the interpretation of the PISA 2000 results by the representatives of the educational community. In the preparation of an educational counter-reform to the LOGSE Law, the Organic Education Quality Law (LOCE), the effects of PISA 2000 were quite limited: increase the hours dedicated to reading and mathematics (Royal Decree 3473 of 29/12/2000), just a few days after the PISA results were published.

Something similar occurred with PISA 2003. For a brief look at the newspaper headlines, we can examine the newspaper archives from December of 2004 "Spanish students at the tail of the OECD in mathematics, science and reading" (*El País*, 7/12/04). An editorial in the newspaper *ABC* (8/12/04) said, "The report shows, moreover, that we have a stagnant system, with a tendency to worsen in areas as relevant as mathematics and reading comprehension". Furthermore, the editorial page of *El País* on the same date (8/12/04) talked about the same thing: "The x-ray of the state of education in the OECD a translation would use OECD countries, the PISA 2003 report, has sounded the alarm about the poor results obtained by the Spanish system. Although the knowledge and skills of Spanish students in mathematics, reading comprehension and scientific culture already appeared at the tail of the developed countries in the year 2000, the macro-study made public on Monday reveal a worrisome stagnation and even a worsening in reading".

This situation was repeated in December of 2007 with the same reiterated discourse: "While Spain receives failing marks from the PISA report, Finland gets

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the highest grade” (*El Periódico*, 24/12/07), and “Spanish education moves backward. The level of reading comprehension of 15-year-old Spanish students suffers the worst decline in the OECD” (*El País*, 05/12/07). A former Spanish Education minister (Ortega Díaz-Ambrona, 2007) commented:

Every three years the OECD insists on ruining our Christmas with their PISA report. They did so in December of 2001 and 2004. Now they are back with the bad news that our educational system is still poor. We live with hope for a few years without the report, convinced that non-university education is improving thanks to the efforts of the government at the time, but then party pooper PISA arrives and with the PP or the PSOE, we end up looking bad. We seem to be trapped in a sinister vicious cycle that makes it difficult to diagnose the problem and its solution.

And he ended “meanwhile, in 2010, the swallows will be back as well as the PISA report. Will we have better results or continue this never ending story? We’ll see”. In part, this has been the experience of PISA in the Spanish public discourse: bad news that is quickly forgotten, at the most a hurricane passing by.

In the meantime, the objective of the official educational policy has been to counteract the effects, reducing the criticism with official declarations or reports. The respective governments finance participation in PISA and, in exchange, feel they have the right to use the data in their own way. The case of the Evaluation Institute in Spain is paradigmatic of the use for political interests, rather than to generate an enlightened and public use of educational knowledge. Argumentation strategies are developed to use the PISA data to support the respective political policy which, in fact, existed before PISA. Thus, the mediocre results of PISA 2000 were used, among other purposes, to criticize the previous educational law (LOGSE) and thereby justify the new reform (Educational Quality Law, LOCE). Similarly, PISA 2003 arrives at another moment of political change. The new government has stopped the application of the previous law (LOCE) and is in the process of preparing a new educational law. In this context, logically, the report will be used to criticize the previous proposal and support the new one: design the curriculum according to competencies, increase the number of hours for reading and mathematics, and introduce Citizenship Education into the curriculum.

IBERO-AMERICA IN PISA

As far as education and culture are concerned, Ibero-America (Latin America, Spain and Portugal) has become a reality, as shown by The Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI) and the “Ibero-American PISA Group” (or GIP) network. Moreover, the Ibero-American countries participating in PISA are significantly different in their sizes and in the percentages of school coverage in the age groups being evaluated. Latin America faces problems inherited from its colonial past, and it is considerably behind compared to the industrialized countries. The societies have complex demographics, with profound inequalities and differences between countries in the access to education, and with insufficient quality.

With regard to their participation in PISA, México and Brazil are two Iberian-American countries (together with Portugal and Spain) that have participated in the three editions of PISA. Furthermore, in 2006 Argentina and Chile participated, as they participated in PISA Plus, but not in 2003; Uruguay participated in PISA in 2003; and Colombia did so for the first time in 2006. Some countries stop participating (Argentina, Chile) because of the political consequences of continuing to receive low scores for the current government, or due to the economic cost of participating, especially during a period of economic crisis. In the 2009 edition, other participants were: Panamá, Perú (participated in PISA plus) and the Dominican Republic.

México, together with Brazil and Spain, promoted the creation in 2005 of the *Ibero-American PISA Group (GIP)* network. It was created due to the need to join forces to facilitate cooperation, reflection and mutual help, contribute to improving operational capacity, and encourage a more active participation in the project. Having a common language makes it possible to more effectively share interests, problems, experiences and, especially, initiatives within the *Ibero-American PISA Group*. The GIP is a mutual support group designed to contribute to a better performance on the PISA, by means of continuous technical training and exchanging best practices. The cooperation and support are organized by the National Project Managers (NPMs) and their respective technical groups at the national centers. Which language – the spelling decision again Thus, they have carried out rounds of technical review for the reactive units on reading for each country, before sending them to the ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research). In this way, the PISA 2009 report includes ten items proposed by this Group, which also has a representative in the group of experts who advise the OECD on elaborating the next test. From mere participants (providing a sample to the study), they have taken on responsibilities in designing the instruments and studies (up until now directed exclusively by Anglo-Saxon countries). The GIP has published the book *Ibero-America in PISA 2006. Regional Report* (GIP-OECD, 2009), which emerged from an International Seminar.

Table 1 shows the data from the seven countries participating in *PISA 2006*. They are the countries on the American continent with the largest educational systems, with Brazil at the head, followed by México, Argentina and Colombia; then come Spain, Chile, Portugal and, finally, with the smallest system, Uruguay. There are great differences between these countries in terms of educational coverage of young people between 15 and 16 years of age, where Spain has 100% coverage, followed by Argentina with 87.4%, while México only covers 62.9% and Colombia 60.6%.

The average obtained by the Ibero-American countries is 426, while the Latin American average is 408, far from the OECD average (500 points). With regard to the levels of competencies, Spain is at level 3, Portugal, Chile, Uruguay and Mexico at level 2, and below the minimum level of scientific literacy, at level 1, are Argentina, Brazil and Colombia. As Fernández Rizo (2006, p. 166) rightly states, “the results of Mexico and other Latin American countries on PISA should not surprise us: they lie in the range of what would be expected, due to the weight

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of the socioeconomic factors and the resources the schools have access to”. Likewise, the results should be interpreted with caution, given that the percentages of school coverage of the 15-year-old population are lower than in other countries. Precisely those youths who do not take the PISA tests, as they do not attend school, pertain to the lowest layers, which means the performance is overestimated. Or the authors could use: Those youths who do not take PISA tests often do not attend school and would thus lower the scores – which means performance is overestimated.

Table 1. Populations of 15-year-old youths in the Iberian-American countries in PISA 2006

<i>Country</i>	<i>Total Young people 15 years old</i>	<i>15 year olds enrolled in school</i>	<i>Percentage of coverage</i>
<i>Argentina</i>	662.686	579.222	87.4
<i>Brazil</i>	3.390.471	2.374.044	70.0
<i>Chile</i>	299.426	255.459	85.3
<i>Colombia</i>	897.477	543.630	60.6
<i>Spain</i>	439.415	436.885	99.4
<i>Mexico</i>	2.200.916	1.383.364	62.9
<i>Portugal</i>	115.426	100.816	87.3
<i>Uruguay</i>	52.119	40.815	78.3

In the case of Spain, there are not many students in the lower levels of the scale or in the upper levels either. There is a certain controversy about whether a low dispersion of results (295 points between the best and worst results, compared to 311 in the OECD countries), means in principle that there is more equity, or whether it is only an “artificial” effect of the homogeneity of the results of Spanish students (Bolívar, 2008). It is possible, then, to interpret as egalitarian that which is only an effect of the narrow dispersion of the results. The Spanish Report on PISA 2006 states (IE, 2007) among its conclusions that “the Spanish educational system is comparatively one that offers greater equity to its students, close to that of the Nordic countries” (p. 100).

Chile is a country that had fairly poor results in the year 2000, decided to withdraw in 2003, and improved significantly in 2006. The Education Minister of Chile (Mineduc) titled the presentation of the results (04/12/2007) in this way: “Chile leads the results of the international PISA test in Latin America”. Naturally, this outcome was used to argue that the Chilean educational policy had been the correct one: “we are drawing closer to the developed countries. We have the best educational results in Latin American”, said Minister Provoste. A more scientific analysis (Cariola et al., 2009) shows that the Chilean students, trained completely in the reformed curriculum, generally had better results than their Latin American counterparts, and that they improved significantly in Reading compared to five years before. However, a lack of equity is also shown by the socioeconomic and academic segregation of the educational system and the disparity in the performance of men and women.

With regard to Argentina, a recent study (Rodrigo, 2009) of the poor performance of its students on PISA found that external factors alone (socioeconomic background of population, economic investment on the educational system, coverage of the Argentinean educational system, public vs. private schools, etc.) are not able to

Table 2. Average results of Iberian-American countries on PISA 2006 countries

	<i>Sciences</i>	<i>Countries</i>	<i>Sciences</i>
<i>Spain</i>	488	<i>Mexico</i>	410
<i>Portugal</i>	474	<i>Argentina</i>	391
<i>Chile</i>	438	<i>Brazil</i>	390
<i>Uruguay</i>	428	<i>Colombia</i>	388

explain these low results. There is no causal relationship between student learning and external factors such as the level of spending on education. It is at the school level where the courses taught shown how the processes depend, firstly, on the learning achieved. According to research on school effectiveness, the most relevant factors in explaining the differential between Argentina and other countries – like Spain – are internal factors: organization of teaching, working conditions of teachers, and levels of academic requirements. The way it works, and how school experiences are organized, depends mainly on: working conditions of teachers (low salaries, multiple employment, training, teacher absenteeism), which explains the low school time devoted to teaching, as well as the low quality of education. Similarly, modes of transmission of knowledge and the limited employment of textbooks show that the level of functioning of Argentinean secondary schools does not guarantee the development of effective teaching-learning processes for all students, which, from a comparative international analysis, would ultimately be one of the reasons for Argentina's low level on PISA.

On the other hand, México was, together with Brazil, a country that dared to participate in PISA 2000. Fernández Rizo (2006) recalls that when the results were published in Mexico “some of the news media gave a negative simplistic version, saying that the country was in the penultimate place in the world with regard to the quality of its education” (p. 158). However, PISA seriously put into doubt whether the management of the educational system was oriented toward educational achievement. The increase in the number of young people in secondary education had not also guaranteed sufficient minimum quality, for example, in reading. PISA, as a distant voice, with its legitimacy and recognition as an international test, came to show the public opinion that “there are very serious problems that should be taken care of and that, otherwise, the country would have to face the consequences in terms of lagging behind, inequality and lack of competitiveness” (Zorrilla, 2009, p. 80).

Brazil is the only country that, without belonging to the OECD, decided to participate from the first edition. In the context of a “managerialist vision” (Motte, 2008), during President Cardoso’s second term (1995-2002), his Education Minister, Pablo Renato Souza, decided to put the Brazilian educational system to the test with

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PISA 2000, even knowing that the results could be disastrous. But the mediocre educational system in Brazil is not thought to be due to a lack of resources, but rather to a lack of measurement using comparative standards. Far from pretending to compete in quality with richer countries, this evaluation was defended because it is considered one of the most serious and respected instruments in the world to identify the deficits of educational systems. Retrospectively, Souza explains (Souza, 2006) that it was a brave decision to “enter into a study where the most advanced countries are”, as an expression of a country’s maturity to comply with the methodological requirements and analyze the information obtained from a scientific document. He added: “some countries decide not to divulge the research data considered less favorable. Our decision shows a degree of maturity of the education authorities, and it shows the will to calmly analyze the state of our education and extract lessons and implications for making political decisions. [...] The results from PISA will house style? serve as a basis for perfecting the evaluation and follow-up of the effectiveness of the educational systems, using the international patterns as a parameter and drawing ambitious horizons for how to formulate public policy in all the areas in our country” (pp. 156-7).

Therefore, although the results, as expected, were poor, PISA played a high level strategic role in returning them to the actors, especially the teachers (Souza, 2005). Thus, in part, the teachers received pressure, as responsible parties, for future improvement. In this regard, the Basic Education Evaluation System (SAEB) made an effort to report the results in a way that would be understood by teachers. The Minister used to argue that the improvement in the academic results does not depend on the resources, given that certain Federal states have more resources, but similar results.

DISCUSSION: IBERIA-AMERICA AND PISA

The question of why Latin America scores so low on PISA can have different answers depending on the ideological position from which they are perceived and formulated. Thus, from a neoliberal perspective, Jeff Puryear (2007) points out:

There is no single answer, and most Latin American countries clearly can't expect to do as well as wealthy countries such as Finland any time soon. Still, it is telling that Latin America has failed to put into place a number of components that are common in the world's high-performing school systems. These include: world-class standards (especially in reading and math); incentives to get and keep first-rate teachers; mechanisms to make teachers effective instructors; special attention to students who fall behind; and universal pre-school.

But it is senseless to compare the performance of the Latin American systems – plagued by gaps of inequality— with the performance of systems like Finland and the other more socially egalitarian countries. Latin America will gain nothing right now by imposing high standards –internationally competitive— if they are not accompanied by an “internationally competitive” spending, especially for poor

students, and if these students are not supported, together with their families from day one.

The investment in education in Latin American, even though it has increased in the past few years (before the current crisis), is insufficient. The percentage of GNP spent on education now represents about 4 %, a level similar to that of the OECD countries. But the spending per student is five times lower in Latin America, as the school age population represents between a quarter and a third of the total, compared with less than a fifth in the OECD. It is necessary to improve both the quantity and the quality of the public goods and services. Spending more is important, but the way this money is spent is even more relevant. The Latin American governments continue to invest little in those policies that have a greater impact on the performance of the students. If a greater expenditure in education is quite important, when there is little money available, improving the quality of this spending becomes even more important, making it more effective and better focused.

Latin America and the Caribbean have made (the same year as the third PISA, in 2006) their own evaluation of the performance of Primary level students, in one of the most ambitious attempts, known as the *Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study* (SERCE), carried out by the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE) of the UNESCO (2008). Seventeen Spanish-speaking countries participated with third and sixth grade primary students in the areas of mathematics, language and sciences. A good analysis of the results, as well as their implications for educational policy and classroom practices, can be seen in Murillo and Román (2009) and Llece (2010). In this sense, SERCE offers information that complements PISA, as can be observed in the joint analysis performed by the OEI (2008). Although the influence of the social, economic and cultural environment of the student and the school increases with the grade level, PISA and SERCE also show that good work by teachers and schools is a determining factor in improving the education of all young people.

In the context of the commemoration of the 200 years of Latin America's independence from Spain, the General Secretariat of the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI) has proposed a collective commitment in education to deal with the current challenges and demands of the Iberian-American people and as a way of betting on the future. Thus, the project "*Education Goals 2021: the Education that we want for the Bicentenaries' Generation*" arose; twenty-seven specific goals were established which, in turn, were specified in the form of 38 indicators. These indicators express the criteria that will be used to evaluate the advances made toward the goals, which are expected to be reached in 2021. The achievement levels are formulated in different degrees in order to adapt them to the initial situation of each country. An important future task will be for each country to define the level of specific achievement it plans to reach (OEI, 2008).

However, if it is clear that PISA has become the most advanced and complete system of international evaluation to date, it is also true that it is limited to a selection of three basic competencies, so that, according to Schleicher (2007: 350),

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“it is obvious that PISA cannot capture the *entirety* of competencies that will make young people successful”. The DeSeCo project, also funded by the OECD, wanted to provide a comprehensive view of competencies “for personal, social and economic well-being”, but up until now it has not been reflected in PISA. In the work mentioned above, Schleicher recognizes that PISA will not be able to evaluate interpersonal dimensions of competencies, which are of increasing importance, such as the ability of students to relate well to others, to manage and resolve conflicts, or to respect and appreciate different values, beliefs or cultures. Therefore, a serious limitation is that it only evaluates part of what is taught in school. Furthermore, there are other basic dimensions where PISA does not enter: coverage, level of long-term efficiency, evaluations of students, teachers and schools. In a clearly coordinated way, each of them must fulfill its role in order to improve the educational quality.

Ibero-America has gradually assumed more responsibility for the results of the students. However, on the whole, these results have not improved progressively. If broadening the schooling to the entire population was the goal of the 1980's and part of the 1990's, the current challenge, as well as universalizing Secondary education (World Bank, 2005), is to improve the quality, understood as providing the entire population with the necessary skills. On the whole, Latin America, on the successive tests (both TIMMS and PISA), obtains lower results than the countries in Europe and Asia. In addition to revealing great distances from other OECD countries, the Latin American countries present more unequal distributions. The reforms undertaken in the past few decades, once the entire population had access, have not been able to affect the hard core of teaching: the qualitative improvement of the teaching in the classroom. In one context, in some cases, quite focused on the country itself or with populist governments, an external international test like PISA enjoyed a legitimacy that served to question the management of the respective education systems, demanding quality focused on educational achievement in competencies.

The commentary about PISA has been mobilized to legitimize a certain educational policy. Rather than extracting lessons from the results, like –for example– which methodological changes could favour which language and which spelling, again learning the competencies, any changes made have been based on a prior political, ideological or educational position, and the data from PISA have been instrumentalized toward this end. The data have been used to justify the changes made or to provide support for educational policies already in place. Instead, the diffusion of the reports should contribute to a “rationalization of the public action” in education (Maroy & Mangez, 2008).

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