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#### TEACHERS' INITIAL TRAINING SYSTEM IN URUGUAY: LESSONS LEARNED

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In Latin America, teachers at all levels of education lack the motivation for professional development. This is due partly to financial reasons, but also due to an educational system, which accords greater importance to increasing the number of enrollments than to reinforcing the professional role of teachers. The considerable increase in the number of jobs for teachers over the last forty years has occurred without having the necessary means to create and maintain quality of teaching. Low salaries and poor working conditions have brought down the level of recruitment of new teachers. Recent research has shown that beginning teachers, who enter training, have incredibly low academic levels.

A study carried out in six countries has shown those levels of satisfaction and prestige as well as the desire for excellence was very low<sup>2</sup>. The principal factor causing a low quality of education in Latin America is the lack of attention to the professional development of teachers. The motivations for encouraging teachers to improve their teaching (adequate salaries, perfection, rigorous periodic assessment, and competitive entrance examination) are seldom found.

Teacher training and school management have not changed the traditional method of « frontal » classroom teaching, in which learning is dictated to pupils, where memorization plays an active role, and where only correct answers have value. Discussion among pupils for solving problems is a rarely.

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<sup>2</sup> Schiefelbein and all, 1994.

In the past decades, teacher education in Latin America has suffered undeserved neglect partly due to a low social status and the very meagre remuneration of Primary and Secondary school teachers. How can this situation be transformed? The obvious answer is a salary increase although is not the only one possible. There are other ways of strengthening the teachers' professional status and of furthering the capacity of attracting those who take up a teaching career by providing suitable well-equipped premises, an incentive system to go into teaching, by establishing contact with the best international academic centers...

Between different possible ways to improve the situation of teachers in Latin America, we present in this article the case of Uruguay, with special reference to an innovation introduced in the initial formation of teachers carried out in the Regional Centers for Teacher Education (CE.R.P.s).

Uruguay is a small country with little more than three million inhabitants. The smallness of its size becomes more relevant if we consider that neighboring Brazil grows at the rate of one Uruguay per year and the other neighboring country, Argentina, has 33 million inhabitants. It is understandable then that even if Uruguay due to its smallness can hardly be regarded as a model, it nevertheless has a series of comparative advantages that makes it possible for it to contribute with interesting reflections upon education in times of reform, thus becoming a kind of laboratory for inspiring ideas to the other countries in the region.

#### 1. Setting the context: What is happening with educational change in Uruguay?

Uruguay shares with Latin America a number of common traits. Research shows that in the past decades, the growth of most of the formal education systems has taken place together with a general diminishment in quality and with an ever-rising internal differentiation or segmentation between students from a low socioeconomic level and those from a higher one.

Today it is necessary to face not only problems rising from access equity -all the students have the right to enter the educational system- but also those of equity in learning conditions -all the students must be provided with the necessary tools in order to achieve the results expected from them-. This is supported by the educational reform carried out in Uruguay since 1995<sup>3</sup> of which one of the aims is to consolidate social equity<sup>4</sup> so as to confront awareness of the fact that both disparity in access to the educational system as well as learning difficulties, strongly concentrated around critical areas such as Mathematics and Spanish, might threaten the achievements of a solid social integration, which has been a historical characteristic in Uruguay.

The Educational Reform in Uruguay refer to the progressive universalization of initial education for four and five year-old children, to the extension of the model of full-time school for the deprived population groups, to the revision of the teaching and learning

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<sup>3</sup> Which began to be put into practice with budget funds voted by Parliament and enacted by the Presidency and which became current as from January 1st. 1996.

<sup>4</sup> With strong inspiration in the CEPAL and OREALC ideas which propose a "productive transformation with equity" for the Latin America of the nineties, emphasizing equity as a condition for social and economic development.

model in Middle Education<sup>5</sup>, to the professional strengthening of initial teacher training, to strongly promoting in-service training and to the gradual improvement of labor conditions.

Many of the goals mentioned are included in other reforms applied in the region. However, a distinctive characteristic in Uruguay is the fact that, throughout five years of implementation, there has been achieved a series of results in different areas that breaks away with the idea of a slow and painfully agreed-by-consensus way of designing a reform, and makes us wonder about the characteristics and consequences of certain modes of change.

Among the most undeniable results of the reform process are those related to Middle Education teachers' initial training? In the past three years, Uruguay has devoted much time and effort in rethinking and developing a new proposal for teacher training.

## 2. Why transform teacher initial education?

Transformation actions undertaken by ANEP<sup>6</sup> in teachers' initial education originated in the process of low professional development of Middle Education teaching staff associated, among other things, with the low rate of degrees in the Institutes for teacher education and the high rate of retirement<sup>7</sup>, as well as the explosive growth of enrolment in Middle Education in Uruguay<sup>8</sup>

The universalization policy<sup>9</sup> which stated that the first three years of Middle Education were to be compulsory had a very important effect in that it incorporated a great number of students to basic education, both in technical secondary schools and secondary schools proper. The law was actually applied as from 1985 with the return to democracy. A new student population therefore joins the formal educational system, particularly Secondary School. By way of example, note that in Uruguay during the sixties, secondary school presented coverage rates of about 15 % to 18% (in students aged from 12 to 17) while at the beginning of the nineties, they had risen to 75% to 80%. This fact has brought about important challenges to the Secondary School systems, designed several decades ago for an "average" middle-class student with a certain cultural level.

This avalanche over the Secondary School system meant a high growth rate, an increase in the female staff and a horizontal expansion of education services in the country, reaching

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<sup>5</sup> Middle Education in Uruguay comprises two stages of Secondary School or Technical School. Primary school (6 years) and the first phase of Middle Education (3 years) are compulsory.

<sup>6</sup> In Uruguay, the whole of the educational system is under the control of ANEP (National Administration of Public Education) that is, kindergarten, primary, secondary, as well as primary school and secondary school teachers', directors' and supervisors' initial and in-service training. The Ministry of Education is an extremely atypical one and exercises no direct hierarchical authority on the functioning of education, which is in charge of two self-governing public institutions: ANEP and the University of the Republic.

<sup>7</sup> The graduation average of Middle Education teachers between 1996 and 1998 is 212 per year, while an estimated 650 teachers are needed to compensate for yearly retirements.

<sup>8</sup> About the situation of the teaching staff in Middle Education, see "La Reforma de la Educación. Documento V: "Docentes de Secundaria. A un año del censo de 1995".

<sup>9</sup> The 1973 law.

small towns and villages, with all that this implies in terms of lack of human teaching resources.

Information collected in the 1995 teachers' census revealed a considerable shortage of qualified teachers in Secondary Education. According to such data, 44 to 45% of the teachers working in Montevideo hold a degree, while in the rest of the country they amount to 20%, the national average thus being 30%. There are particularly critical areas, such as Mathematics, where the average in the provinces drops to 7.1%. The situation is somewhat better in Natural Science (18%) while percentages for Language and Literature and Social Science reach 32.2% and 37.45% respectively<sup>10</sup>.

The problem of the absence of a teaching staff with satisfactory specific training affects the provinces more than it does Montevideo. The creation of the Regional Centers for Teacher Education (CE.R.P.) is geared, precisely, to change the situation.

### 3. An innovation in progress: Regional Centers for Teacher Education (CE.R.P.s)

The Regional Centers for Teacher Education (CE.R.P.s) are the answer to a decentralization strategy in terms of teachers' initial education. The first two opened in 1997 (West and North of the country), a third Center in 1998 (East), two more were added in 1999 (South and southwest) and the last one in 2000 (Middle of the country), thus covering the whole of Uruguay. Such centers are tertiary institutions with a high academic standard sited in urban areas with a relatively low population and little cultural differentiation, whose purpose is to train teachers for Secondary Education and Technical Education in the following degree courses: Language and Literature, Mathematics, Natural Science (Biology, Physics and Chemistry areas), Social Science (History, Geography and Sociology areas) and English<sup>11</sup>.

The curricular proposal in the Regional Centers (CE.R: P.s) starts with the great areas of knowledge in the 1<sup>st</sup> year and opens up in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year to deal with the specificity of each course of study. That is, the 1<sup>st</sup> year covers areas of knowledge common to all, whereas the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years are devoted to knowledge more closely related to each course in particular.

The training of trainee-teachers focuses on the specific aspects of each Department but is also related to the field of Education Sciences and Teaching Practice and includes learning modules devised to develop special abilities required for the teaching profession such as English and Computing.

One of the main axes of the proposal is the hour-duration ratio. The CE.R.P.s have more lesson hours and less years of training compared with the traditional institutions for teacher education in the country.

The CE: R: P: s constitute academic units with a highly concentrated timetable. There is forty hours per week teaching from Monday to Friday, attendance being obligatory. The total

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<sup>10</sup> For the calculation of percentages of qualified teachers, teachers taken into account were the following: for Language and Literature, those of Spanish Language and Literature; for Natural Science, those of Biology, Physics and Chemistry; for Social Science those of Geography, History and Social and Civic Education.

<sup>11</sup> The English teacher course began in 1999 in the two centers: South and Southwest.

numbers of hours a year -on the basis of 35 weeks at 40 hours per week- amounts to 1.400. It is then a three-year course with a total of 4.200 hours including lessons and teaching practice.

The 40 hours week sessions mean that the students should devote themselves exclusively to studying. Thus a full-time system of higher education is created in an obvious attempt to achieve excellence.

It is with the intention of having full-time students that teacher initial education is carried out in regional centers and not in centers in only one town. The old rivalry among all the towns in Uruguay, each of them claiming first for a school, then a high school, is senseless in a small country, with only 3.200.000 inhabitants and no city -except Montevideo- with more than 100.000 inhabitants.

The creation of the CE.R.P.s is significant only at a regional scale and to make it feasible there is a scholarship program. The program is intended to attract future teachers with a good academic record in Secondary School and who cannot afford a higher education. The financial-support program includes the granting of 60 yearly scholarships to students not living in the town where the Center is sited and 10 yearly lunch vouchers for local students. Maximum registration expected for each CE.R.P. Generation amounts to 160 students; therefore the theoretical registration maximum is 480 students and 180 full scholarships. The success of the program has been made possible through the cooperation of the municipal governments who have provided lodging facilities and have afforded assistance in terms of scholarships in order to enlarge the student quota in their respective provinces.

The scholarship program covers transportation, food and lodging so as to cater for any subsistence problems the region's students might have. The social intentionality is clear: the idea is to recruit young people regardless of their income and thus attract the best human resources to the educational systems.

The fact that the CE.R.P.s are regional partly determines their cost structure, since they require a series of expenses for scholarships and the settling down of the teachers in the area which are not included in the other teacher education options. The 46% of the operating costs of a CE.R: P. is destined to salaries paid to educators/teacher-trainers, administrative staff and directors. The remaining 54% are allocated to the scholarships for the students' lodging, food and transportation and expenses derived from locating teachers who do not live in the area and to functioning costs.

The students' maintenance costs vary according to whether or not the centers have accommodation facilities. In order to lower costs a building scheme is under way which will enable the CE.R.P.s to possess their own facilities.

Another nodal aspect of the C.E.R.P.s is the presence of full- time teachers with a weekly 40-hour dedication, of which no less than 20 hours are devoted to teaching lessons. The remaining 20 hours are devoted to other activities such as tutorials, self- study guidance, and co-ordination among teachers of the same Department, co-ordination with other educational centers for the Teaching Practice, participation in technical teams to provide pedagogic support to educational centers and /or refresher courses.

Teachers for the CE.R.P.s are selected from among those applicants who have undergone an Educator training course held annually at the Center for Teacher Training and Development of the National Administration of Public Education. To date, four courses have been conducted *since 1997*.

The CE.R.P.s with their scholarship system, well-paid teachers, and full-time courses have registered a low rate of dropouts. In most countries, the issue of Primary school and Secondary School teachers, their salaries and their training is a vicious circle which has brought about the existence of poorly-trained teachers recruited from a pool of students of low performance. There is little motivation to go into the teaching profession, due to low initial salaries. Therefore, dropout during the course is high, so the costs of training teachers become prohibitive. The design of the new centers tries to break away from this vicious circle and gives way to reflection upon transformation in teacher initial education.

#### 4. Lessons learned

Teacher initial education has been diversified noticeably since 1997 as, on the one hand, there exist the traditional Institutes for Teacher Education and on the other hand, the new Regional Centers. The “bypass”<sup>12</sup> change strategy adopted has brought about certain cohabitation not exempt from difficulties but which at the same time makes the educational institutions more dynamic.

The “CE.R.P. Innovation” has contributed to improving the existent initial training system in Uruguay thanks to an educational policy based on the quality and equity of the education, the modernization of the teaching methods, the social and cultural reappraisal of the teaching profession and the changes in curricula that are being implemented in Middle Education.

Although it is comparatively easy to diagnose what is happening in the institutions for teacher education, it is not equally easy to put forward proposals that can be turned into practice which, at the same time may be supported by policy and administrative reforms. The case of Uruguay shows that it is possible to re-think and develop new teacher education projects within a reasonably short time.

In the following sections we will share with the reader some of our reflections and queries aroused by the setting up of the CE.R.Ps.

#### A “whole” educational institution

At present there exist many types of centers for teacher education, some of them cater for education in the full dimension of the personality and others do not. Thus we can refer to “whole” institutions and “partial” institutions<sup>13</sup>The “whole” initial education institutes aim at providing teacher trainees with a total education. Such institutions deal not only with the basic core of cognitive development but also with the basic core of the personality. Future

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<sup>12</sup> That is to say that new institutions are created instead of changing the existing ones.

<sup>13</sup> See Legendre, R. 1983 and Tedesco, J. C., 1995.

teachers must develop a series of skills (the skill to solve problems, the skill to work in teams,) which are not formed through the mere acquisition of information or knowledge.

The CE.R.P.s show a clear tendency to develop as “whole” institutions, by means of better ways of organizing and supporting learning practice and the incorporation of activities related to the development of the personality. Trainees and trainers regard learning not as a solitary task but as the result of joint effort, with time and opportunity available to work together. Changes in attitude and energy resulting from the daily exchange are very beneficial and contribute to regard the institution as a “whole” environment, a generator of cognitive capacity and values.

#### *More time for the students to learn*

At the CE.R.P.s there is plenty of time available, so teaching and learning strategies become broader and more complex. Teachers devote more time to students according to their needs: with those who have learning difficulties, those who require more demanding activities or those who have very different learning styles. The eight-hour timetable allows for more “academic time”: time to learn and time to develop each student’s human potential. Students must read a lot and do many write assignments. For the time being, we find that the daily eight-hour working schedule has brought about changes at different levels in both students and teachers. The future teachers are taken away from their milieu and are kept in a full-time scheme, thus making it possible to seize their motivation, effort, energy and time to the outmost. The trainees feel transformed by the intense experience of devoting themselves exclusively to studying and talk openly about the achievements made in one year.

#### *A curricular proposal with a stress on essential knowledge*

The present proliferation of knowledge raises the question of content selection criteria to be applied in the centers for teacher initial education: can it be the whole of it? The answer is “No”. It seems that “generating” knowledge must be selected in order to obtain basic competencies for the future teachers’ performance as productive, creative, analytical and critical 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens<sup>14</sup>. The curriculum proposed by the CE.R.Ps is based on a profound knowledge of some essential topics rather than on a mere accumulation of superficial knowledge of a large number of topics. It stresses ideas and theories that will help students to organize and build up new knowledge. The principle behind is clear: a curriculum is proposed covering less subject matter but offering the opportunity of going more deeply into the topics.

#### *A system of incentives to take up the teaching profession*

If the question is asked, “Who wants to be a teacher today in Latin America?” the answer is the worrying evidence that a teaching career in the past years has not been attracting society’s most talented, most motivated young people<sup>15</sup>. In most Latin American countries, the teaching profession does not arouse much interest. This phenomenon of the choice of a

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<sup>14</sup> See Braslavsky, C. 1998 and Perkins, D., 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Tedesco, J. C., 1995.

profession in terms of low attraction capability has increased in the past few years, particularly because of low salaries and deterioration of teachers' living standards. In this context it is not surprising that teachers who work for a time in secondary schools should resign, considering that the secondary level is particularly critical in terms of working conditions, where isolation and balkanization are a distinguishing trait<sup>16</sup>.

The incentive system to go into teaching, which accompanies the CE.R.P.s' proposal undoubtedly, arouses in intelligent enthusiastic young people the wish and the possibility of becoming teachers in Middle Education. The granting of scholarships to students with little means of support is a way of motivating them to take up the teaching profession. Such scholarships are a very strong incentive to encourage candidates who otherwise could not afford to go and live in the town where the CERP is sited. We must add another advantage: future teachers are recruited from the provinces, where the shortage of qualified teachers is most crucial.

### *The Directors' leadership*

The CERP Directors have played a very important role ever since the innovation was started since it was on them that the responsibility of setting the guidelines of the institution lay, of permanently seeking to combine the criteria, willpower and intentionality of the different actors. The directors are continually taking decisions not only as regards the educational centers but also about the students' residences and besides, they have had to interact with the different levels of the educational system, with local governments and with cultural and sporting bodies. Throughout this process, the CERP directors have revealed a high degree of information, intuition and creativity, strategic command apart from a good deal of organizational imagination.

### *Full-time committed educators*

One of the strong points in the proposal is the policy applied to the hiring of educators. It is unthinkable to propose a model of teacher initial education without qualified educators to carry it out. In order to have good teachers one must have good educators. The system of selecting and training such educators is no doubt one of the achievements that Uruguay can pass on to other countries as it succeeded in obtaining highly qualified professionals.

Teacher educators spend about four hours a day in class with the students and remain in the Center for about eight or nine hours from Monday to Friday, They spend the time they are not teaching interacting with other teachers, preparing classes, correcting assignments or tutoring students individually. The fact that the educators work exclusively for the Center and are paid an adequate salary gives them a greater economic relief. They do not need an additional source of income, which ensures a good balance between teaching hours and time devoted to preparing courses, helping students and participating in other activities in the Center.

### *Instrumental support*

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<sup>16</sup> Hargreaves, A.,1996.

Students are aided in their studies with the support of two instrumental subjects (English and Computing), that undoubtedly improves their learning and facilitates their professional practice in the first years. Such support is vital since one cannot manage as tertiary-level professionals in the world today without speaking an international language and without having a command of computers.

The availability of new technology is a unique opportunity to discharge part of the information supply through the screens of the CE.R.P.s' computing rooms.

As above mentioned, the CERPs illustrate a proposal of Teachers' initial education, where a series of factors act together in order to achieve success in the future teachers' education. However, a new experience and a project that is just beginning to be implemented, necessarily bring about weak points that must be reflected upon:

#### Scarcity of studies

The educational transformations in progress at present face challenges for which there is no single or definite answer.

The implementation of the CERPs is very recent so more times are required for the Centers to develop fully and to be subjected to evaluation.

#### Lack of coordination

The curricula proposed by the CE.RP.s are hardly articulated with those offered by other institutions for teacher initial education in the country. Without affecting the particular characteristics of each institution, it would be desirable to establish a minimal coordination of curricula in teacher education in order to ensure the quality of the offer in spite of its heterogeneity.

#### Imbalance between the proposal and administrative support

There is a noticeable imbalance between the changes introduced in the CERPs (eight-hour working days, full-time teacher educators,) and the administrative support required for its development and mainly, for its consolidation. This can be associated with the strong centralist tradition that characterizes the organization of the educational services in Uruguay and to the lack of mechanisms that will promote decentralization efficiently.

#### Difficulties inherent to a process of change

Great deals of the difficulties that arise in the CERPs are due to the complexity of a process of change and to the diversity of forces intervening in it. The creation of the CERPs is an experience in which different factors interact in terms of innovation, quality and type of resources, organization and actors involved. Interaction among these factors is not exempt from conflict and requires institutional monitoring which is not always easy to guarantee.

#### 5. A final reflection

There can be no sole answers at times of great uncertainty about the future. In teacher initial education there are no set rules because of its very complexity. The “CERP innovation” has brought us face to face with such complexity, where political, cultural, economic, social and pedagogical variables merge.

The great challenge for those of us who have been working in new models for teacher initial education is to find out exactly how to handle such complexity, which is far more difficult and self-committing than just rocking-chair thinking. What we did find out is that there are no recipes, no fixed routes.

An analysis of teacher training in Uruguay and Latin America, at a time of great social changes underlines the huge complexity of the problems and the need to face them with systematic strategies of action and not partial policies. But recognizing the need to consider the problem in its entire dimension does not mean that it is possible or even desirable to try and solve everything at the same time.

The systemic characteristic must be understood as the need to define a sequence in the actions, through which it is shown when and how the different aspects of the problem will be considered.

The global and systemic characteristic, which the training policy of teachers in Latin America must adopt, goes hand in hand with a series of challenges, which will appear in the decades to come:

- Recruitment of teachers: attract the most competent students towards the teaching profession
- Initial training: improve the link between initial training and the requirements for professional development
- Training at work: provide permanent qualification for all the staff
- Involvement of teachers and other staff in the process of transformation of education: autonomy and responsibility
- Promotion of professionalism as a strategy to improve the situation and working conditions of teachers.
- Solidarity with teachers working in difficult conditions
- Regional and international cooperation: an instrument to promote the mobility and competence of teachers

This is the great challenge that we educators cannot relinquish, to prevent the children and young people in our educational systems from experiencing what Bernard Shaw looking in retrospect stated: “in my childhood my parents decided to interrupt my education by sending me to school...”

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