



# Community school programmes in Latin America: Imagining the long-term impact of developing pupils' agency



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## ABSTRACT

Community school programmes in Latin America have received relatively little consideration when compared to the amount of research conducted on popular education in the region. This paper revises the literature on community school programmes in the context of the theory of dialogic action and the capability approach. First, the roots of inequality in Latin America are discussed. This is followed by a summary of the literature on community school programmes in Latin America, analysing their differences and commonalities and exploring two different community school programmes operating in the region. A conceptual framework is next presented to explore the role of the progressive educator and individuals' agency, drawing parallels between the ideas of Paulo Freire and those of M S Archer and Amartya Sen in relation to agency and freedom. The paper concludes by questioning whether, by developing pupils' agency, community school programmes such as those analysed in this paper, could help to tackle educational inequalities in the long term, with a discussion of the implications for further research.

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## 1. Introduction

Twenty-six years ago, La Belle wrote that “Latin America and the Caribbean have a long tradition of innovative approaches to non-formal education for economically and politically subjugated adults” (1987: 201). It could be argued that currently this is still the case. Adult education and school community programmes are examples of such a tradition. As Torres (1990) explains, the coexistence of hegemonic and emergent pedagogical forms has been the rule in the region and has led to rich experiences of educational innovation at the community level. Whilst adult education and more recent cash-transfer programmes have generally been widely analysed, research on community school programmes remains under-explored. In the context of Freire's theory of dialogic action and Sen's capability approach, this paper revises the literature on programmes originally tailored to serve the impoverished sectors in the region.

During the last thirty years, community school programmes have been introduced in countries as diverse as Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Canada, Israel, the United States (US), India, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua (Di

Gropello and Marshall, 2009; Jimenez and Sawada, 1999). For example, different school interventions undertaken in the US aimed at strengthening partnerships with ethnic minority groups have demonstrated that students and their families welcome these programmes when implemented in their communities (Ordoñez-Jasis and Jasis, 2004; Sabry and Bruna, 2007; Williams and Baber, 2007).

School programmes that involve families and communities can play a decisive role in students' academic success. These programmes have been promoted as a strategy to enhance school environments, strengthen effective leadership within schools and help to tackle educational inequalities more efficiently. Research evidence demonstrates that when schools in low-income areas establish programmes of collaboration, students are more likely to perform at higher levels (Deslandes, 2006; Ordoñez-Jasis and Jasis, 2004; Sanders, 2008; Sheldon, 2003, 2007). Community school programmes are no longer a single country issue, but a priority shared by politicians, educators, families and communities around the world (Deslandes, 2006). In the case of Latin America, community school programmes have been influential in expanding educational access for many deprived rural areas.

Community school programmes in Latin America are not part of what has been known as the popular education movement. There are some important differences between community school programmes and popular education such as the former being state-sponsored (and in many cases internationally sponsored) whilst the

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latter originated at grassroots level and, consequently, more critical and political aware (Arnové and Torres, 1995). However, it could be argued that they also share some common characteristics. For instance, both have been directed to a social sector generally characterised as marginalised. Pedagogically, both share basic principles such as problem-posing literacy training and participative education (Torres, 1990). As with popular education, people benefiting from community school programmes can also be empowered to place demands on national governments for social services and resources (Arnové et al., 1996) and, like popular education, community school programmes have also represented an important alternative to the formal education sector in the region.

Scholars have argued that little research has been conducted on the impact of community school programmes and they advocate further research in this area (Altschuler and Corrales, 2009; Sheldon, 2003). Particularly in less industrialised economies, there is relatively little empirical evidence documenting the merits of community school programmes (Di Gropello and Marshall, 2009; Jimenez and Sawada, 1999; Marshall, 2009; McEwan and Trowbridge, 2007).

This paper does not aim to analyse whether mainstream education systems in Latin America contribute to reproduce social inequalities neither to present new empirical data on community school programmes. It aims to revise the literature on these programmes as the topic has been less discussed in the international literature. It will also reflect upon the long-term benefits of encouraging pupils' agency through alternative teaching – such as the community schools programmes here analysed – and will propose further research on this area. In other words, it will analyse previous empirical and conceptual scholarship in order to propose implications for further research on this topic.

## 2. Contextual background: inequality in Latin America

Torres (1990) points out that if we are to characterise educational programmes we need to make reference to the social circumstances in which these programmes take place. Taking into account different indicators of inequality such as consumption, income, wealth, access to services and opportunities, Latin America has been one of the most unequal regions of the world (De Ferranti et al., 2004; Klasen and Nowak-Lehmann, 2009). For this reason, it is important to grasp the implications that inequality has for education. Different policies and interventions have been implemented across the region. Development strategies were introduced during the post-World War II era up to the 1970s, bringing general economic development to the region. More recently, liberal market reforms together with economic adjustment policies promoted by international donor agencies (Arnové et al., 1996) were implemented since the 1980s slowing down the previous economic growth. Notwithstanding different economic strategies and policy regimes, Latin American inequality has persisted across time (Klasen and Nowak-Lehmann, 2009).

As De Ferranti et al. (2004) explain, poverty and inequality, although related, are different phenomena. Poverty is a consequence of poor economic growth and high inequality (Klasen and Nowak-Lehmann, 2009). Economic inequality is a consequence of uneven distribution of wealth and in the region tends to be related to individuals' race, sex and parental origin (Klasen and Nowak-Lehmann, 2009) affecting the opportunities for equal interaction and competition of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Hence, not surprisingly, the highest levels of poverty and inequality are found amongst the working classes and the rural poor. As Arnové and Torres (1995) explain, ethnicity contributes further to striking inequality rates being the countries with largest concentration of indigenous populations the most affected. This is

because Latin America's high level of inequality has historical roots as a result of the Spanish and Portuguese colonisation of the Americas where the redistribution of land and labour through coercive institutions benefited the European elite (Frankema, 2009).

It can be argued that the historical development of education policies in the region has been characterised by continuous struggles between progressive plans versus conservative projects. Historically, it has been the elites that have been able to design and implement the education policy in the region (Azaola, 2012). These policies generally have served the elites' own interests (Arnové et al., 1996) in order to maintain their power. The dominant sectors have generally blamed the mentality and customs of underprivileged groups instead of attending the increasing needs they have had since the Spanish colony. Currently it is difficult to find a regional standardised trend in relation to educational policy, or what Beech (2002) called, a 'regional educational discourse' as it used to be decades ago. The days of the dependent capitalist states with a peripheral position in the global economy and a precarious position in relation to the US as described by Arnové and Torres (1995) apparently have changed. Nevertheless, the challenges for all Latin American countries, either of right, centre or left-wing governments, have now increased since, apart from endemic inequality, the current financial crisis further reduces the socio-economic progress of the countries (Marchesi, 2009). With every economic crisis the sectors that suffer the most are the disadvantaged ones. As Arnové and Torres reported in 1995 the highest illiteracy rates are found amongst poor, rural women whilst children from working-class, indigenous and rural backgrounds are most likely to fail at school and, almost twenty years later, the situation has not changed much (see Marchesi, 2009).

The following section will summarise the literature on community school programmes in Latin America; will examine their differences and commonalities and will look at two different community school programmes operating in the region.

## 3. Community school programmes in Latin America

Community school programmes in Latin America were originally implemented in poor, rural and remote communities with limited local services and low socio-economic and education levels. They emerged as a response to the serious educational deficits prevailing in rural areas (Altschuler and Corrales, 2009). These programmes were designed to encourage school autonomy, foster parental participation and make schools more responsive to local needs. By so doing, they sought to free school staff from time consuming administrative activities (Di Gropello and Marshall, 2009). Community school programmes also promote new instructional strategies amongst rural teachers including classroom discussion, work in small groups and independent student research (McEwan and Benveniste, 2001). These programmes run in parallel with, and fill the gaps left by, traditional public rural schools (Altschuler and Corrales, 2009).

Although the origin of the call for increased social participation in education in Latin America has been top-down and more rarely bottom-up (Gershberg, 2004), there is some evidence that these programmes demonstrate communities' strong inherent demand for education and a desire to participate in the governance of their schools (Jimenez and Sawada, 1999). Unlike demand-side intervention programmes that seek to provide conditional cash transfers to poor rural or urban households linked to regular school attendance and health clinic visits, community school programmes are an example of supply side interventions that aim to implement pedagogical innovation, and invest in infrastructure and materials in schools with high percentages of poor students (Tarabini-Castellani, 2007).

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