

Teaching for Transformation: International Forum on Liberating Pedagogies, and Resistance to Neo-liberalism in Education

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The IDEA network forum, *Teaching for Transformation*, was held on April 12 and 13th in Vancouver. The IDEA Network is an intercontinental network whose main goal is to link organizations working in support of public education. The forum was coordinated by CoDevelopment Canada under the direction of Steve Stewart. The main goals of the forum were to examine the effects of neo-liberal policies on education and share a variety of responses to the attack on public education. Canadian participants included teachers, academics, and student leaders from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Quebec. International participants came from Kenya, Barbados, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Panamá, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and the United States.

1. Inauguration

BCTF President Susan Lambert shared some of the ways that neo-liberal policies have affected education in British Columbia, where 25% cut in taxes have resulted in a 3.3 billion dollar loss to public education, child poverty rates are the highest in the country for the 8th year in a row, and BC has one of fastest growing gaps between rich and poor. She discussed three fundamental forms of attack on teachers: on professional stature, collective bargaining, and autonomy. She recognized the gravity of the present situation in the participants' countries and thanked them for participating in the fight to preserve universally accessible public education for future generations.

2. Panel Discussion: Neo-liberal education policies and practices: what do they look like in the south and north?

Larry Kuehn, research director for the BCTF, Fanny Sequiera, education secretary for FOMCA, the Central American Organization of Teachers, Edgar Isch, researcher for the IDEA network and representative of the Ecuadorian Educators Union, Mary Compton, editor of *Teacher's Solidarity*, a UK based website, and Moses Muthoki, Kenyan coordinator for *Education Beyond Borders*, participated in the opening forum. Each participant had a similar analysis of neo-liberal educational reforms in their region to reduce the role of the state and turn education into a business that serves economic interests. Kuehn explained how governments have been effective in shifting the blame for the current economic crises to the high costs of public services. Sequiera commented on the "municipalisation" of education in Nicaragua, where responsibility for public education has been downloaded onto municipalities, claiming that this will result in improved quality and accessibility of education. In South America, India and Africa, the IMF has imposed neo-liberal policies through structural adjustment agreements as a condition for allowing more flexibility in debt repayments. The millennium development goal of a global right to education influences educational policy changes such as standardized testing and using enrolment and graduation levels as indicators of success. Compton described the influence of private corporations in India, which fund PRATA, whose goals include "preparing India's next

generation for global market economy” and “empowering an underprivileged child by teaching him English.” In Kenya, schools that were set up under the colonial system to maintain the division between servant and master are now being used to maintain a class system, with national schools receiving the most funding and support.

Each panel participant gave examples of how neo-liberal policies are used to monitor and control the educational system with the ultimate goal of privatization. Standardized tests, under-funding and large class sizes in public schools are never considered as factors for inferior performance compared to private schools. There has been a shift in focus from one of solidarity, respect for human rights, and development of moral values to one of competition, with a goal of transforming students into “micro-entrepreneurs.” In Kenya, society has become increasingly egocentric and violent; ten students committed suicide after test scores were released this year. In the UK and India, teachers are held responsible for low test scores, and schools with consistently low test scores are often forced to privatize. Isch spoke of a meritocratic system that segregates students based on test scores and the introduction of elite private schools offering the international baccalaureate, which only those with financial means can afford to attend.

The participants all gave examples of how current educational reforms have targeted teachers, resulting in decreased teacher autonomy, pay and pension cuts to teachers, teacher smear campaigns, the hiring of unqualified teachers, removal of the right to peaceful protest, and loss of labour rights such as seniority. A new education law in Honduras has eroded the teachers’ union by allowing voluntary membership. All these attacks are affecting teachers stress levels and reducing their amount of time available to teach creatively and to engage in acts of resistance.

Participants concluded their discussion with suggestions and examples of forms of resistance. Successes such as the student movements in Chile and Quebec as well as the “Occupy” movement are inspirational. Teachers’ unions, students and other groups need to continue working together to develop positive messaging and an alternative pedagogical movement in response to attacks on public education. Isch identifies three goals: increased investment in education with transparent use of funds, increased involvement of governments in defending education as a universal right, and the recognition of the value of an inclusive, emancipatory education system with a focus on social justice. Compton encouraged teachers to dare to resist right-wing governments: for example, the Sangati Project in Mombay, is introducing critical education into schools, and teachers are building a union. Her Teachers’ Solidarity website (teachersolidarity.com), documents examples of teachers’ struggles around the world and builds global collaboration. Mutoki used as an example the collective strike in Kenyan leading to teachers obtaining pensions and job security.

3. Forum Discussion: Forms of resistance to neo-liberal education policies

Rafael Feliciano, from the Puerto Rican Teachers’ Front opened the panel discussion on forms of resistance. He gave examples of successful struggles in Puerto Rico, including a month-long teachers’ strike in 1993 which won them continuing contracts and seniority, and a strike in 2008, which resulted in a 20% salary increase and a guarantee that no charter schools would be created. The teachers’ federation has played a leading role in social struggles. He warned against backing a particular political party, which consistently results in losses for teachers.

David Chudnovsky spoke next as coordinator for the Great Schools Project, whose goal is to investigate educational reforms that are good for children, communities and public education.

The approach of the Great Schools Project is to investigate alternative forms of assessing schools and use the results of assessment to help children, build communities and support public education, contrary to the controversial and ineffective use of standardized testing as an assessment tool.

Guillermo Castellanos de Leon, from Section 22 of the Mexican Education Workers' Union, spoke on the forms of resistance that teachers have used in Oaxaca, where violence and disappearances are common. Castellanos de Leon described how teachers are seen as community leaders in the on-going social struggle for government support of public services. One successful strategy is the implementation of teacher-led alternative pedagogy workshops for the whole community, using Paolo Freire's popular education model.

René Ramirez Puerta, president of the Peruvian Education Workers' Union (SUTEP), described how public education has been under attack in Peru over last 20 years, under four different neo-liberal governments. Under President Fujimori, changes meant that education was geared to the needs of the private sector, costs of education were off-loaded to municipalities, a meritocratic law determined funding of schools based on results of standardized tests, and private universities not averse to selling diplomas were created. Peruvian teachers worked together with parents, unions from all sectors and the general population to participate in "active resistance" through demonstrations, eliciting international denouncement and other actions which eventually succeeded in overthrowing Fujimori. Governments following Fujimori used media smear campaigns to continue to attack teachers. Violence was perpetrated by groups like the Sendero Luminoso in response to exclusion from the union and teachers' unions lost the right to remove union dues from pay cheques. A major struggle in Peru has been reuniting the union factions; SUTEP is proposing alternatives to neo-liberal initiatives, developing an alternative educational law and putting forward a national education project with an alternative curriculum.

Participants from a number of countries proposed tactics such as creating a popular struggle by building alliances, running publicity campaigns, developing a political strategy, putting forward constitutional court challenges, and taking the offensive by a process of extensive self-assessment of current practices.

4. Panel Discussion: Examples of successful resistance—*Students in Defence of Public Education (OCLAE)*

Daniel Carbo, representing students from 23 countries in the Latin American and Caribbean Students' Organization, described OCLAE as an anti-imperialist organization, working with public sectors to fight neo-liberal policies. A main goal is a free, high-quality public education. In the 1990s, the student movement fought against privatization of education, including universities. In the new millennium, OCLAE began demanding the recuperation of lost rights such as access to post secondary education. They organized solidarity protests for 26 disappeared Columbian student activists. Needs of the organization include reflecting on current objectives, increasing solidarity between students and teachers, and expanding the fight against imperialism to include protecting natural resources and the environment.

Paul Floor, representing CONFECH from Chile, described the attacks on public education since Pinochet initiated neo-liberal policies. These took the form of the government role in setting policies, cuts in funding of public education from 100% to 18%, deregulation and privatization of universities, standardized university entrance exams, and increases in university fees and

student loans (students may pay up to \$60,000 for a five year degree). Secondary school students have been instrumental in initiating effective protests despite laws put into place to criminalize student protests and silence the media. In 2006, when the students took over secondary schools and classes for two months, the public began to take interest, and as a result, two ministers were forced to resign. At the university, a political students' organization was created, with the support of university faculty. Students became aware of their potential role as a political force for transformation. From 2008 until the present, students and professors proposed educational reforms, organized a five-day protest with 5000 participants, focused on reconstruction following the 2010 earthquake, and worked on strategies to convince the public of the need for reform. In 2011, 500,000 protestors took to the streets using the model of cultural carnivals to avoid violence and create a joyful, positive atmosphere. This increased public engagement came as a result of the students convincing the public that they, too, were affected by neo-liberal policies, putting into question the whole economic system. Over 90% of Chileans supported the protests. Now, more than 80% of Chileans believe that education must be public and free. The movement is working on having necessary fundamental reforms made to the constitution.

Kevin Paul, from the Quebec students' organization CLASSE spoke of the far-reaching effects of neo-liberal policies in Quebec: tuition fee hikes of \$500 over five years in 2007 and a proposed \$1625 increase over the next five years, user fees in the health sector, with a \$200 health tax, increased hydro rates, and the construction of highways and diamond mines threatening the environment and indigenous populations in the North. The government cites a budget deficit to justify increases in fees for public services, but at the same time, it has cut taxes each year by \$950 million and offers the lowest corporate tax rate in North America, at 0%. The proposed tuition hike could force 7000 students to drop out of university and would decrease diversity in classrooms. The president of McGill University, who sits on board of the Royal Bank of Canada, supports the increase; tuition hikes increase profits for private banks through the interest made on student loans. Student political engagement has often taken the form of general strikes which are successful because of the pressure due to economic consequences of cancelling the semester, including lack of room for students the following year and fewer graduates entering the workforce and paying taxes. Students also use tactics such as picketing classrooms, disrupting classes, preventing access to entire buildings as well as economic disruptions such as blockades of the port of Montreal, bridges, and state owned businesses. The government has responded with increased police and legal repression.

5. *Teaching for Transformation* Forum

On the evening of April 12th, the BC Teachers' Federation and Co-Dev Canada sponsored a public event that took place in conjunction with the *Teaching for Transformation* forum.

Patricia Quintana told of the comprehensive analysis of education and exchange of ideas by educators in Michoacan, Mexico, which led to a new model of holistic, humanistic, scientific curriculum being piloted in 32 schools. Education in Mexico is traditionally based on domination occurring after the conquest, a story that has neither relevance to nor engagement from the indigenous population. The resistance to this neo-liberal system and efforts to dismantle it have been successful in that the local government has provided some financial resources for teachers, along with community members, to develop a project to respond to the needs of the local population. A long-term goal is to pass a state law defending public education, informed by the teachers' union with participation from students and families.

Mary Compton, U.K. editor of Teachers' Solidarity website gave a chilling account of a system that requires delivering a prescribed curriculum with the threat of using test results as a way to evaluate teachers. This system is discriminatory towards learners experiencing difficulties, and seriously hampers teachers' efforts to meet the individual needs of students. In speaking of education in India where learning is still based on the British system left behind as a colonial legacy, Compton described the state-mandated "synthetic phonics" approach to reading, whereby kindergarten students are required to learn to read by decoding nonsense words rather than via balanced reading programs that meld skills with meaningful literature. Rote learning is imposed. Teachers know that these methodologies are ineffective and that curriculum content is meaningless to the local communities. Standardized testing is being used to privatize state schools falling below arbitrary levels. In contrast, she told of a positive and creative initiative called the "Sangati Project," introduced by Indian education activists, to take into account the personal context of the community of the child, making education an engaging and useful experience.

According to Miguel Angel Duhalde from the Pedagogical Movement of Education Workers of Argentina (CTERA), social transformation cannot happen without education. In present day Argentina, the profoundly conservative ideas of the 90's have been replaced, and true reform in education, law, politics, and culture is taking place. The union movement is strengthening and uniting all social movements, leading to improved salaries and enhanced rights for workers. Networks of progressive teachers, through research, debate, discussion, and concrete actions, have been leading the struggle for the emancipation of teaching. Integral to their work is the consideration of how knowledge is produced and transmitted, what influences the school culture, and how pedagogical beliefs are shared.

Dalila Oliveira from the Red Estrada of Brazil described changes in education since the advent of the Lula government. Educators have a well established network for research and exchange of ideas; their voices are heard at the national level where government has developed a ten year National Education Plan. Education is obligatory for children up to the age of 17, and teachers are insisting on funding being tied to the GDP, as the economy of Brazil is strong. Each of the 500 municipalities in Brazil's 27 states is responsible for education and each has local autonomy in decision making, thus making education responsive to local needs.

Paul Floor spoke on behalf of the Confederation of Chilean Students. The legacy of successive, repressive neo-liberal regimes on students was a privatization of educational institutions, crippling student debt, and higher education being treated as a money-making business. At the beginning of the 21st century, students started organizing and taking their protest to the streets. In 2006, students seized control of the high schools, developed and taught their own classes, and took care of the schools. This very visible action earned media attention, forcing the president to take note. A table of "experts" which included student voices was established; however, results were far from satisfactory. Since then, a massive student campaign including outreach to the public through social media has brought the popularity of the government from 60% down to 20%. Students are leaders in social change, looking for the creation of a new constitution to lead to a more just society.

These dynamic presentations gave an inspiring picture of the effective role of educators in leading to positive transformation.

6. Indigenous Popular Education and Alternative Pedagogies

The *Teaching for Transformation* Forum included several working group sessions where participants shared their experiences dealing with specific issues. The Indigenous Education and Alternative Pedagogies workshop offered a rich exchange of ideas with voices from indigenous peoples of Peru, Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, and Canada. There was also a participant from Kenya whose experiences dealing with colonialism mirrored those of the other members of the group.

Common to all is a crisis in education as it relates to indigenous people. The devastating legacy of brutal colonial massacres and repression of native populations is one of fear, misunderstanding, marginalization, and segregation. Ecological resources belonging to First Nations continue to be exploited by large corporations, leaving local people dispossessed and living in poverty. There is little respect for the land or the communities of people living on it and little appreciation of diverse cultures and customs. Intellectual property rights continue to be violated, with First Nations culture viewed as local colour worthy only to entertain.

The education system in the Americas has presented many problems for aboriginal learners as it is controlled by the privileged, dominant classes. Curriculum and pedagogies are often racist and geared to assimilation, with native content and traditional knowledge conspicuously absent. Unfortunately, decisions are made in a hierarchical, top down manner, and bureaucratic regulations set up insurmountable barriers to transformation. There are often no indigenous representatives on policy making boards to share the unique perspective of First Nations ways of learning and very few First Nations teachers as role models for children. In a few instances where there have been successful programs, such as a language program for kindergarten students in British Columbia, Canada, these programs have been axed. The feeling is that as soon as indigenous culture impinges on the status quo, it is shut out.

In looking for solutions, the example of a regional educational project in Loreto in the Peruvian Amazon was presented. Teachers developed a new approach to education that respects the incredible bio-diverse ecology, promotes the culture of the local people, and cultivates positive scientific, ethical and social values. A diversified curriculum, active learning, and critical thinking form the basis of this just, universally accessible, secular system. In Michoacan, Mexico, indigenous people elected their own candidates, took over responsibility for education, translated texts into their own language, and looked for ways to integrate First Nations views with technology and science so that young people could participate effectively in a productive economy. In Guatemala where many thousands of indigenous people were systematically killed by government forces, it has been a struggle to break out of fear and move forward. Alternative programs have been instituted, communities with similar backgrounds linked, and methods of education developed to meet local needs. In Vancouver, Canada, the first Aboriginal Education Focus School is about to open its doors. There was significant input from the First Nations Community about how to address the learning and social needs of aboriginal children, many of whose parents were abducted from their homes to be placed into residential schools where their cultural identity was stolen and where many suffered horrendous physical, emotional or sexual abuse. In some BC communities with significant aboriginal populations, there have been positive results in collaboration, leading to the implementation of successful initiatives.

Although many obstacles remain in the struggle for equality and justice, progress is slowly being made. Indigenous people have started to assert their power to facilitate change and implement

alternative systems. A shift in attitude and a more open effort by the dominant culture to understand and integrate pedagogies which take into account the natural and spiritual elements inherent in traditional ways of learning goes a long way in breaking down racial barriers. Learning must empower each and every student to think critically, realize their full potential, and therefore have the tools to be able to dream about tomorrow.

7. Summary of working groups

Working Group 1: Non-sexist inclusive pedagogy

Luzmila Sanchez of FOMCA described the work in non-sexist pedagogy in several of the participating countries. The classroom is considered as a micro-universe and the school as a family. In Honduras, teachers joined participants from around Central America to share strategies and workshops were held to train facilitators. In El Salvador, 100 teachers have been trained to lead non-sexist pedagogy workshops. Ten percent of Chilean teachers have been trained in this area and working groups have been formed across the country. International groups have played a key role in supporting these efforts, despite laws hampering efforts. In the Dominican Republic, there is tension between supporting initiatives in non-sexist pedagogies and the need to respect religious views. In Brazil, women have limited access to leadership roles in education.

Working Group 2: Indigenous Popular Education and the Amazonian Alternative Pedagogical Project

(see 6 above)

Gabe Haythornthwaite, past administrator of the Cowichan Tribes Community Leadership Initiative, outlined recommendations, including developing an IDEA network guide with a summary of each participating group's work and contact information; posting solidarity actions on the IDEA website; and developing a publication with guiding principles in indigenous education, as well as examples of impacts, acts of resistance and strategic action plans.

Working Group 3: Education for Emancipation Movement in Venezuela

In her summary of the discussion of this working group, Flor Martínez of Local 19 of the Mexican Education Worker's Union discussed advances made, including increased government investment in education, a literacy project, pre-school initiatives, and a secular education system. Venezuela faces continued challenges, including a capitalistic context and neo-liberal influence on universities. There is a need for increased investment of public funds in education, and a targeting of these funds to students and teacher training. Martínez proposed the development of "unlearning neo-liberalism" workshops, based on the "unlearning racism" workshops offered in British Columbia. All teachers should refuse to give standardized tests, as teachers in Los Angeles have done. An international network of social movements will lead to societal change, without which educational reform is not possible.

8. Declarations and Conclusion

Steve Stewart, Education Program Director of CoDev and Technical Secretary of the IDEA Network, recommended that members of the IDEA Network:

1. refuse standardized testing
2. refuse standardized teaching
3. advocate for free access to public education
4. continue efforts to develop and propose alternative, contextualized curriculum

5. engage in collaborative discussion between teachers, students, and parents
6. identify and network with social movements in each of our countries

The forum participants also passed a motion to distribute a petition to the Mexican government requesting the safe return of Carlo Ramiro Raman Salazar, an activist from Oaxaca, Mexico who was taken from his car on March 14, 2011, and hasn't been found.