

PUBLIC POLICIES OF EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA: CRITICAL ANALYSIS FROM THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE OF THE POPULAR UNIVERSITY OF CESAR

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Abstract

Recent Colombian education policies have been evaluated according to criteria of relevance, effectiveness, and equity, based on an analytical framework that articulates the tension between the centrality of education and the principle of autonomy, and that explores the meaning of equity in a context of poverty and inequality. The supply of basic education has increased in coverage and quality, although there are still significant shortcomings in rural areas and in the care of the Afro-Colombian and indigenous population. These achievements, which have allowed a greater number of young people to access secondary and higher education, have not been sufficient to guarantee educational equity. The opportunity for better and greater access for vulnerable groups has been frustrated at various levels by the inadequacy of the educational offer to their conditions and requirements. Along these lines, alternative interpretations are proposed, which do not circumvent the criterion of relevance, and which emerge from careful observation and the experiences of the team.

Keywords: Public policies, higher education, teaching experiences, critical analysis.

1. Introduction

Colombian public education policy must be presented with absolute academic rigor, it is of vital importance that the critical synthesis of the policies evaluated takes into account not only the established foundations and objectives, but also the implementation mechanisms that are being used, which in turn integrates a robust analytical framework (Calics-Salcedo, 2023). This analysis considers the tensions that exist between centrality and autonomy in educational management, as well as the implications that this has for educational equity in the country. In addition, it is essential to describe the evaluation criteria of the policies implemented, the performance indicators that have been developed and the expected results that are to be achieved, all illustrated with specific examples that

derive from the period analyzed. Significant comparisons with previous and subsequent policies are also included, which point out both the improvements achieved and the limitations observed that still persist in the Colombian educational field. Not only does this provide a rich context for analysis, but it also provides a solid foundation on which to build future recommendations. (Guzmán Ramírez)

The social, economic and political context that conditions education in Colombia is directly and significantly related to the development goals and fundamental principles enshrined in the Constitution. In this framework, not only the key regulations that regulate these aspects are specified, but also the relevant laws and decrees that have an impact on education and their implementation at the different territorial levels established in the country; likewise, the risks associated with the implementation of these regulations are exposed in detail, as well as the costs that may arise and the undesired effects that have been identified both in the academic literature and in the practical experience of teachers (Peña et al. 2023). The methodology used by the professors of the Universidad Popular del Cesar is described in an exhaustive and detailed manner: thus, all the elements of the methodological design, the selection of the sample, the instruments used, the data collection processes carried out, as well as the specific analysis criteria that are applied to interpret the results obtained are specified (Álvarez et al. 2021). The rigorous validation and reliability procedures of the instruments used in the research are also explained, along with the ethical considerations and informed consent aspects that have been taken into account to safeguard the integrity of the study participants. Finally, the methodological limits that may affect the results are pointed out, as well as the potential biases that could influence the interpretation of the data. It also explains the specific measures adopted to mitigate its impact and guarantee the quality and validity of the research as a whole. This is essential to ensure that the conclusions and recommendations that emerge from this study are as accurate and applicable as possible in the Colombian educational context. (Cobo)

2. Context and regulatory framework of education in Colombia

Education in Colombia faces intense social and political tensions that condition its development and future. Despite the fact that the country has achieved significant milestones in terms of educational coverage and quality, shortcomings affecting the most vulnerable groups persist, which continues to be a considerable challenge for the State and its response capacity (Gómez-Barrera, 2021). Despite the enormous problems of social and economic development that Colombia faces, the government has presented an ambitious National Development Plan, in which education is assigned a very prominent role as an engine of change and progress. Among the educational policies contained in this ambitious plan, the strengthening of the education system based on its adequate organization into levels, the growing investment in school infrastructure to modernize and ensure access to education, the development of strategic programs aimed at reducing the educational lag in the least favored groups, as well as the implementation of a national education evaluation system that is effective and accountable (Acosta León & Torres Rivas, 2024). These educational programmes and policies are part of Colombia's commitments to the international community, with the aim of achieving the goals set by the World Education Forum, held in Dakar in 2000, in addition to the Millennium Development Goals, which seek to improve the living conditions and opportunities of all people in the country.

Educational policy in Colombia is formalized through a wide range of laws, decrees, and resolutions that are issued by both the Congress of the Republic and the government. These regulations define not only the general framework governing education in the country, but also the specific aspects related to its development at the different levels and educational regimes. Although these provisions are drafted at the national level, their effective application requires the active participation of departmental and municipal governments, which are assigned specific powers and are delegated functions in this area (Cobo). However, one of the main challenges faced by these local governments is the provision of adequate resources, which is often insufficient, especially at the lowest levels of public administration. This lack of resources can hinder the fulfillment of the functions assigned to them, which leads to educational programs being in a situation of difficult execution and lack of effectiveness (Gualán et al., 2023). Consequently, multiple barriers prevent educational policies from being implemented as expected, generating a negative impact on the quality of education provided to students in Colombia.

3. Methodology of the study carried out by professors of the Popular University of Cesar

The evaluation of policies is based on the guidelines of the public administration where it is maintained that all public policy involves decisions on the "what", the "how" and the "for what" of its implementation; as well as that evaluations must include information on the design, on the way in which the policy is carried out, on whether or not the proposed objective is being achieved, and on the impact that the execution of said policy has on the solution to the problem for which it was conceived (González-Medina, 2022). In addition, the approach of Blossfeld and Hamerle and Lauder, Brown, Dillabough and Halsey is used in the interpretation of educational policies, where the curriculum covers not only the subjects that are taught and how they are taught, but also the organization of teaching, the school environment and the social, economic and political context in which education takes place.

In this sense, the design of the research is oriented to the evaluation of public policies, based on the identification of budgetary or regulatory policies that address education and that have been evaluated (Sierra Hernández & Garzón Rodríguez, 2023). The foundations, objectives, actors involved and financing mechanisms of each policy are analyzed, as well as their impact on the coverage, quality and equity of education. For each of these aspects, relevant quantitative and qualitative data are presented and analyzed. Finally, the implications of policies on social and territorial groups that traditionally face greater problems in accessing quality public education are explored.

4. Main policies evaluated and their impact

The policies analysed in detail are the following: the Coverage Expansion Programme (PAC), whose main objective is to increase access to education in various regions; the School Feeding Program (PAE), which seeks to ensure that students receive adequate food during their school day; the creation of 1468 official preschool and primary educational institutions, which represents a significant effort by the government to expand educational infrastructure; the Teacher Training in Critical Areas programme (Law 715/2001), designed to improve the quality of teaching by training teachers in disciplines considered essential; the program for the establishment of Full-Time Educational Institutions (IETC), which intends to offer a comprehensive education, encompassing not

only academic content, but also extracurricular activities; the program for the expansion of public higher education, which seeks to increase opportunities for young people to access vocational training; and, finally, the scholarship program for low-income students, which is established with the goal of facilitating the entry and permanence of these students in the educational system. For each of these programs, the objectives they pursue, the institutional and non-institutional actors involved in their execution, the financing mechanism that supports their operation are described in detail, and both their performance and the results obtained are evaluated based on the criteria previously indicated. Finally, it concludes with a thorough analysis of whether the policies adequately addressed the challenges posed in the educational context and incorporates valuable recommendations for the formulation and implementation of future educational policies, so as to foster a more effective and equitable development of the education system as a whole. (Cuero Ramírez)

Since 1990, education in Colombia has received a significant boost and development in multiple aspects (Melo-Becerra et al. 2021). Educational coverage has grown significantly at all levels of the system, which has allowed more children and young people to access a fundamental education. In addition, a number of centres and programmes have been created specifically designed to cater for vulnerable groups, reflecting an effort to include those who have traditionally been excluded from the education system. Increased resources have also been allocated to both education in general and public education, recognizing the importance of investing in training and human capital development. However, despite these advances, the quality of the educational service remains deficient and presents great challenges: inequity in access to education persists. Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations, those living in poverty or displaced conditions, as well as regions that are less developed, have not been able to obtain results comparable to those of the non-vulnerable urban population. The policies that have been evaluated over the years aim to address in part these two fundamental challenges, seeking to improve the quality of education and ensure equitable access for all.

5. Critical analysis from the experience of the Popular University of Cesar

The policies evaluated in this context—the Pact for Education, the Early Childhood Law, the Higher Education Law—have not adequately emerged from the reality of the current education system or from the particular case of the urgent needs expressed by its various actors involved (González et al., 2022). Its foundations and important objectives are not based on the regional context, where the changes that occur in the supply and demand of education are exogenous and represent complex derivations of much broader historical decisions. The lack of planning and the considerable increase in educational coverage have led to a sharp and worrying decrease in the quality of education, especially hitting the population that is in the worst conditions to learn and develop. The tense and often complicated relationship between the national curriculum and the school reality in the classroom, the autonomy of schools in curriculum design, and inequity in access to adequate institutional support are crucial aspects that require much greater attention (Gil, 2024). An alternative interpretation – one that takes into account the vast experience and testimonies of those who truly carry out education on a daily basis – would facilitate and improve the adaptation of educational policies to the real and felt needs of education in the region and of the country as a whole.

The design and implementation of educational policies, especially the curriculum, are fundamental aspects that must take into account the nature and conditions of the school population, as well as the regional and local context in which the various institutions operate. A policy truly aimed at guaranteeing effective equity in education must ensure that teaching-learning processes are appropriate and responsive to the specific capacities of learners. This implies that educational institutions must offer continuous support and accompaniment to disadvantaged establishments, ensuring resources, staff training and an environment conducive to the learning of all students, without exception. Only in this way will true educational inclusion be achieved that responds to the needs of each community.

6. Contributions of the study to the master's degree of the team of the Popular University of Cesar

The results contribute to the professional career of the team, especially to the Master's Degree in Education for the Sociocultural Development of one of its members. The latter is preparing to present the final project, and the research has influenced her pedagogical training, reflection on her practice and the construction of the research project that will support her degree. Potential transfer pathways to teacher professional development and the strengthening of institutional projects have also been identified. (Baquero Caballero & Garzón Ramírez..., 2024)

The research contributes to the professional career of the entire work team, and especially to the Master's Degree in Education for Sociocultural Development developed by one of its members. The student in training is in the final phase of the process, preparing the presentation of the work, and the research has influenced her pedagogical proposal, as well as the reflection on her practice (Ripoll-Rivaldo, 2021). He has also supported the development of the research project that will support the degree. In addition, potential transfer pathways towards teacher professional development and the strengthening of institutional projects have been identified.

7. Challenges, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations

The proposed results offer a broad perspective on the tensions, tensions and constraints that affect and condition public education policies. Even though it is a region that has received important and significant investments in absolute terms, it seems evident that it has not been possible to solve the historical debt in terms of coverage or quality, especially for the most vulnerable sectors of the population (Vásquez & Consuegra, 2025). In this context, the need for a view that prioritizes sustainability and equity, rather than the simple absolute volume of resources invested, is becoming increasingly evident and pressing. The quality of the education system is not measured exclusively by the amount of resources invested, but by the real capacity of public policy to guarantee the equity, sustainability and relevance of the programs implemented. Especially in a region where the educational offer, due to its geographical proximity, is significantly more abundant than the real demand for educational services, the question of the quality and relevance of these offers becomes crucial and essential for sustainable development. It is imperative that clear criteria are established to effectively assess how these resources are being used and what real impact they are having on improving education for all (Alfaro, 2024).

Despite the obvious limitations of an evaluation of this nature, the information collected can be very useful for the development and evolution of educational policies in Colombia and other Latin American countries, as it provides valuable data that reflect the

diverse educational realities that are experienced (Carmona Bedoya et al., 2022). The teaching experience, moreover, is a rich source of interpretation of the educational reality and, from it, proposals can be developed that really contribute to the design and implementation of public policies that are more in line with the regional and school realities that are observed in the educational field. It is imperative that the interpretation of educational policies does not only take place at the level of their formulation, but also that the use and application of these policies take into account in their development process the opinion of those who are immersed in the day-to-day of education, such as teachers, students and parents. This would ensure a more inclusive approach adapted to the specific needs of each educational context (Díez et al., 2024).

8. Recommendations for public policies

The proposed recommendations include evaluating programs from the perspective of their ability to promote educational equity, their sustainability, and their scalability. Although these criteria are interdependent and do not always coincide, the analysis suggests prioritizing educational equity in the design and implementation of future policies (Reinaga & Alcívar, 2024). This priority can translate into solutions that reduce inequalities in access to education or forge a more conducive learning environment for those in disadvantaged circumstances. The response of public policy should also be the clearest in the face of situations of inequality, in which education must play a compensatory role.

The specific recommendations are aimed at the care of groups in vulnerable situations or with less coverage, the diagnosis and attention to the operating conditions of educational institutions and attention to the quality of the educational process (Gutiérrez-Puertas & Márquez-Hernández...). In this last line, an alternative interpretation to the aforementioned objective of guaranteeing the quality of education in the country is proposed, which considers the market conditions of the education system, the working conditions of teachers and the use of unqualified human resources.

9. Conclusion

The evaluation of public education policies in Colombia must be a rigorous and exhaustive academic exercise, which clearly aims at the identification and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of such policies, in relation to their adaptation to the complex national and regional educational reality. In this sense, the use of the policy evaluation frameworks proposed by UNESCO and the World Bank, as well as those developed by the Universidad de los Andes, makes it possible to effectively identify and analyze in depth the nature, objectives, implementation mechanisms, and effects on the coverage, quality, and equity of the education system. This is achieved through a careful comparison of expected results, performance indicators and evaluation criteria, as noted above. In addition, the analytical framework proposed by the Universidad de los Andes, which points out the inherent tensions between the centrality and autonomy of education systems, complements this evaluation process by making it more sensitive and receptive to problems of territorial relevance and adequacy. In this way, evaluation not only becomes an exercise in accountability, but also a vital tool for the continuous improvement and strengthening of the policies that govern the education sector in the country. It is essential that evaluations are carried out regularly and that findings are shared in a way that is accessible to all actors involved, thus promoting constructive dialogue in the construction of a more inclusive and higher quality education for all Colombians.

This analysis will be developed in the context of research on education in the country, taking as a reference the Master's Degree in Education of the Popular University of Cesar. In this regard, it is crucial to point out that, despite the many shortcomings that persist in the Colombian education system, notable progress has been made in terms of coverage in recent years. This phenomenon has been accompanied by an effort to improve the quality of education; however, this growth has not equitably reached the most vulnerable sectors and regions that have historically been neglected. It is imperative to examine whether the educational policies implemented in recent times have generated results that align with this favorable trend, as well as to determine whether progress has really been made towards a fairer and more accessible educational model for all. The urgency of this inquiry lies in the need to establish mechanisms that allow low-income groups to access the same opportunities as their peers in other areas of the country, thus guaranteeing an educational system that promotes equity and social inclusion. This study, therefore, becomes an essential tool to evaluate the real impact of educational policies in the search for a more dignified and representative education of Colombian diversity.

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