

# Fraternity and Educational Reform in Latin America

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*The author proposes that in a democratic society, education serves to establish fundamental relationships of fraternity, generating the “social capital” that bonds citizens together. Against this perspective, he examines the cultural values transmitted in the educational systems of six Latin American countries. He finds that following world-wide trends, the curricula have shifted from privileging nation as symbolic reference of community to human rights. He proposes fraternity, as presented in the Focolare charism of unity, as a fundamental value in national curricula by which greater social cohesion among students and therefore society as a whole can be generated.*

**A**s a cultural phenomenon, the school plays a pivotal role in building the new culture of fraternity that is crucial to human coexistence. From the perspective of sociology, what counts in public systems of education is the result of profound

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and far-reaching processes of socio-political reflexivity about what should be preserved of the past, and what is to be communicated to the present generation in preparing them for the future.

In democratic societies, education is a product of politics, the capacity for action based on what has been encountered as given. It is also the fruit of freedom. As such, the method of education a society chooses will shape the next generation, initiating them into the life of the society. In this regard, fraternity—which is acknowledged in Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>1</sup>—is a fundamental competence to be cultivated, a result of the educational process. The institutional organization of an educational system allows—or discourages—the experience of encountering “others,” those who differ from us. As such, education furnishes the most elemental condition for what Aristotle called “civic friendship,” namely, interaction which allows for mutual knowledge in a common and protected public space. Such experience can take place among social equals, providing the confidence and bonding that Robert Putnam calls “bonding social capital.”<sup>2</sup> When it occurs among a plurality, among many different others, it generates an experiential base for general confidence—in Putnam’s terms, a “bridging social capital.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. “Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>). In this paper, I consider “brotherhood” to be equivalent to “fraternity,” which better conveys the breadth and inclusivity that I intend.

2. “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* (1995): 65–78.

3. See Robert Wuthnow, “The United States: Bridging the Privileged and the Marginalized?” in Robert D. Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 64.

In this regard, let us examine the situation of education in Latin America, both implicitly (through its institutional arrangements) and explicitly (through its curricula and their contents). Among the seventy countries sampled in PISA 2009, compared regarding how much they involve or separate their educational institutions socioeconomically—that is, whether they integrate or socially segment groups in the school experience—the results for the five Latin American countries that participated reveal a serious problem. In this study, which samples responses from fifteen-year-old students, all of the Latin American countries rank in the lower third: Brazil (44th), Mexico (50th), Argentina (57th), Colombia (60th), and Chile (69th). This means that their educational systems socially segment much more than the majority of countries, thus poorly providing the experiential basis for mutual knowledge among different social groups.

### Basic Cultural Contents Communicated During the Schooling Experience

The basic cultural contents (knowledge, values, attitudes) communicated during the schooling experience include knowledge and the acquisition of ideas, values, attitudes, personal confidence, and sociability with others—both those who are close and those who are distant. What content is taught in Latin American schools (See Table 1)?<sup>4</sup> The curricula concerning citizenship education in six countries (Colombia, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, and the Dominican Republic) cite most frequently:

4. Martin Bascopé and Cristián Cox, based on Cox “Opportunities of Learning Citizenship in Six Latin American Countries: Matrix for Comparison,” *Sistema regional de evaluación y desarrollo de competencias ciudadanas*, Bogotá, 2010.

- Human rights
- Inclusion
- Diversity

The least cited values are:

- Common good
- Solidarity
- Social cohesion

*Table 1. Civic Values in Primary and Secondary School Curricula (2009).*

	Colombia	Chile	Guatemala	Mexico	Paraguay	Dominican Republic	TOTAL
Human rights	5	9	23	8	12	7	<b>64</b>
Inclusion	16	4	20	10	6	6	<b>62</b>
Diversity	4	15	16	6	13	5	<b>59</b>
Democracy	6	8	8	13	5	7	<b>47</b>
Social justice	6	10	15	7	2	0	<b>40</b>
Tolerance	7	11	13	2	4	3	<b>40</b>
Equality	1	11	11	10	5	1	<b>39</b>
Equity	1	8	13	3	1	5	<b>31</b>
Freedom	2	5	3	10	3	1	<b>24</b>
Common good	4	4	7	1	2	4	<b>22</b>
Solidarity	7	3	5	1	0	4	<b>20</b>
Pluralism	9	2	1	0	3	2	<b>17</b>
Social cohesion	0	0	0	1	2	0	<b>3</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>468</b>

Historically, Latin American countries have privileged concepts such as homeland and nation. Today, those values have been replaced by an emphasis on other notions, such as human rights and sub-national reference groups such as those of differing ethnicities, territorial backgrounds, or genders. These rights, however, tend to center not on the “brotherhood” (what we would call “fraternity”) mentioned in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but on liberties or civil and political rights. This is a direct response to dictatorships and situations of systemic violence in the 1970s and 1980s, as in Guatemala. In the past, there has been an emphasis on the constitution and the institutions of the political system. More recently, the emphasis has shifted to society and its culture. With these emphases, however, how can students be educated in Putnam’s notion of bridging social capital, or in what economists and political scientists call generalized confidence? How can they come to appreciate the importance of fraternity with its distant bonds, or attitudes of empathy, concern, or solidarity among citizens?

In terms of fraternity, none of the curricula in these six countries gives priority to the three values most closely related to it — common good, solidarity and social cohesion. This seeming lack is moderated if another significant value—*inclusion*—is taken into account. It is mentioned most frequently in their curricula, and it certainly has a direct influence in forming cohesion, but its meaning, I would argue, points to a less proactive stance in generating cooperation and confidence than are common good, solidarity, and social cohesion.

A comparative analysis of their curricula raises the question whether enough priority is being placed upon education for a life in common and appreciation of civic affairs (politics). They do give priority, however, to diversity and the values of the group or the

immediate community rather than to the dimensions that unify (give cohesion to) groups in their interrelationships. This raises questions about the functionality of these contents for establishing and enhancing the cultural basis of a democratic political system at a national level, or the cultural basis of generalized trust (bridging social capital).

In contexts of marked social inequality and institutional weaknesses of democratic politics typical of many Latin American nations, it seems an important task for education to counter the deep anti-political tendencies in market culture and to provide a counterweight to the acceleration of processes of individuation.

### Homeland, Fraternity, and Citizenship Education

One of the classical tasks of education is to provide young people with the definition of the community to which they belong so that they feel a sense of allegiance and loyalty to it. Historically, schools have taken *nation*<sup>5</sup> as the critical reference for the construction of identity. Curricula used in the examined countries—although there are important differences among them that this study does not touch on—adopt differing perspectives regarding nation and patriotism.

A replacement for *nation* as the traditional and strong symbolic reference of the most inclusive “we” taught in schools has taken place in the observed curricula. This follows universal trends.<sup>6</sup> It is as if the basis for cohesion and shared meanings about “community”

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5. “[T]he nation . . . [is] an arc of solidarities, an ideational and political construction that posits the existence of a historically-constituted and collective ‘we,’ linked to a territory it already occupies or that it hopes to occupy, and usually conceived as entailing expectations of loyalty above and beyond other identities and interests of its members.”

6. This trend of shifting from nation to human rights has been shown to be true in Europe and Asia in the twentieth century by Yasemin Soysal and Suk-ying Wong, “Educating Future Citizens in Europe and Asia,” in Aaron Beuavot and Cecilia

of belonging and allegiance had moved simultaneously downwards and upwards. “Downwards” from the nation as they privilege local or ethnic groups as basis for communities. “Upwards” in the sense that human rights in their universality definitely transcend the nation, profoundly redefining the *locus* of the moral regulation of politics, subordinating *nation* to *humankind*.

Curriculum policies in Latin American countries should consider carefully the likely consequences for social cohesion and democratic politics of the observed shifts in the definitions of the relevant “community” to which the schooling experience teaches and belongs. If nation as it used to be conceived in education seems not to be the relevant focus anymore, what new and strongly “bonding” meanings might be suggested for contemporary educational experience? What might they be based upon?

Education should explicitly prepare students for common life with people close to them (bonding social capital) and with those who are distant (social capital bridge). National curricula, as official definitions of the objectives and contents for generating such an experience, must correspond to a society’s own vision of itself that is to be transmitted to the younger generations. So, curriculum must include society’s common life and its constitutive notions and values.

Perhaps *fraternity*, as presented in the Focolare charism of unity as well as in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, might serve as a replacement for *nation* as the strong symbolic common reference in contemporary educational experience. Of the three fundamental principles of the French Revolution, *fraternity* has had the least effect upon political theory and practice. Compared to liberty and equality, fraternity is the poor sister. As Rodrigo Mardones has noted: “Of the three principles of the

French Revolution, freedom and equality have been transformed into constitutional principles and have also become the guiding ideas of political movements. For fraternity, however, such a path has been elusive.”<sup>7</sup>

According to some reports, when Richard Nixon met Zhou Enlai in 1972 during his historic visit to China, he asked Zhou what impact he thought the French Revolution had on Western civilization. He considered the question for a few moments and replied, “The impact of the French Revolution on Western civilization—too early to tell.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, perhaps it is too soon to concede that fraternity occupies the third place in the triad of political ideas, as well as in the hierarchy of school curricula.

However, the vision of fraternity as an inspiration for the Focolare charism of unity, so eloquently expressed by its president, Maria Voce, suggests that educators try to discover how *fraternity* might occupy a place in 21st century Latin America equivalent to that which *nation* occupied in education for citizenship in the past.

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7. “Hacia una precisión conceptual de la fraternidad política,” in: Osvaldo Barreneche, ed., *Estudios recientes sobre fraternidad* (Buenos Aires: Ciudad Nueva, 2010), 33–62. (Editor’s translation.)

8. <http://muse.tau.ac.il/maslool/boidem/118chou.html>

Braslavsky, eds., *School Knowledge in Comparative and Historical Perspectives* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 73–88.