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# Globalization and Language and Education Reform in Colombia: A Critical Outlook\*<sup>1</sup>

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This paper explores the connection between economic, political, and cultural globalization processes and recent education and language reforms in Colombia. Throughout the article, the author attempts to demonstrate that current education and language policies in Colombia are tightly connected to transnational agendas and models of reform that do not necessarily represent a real benefit for the majority of the population, but, instead, may render privileges for a few. With this analysis, the author insists on the need for an equitable plan for the improvement of language teaching and learning in Colombia in a way that considers local priorities of economic development, respects local knowledge and culture, and accounts for a systemic and fundamental improvement of the public system based on the dissimilar conditions that affect schools, teachers, and students in both the private and the public sectors in the country.

Key words: globalization, education policies, language policy, National Program of Bilingualism

En este artículo, el autor analiza la conexión entre procesos de globalización económica, política y cultural, y políticas educativas y lingüísticas recientemente introducidas en Colombia. Lo que se pretende es demostrar que estas políticas están estrechamente ligadas a agendas transnacionales y modelos de reforma que no necesariamente representan un beneficio real para la mayoría de la población, sino sólo para unos pocos. Además, se insiste aquí en la necesidad de construir políticas para el mejoramiento de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de las lenguas extranjeras y locales en el país, que prioricen las necesidades de desarrollo económico en cada comunidad, respeten su conocimiento y cultura, y busquen consolidar un plan de mejoramiento sistémico y estructural basado en las condiciones disímiles que existen entre el sector educativo público y el privado en Colombia.

Palabras clave: globalización, políticas educativas, políticas lingüísticas, Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo

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Dans cet article, l'auteur analyse les connexions entre des processus de globalisation économique, politique et culturelle et des politiques éducatives et linguistiques récemment introduites en Colombie. Tout au long de l'article, l'auteur tente de démontrer que ces politiques sont étroitement liées à des agendas transnationaux et à des modèles de réforme qui ne représentent pas nécessairement un réel bénéfice pour la majorité de la population, mais au contraire pour une petite minorité. Avec cette analyse, l'auteur cherche à insister sur la nécessité de construire des politiques pour l'amélioration de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage des langues étrangères et locales en Colombie. Ces politiques devraient donner la priorité aux besoins de développement économique au sein de chaque communauté, tout comme elles devraient respecter nos connaissances et notre culture, tout en cherchant à consolider un plan d'amélioration systémique et structurel basé sur les conditions si asymétriques qui existent entre le secteur public et le secteur privé en Colombie.

Mots clés: globalisation, politiques éducatives, politiques linguistiques, Programme National de Bilinguisme

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Departing from the need to strengthen the strategic position of Colombia before the world, determined by the free trade agreements, globalization of cultural industries, and development of the knowledge society, the national government has the fundamental commitment of creating the conditions to develop communicative competences in a second language in the Colombian citizens

(...)

Being bilingual in a global world is essential. Mastering a second language means being able to communicate better; understand other contexts; appropriate and circulate knowledge; understand and be comprehensible to others; enrich ourselves; and play a decisive role in the development of the country. Being bilingual means acquiring more knowledge and having opportunities to be competent and competitive, while improving the life quality of all citizens.

(Colombia. Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2005)

Grounded in the need for a more competitive country in times of what we now call “globalization”, the central government of Colombia has recently passed a number of education and language reforms, including the so called “Revolución Educativa 2002-2006 & 2006-2010” (Educational Revolution 2002-2006 & 2006-2010) and “Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, Colombia 2004-2019” (National Program of Bilingualism 2004-2019) (Colombia, Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2002; 2005; 2008). Through these policies, the government has determined to shape the national school system according to international expectations and models,

and make our national workforce more competitive, now that bi-national trade agreements are being negotiated with other countries, and cities such as Medellín are presented as business and tourist international centers.

Within this context, I explore the connection between these education and language reforms and globalization processes described in different disciplines. Throughout the article, I try to demonstrate that current education and language policies in Colombia are tightly connected to transnational agendas and models of reform that do not necessarily represent a real benefit for the majority of the population, but, instead, may render privileges for a few. With this analysis, I insist on the need for an equitable plan for the improvement of language teaching and learning in Colombia in a way that takes into account local priorities of economic development, respects local knowledge and culture, and accounts for a systemic and structural improvement of the public system based on the dissimilar conditions that affect schools, teachers, and students in both the private and public sectors in the country. This paper is divided into three main sections. First, I outline recent education and language reforms in Colombia and some of the contradictions involved in them. Second, I introduce the concept of globalization in relation to education and language reforms and it can be investigated from an economic, political and cultural perspective. Finally, I summarize the argument and propose an alternative agenda based on the limitations of current reform approaches.

## **2. EDUCATION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE REFORM IN COLOMBIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

Since 1994, when the government introduced the National Education Law, school and university actors have witnessed the continuous transformation of the educational system in Colombia, which has frequently been accompanied with contradictory proposals<sup>2</sup>. For instance, whereas the National Education Law

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2 This section is based on my reading of different policy documents produced by the National Government in Colombia. These documents include: Law 115 of 1994; Law 1064 of 2006; Lineamientos Curriculares Idiomas Extranjeros (1999); La Revolución

granted school administrators and teachers autonomy to redesign curricula, their ability to exert their professional discretion has been hindered by their problematic working conditions, lack of time, and enforcement of national standardized tests (Agudelo Valderrama, 2006). At the same time, despite the fact that central authorities and administrators have called for an increase in education quality and provided teachers with professional development, efficiency models applied to schools have resulted in the firing or transferring of teachers, including some of those practitioners involved in those teacher development programs (see e.g., Usma & Frodden, 2003).

Additionally, while legislators have talked about education expansion and student enrollment in recent proposals such as *Visión 2019 Educación: Propuesta para discusión* (Colombia. Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006a), they have recently pushed for constitutional drafts or national regulations to reduce public spending in education<sup>3</sup>, regulate in favor of private education including the creation of charter/leased schools with the economic support of public monies (Lowden, 2004), or promote the consolidation of bilingual private teacher education programs in bi-national universities (see e.g. Casas de Iregui, 2006). Finally, and now in the field of foreign language teaching and learning, while the National Education Law of 1994 has reinforced the need to learn other languages, and included foreign language teaching as another mandatory area starting in elementary school, the lack of teachers and resources (Cadavid, McNulty & Quinchía, 2004), as well as the adverse working conditions in public schools have impeded a successful implementation of the plan (Ayala & Álvarez, 2005; Usma & Frodden, 2003; Usma, 2007; Valencia, 2006).

Nevertheless, the field had hardly faced a similar transformation like the one being experienced with the adoption of the *National Bilingual Program*<sup>4</sup> (Cely, 2007;

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Educativa 2002-2006; La Revolucion Educativa, 2006-2010; Vision 2019 Educacion: Propuesta para discussion.

3 See <http://www.fecode.edu.co/> for a discussion about the reduction of transferances and its effects on education.

4 See the official web page of the National Ministry of education for a complete presentation of the Program: [www.mineducacion.gov.co](http://www.mineducacion.gov.co) See also Cely (2007) and Usma (2009).

Colombia. Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2005; 2006b; 2006c; 2006d; 2007). This reform includes at least eight main policy tools and strategies:

- a. Introduction of the concept of “bilingualism” where we previously talked about foreign language teaching and learning
- b. Establishment of English-Spanish as the new notion of bilingualism
- c. Designation of the British Council as the leading organization in charge of the development, implementation and control of the plan
- d. Adoption of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) as the norm that will regulate the whole system
- e. Definition of standards to regulate and homogenize teaching practice, language learning, professional development, and school accreditation according to the guidelines provided by the foreign consultants
- f. Introduction of international standardized tests to determine teachers’ and students’ communicative competence
- g. Institutionalization of language approaches and methods according to internationally accepted practices validated outside the country
- h. Deregulation that allows private organizations to compete with public institutions in the education market and exempts international organizations from the accreditation process.

In this fashion, the government attempts to homogenize foreign language teaching and learning at all levels; exerts tighter control over the whole system; and gradually redesigns language programs based on certification and recertification of students, teachers and language schools.

That is how recent reforms continue to give emphasis to standards, certification, accreditation, and control, while local scholars wonder about the rationale behind this program (Ayala & Álvarez, 2005; Cárdenas; 2006; González, 2007; Guerrero, 2008; Sánchez & Obando, 2008) and the possible effects these new policies may have on different subsets of the population (Usma, 2009; Valencia, 2006). In this paper I follow up on this ongoing conversation by discussing how current reforms in Colombia relate to international reform, and exploring the relationship between current education and language reforms and processes of economic, political, and cultural globalization. To these matters I now move

with the hope that a better understanding of global policymaking will drive a comprehensive view of national education and foreign language issues.

### **3. THEORIZING GLOBALIZATION AND ITS CONNECTION WITH EDUCATION, LANGUAGE AND POLICY**

In order to better understand what happens in Colombia in terms of foreign language and education policy, we need to both move beyond the boundaries of our local geography and transcend the frontiers of our field of study. We need to look at globalization and its multidimensional facets and explore the implications of this economic, political, and cultural process. We need to study local reform within the context of a global move toward the transformation of societies and schools. In other words, we need to look at the relation between globalization, education, and languages.

Globalization as a historical phenomenon refers to three simultaneous processes: *migration, spread of ideas, and increased coordination and interdependence* (Tilly, 2004, p.13). Globalization as migration refers to the continuous traveling of people from one region to another or, as Coatsworth (2004) has put it, it is “what happens when the movement of people, goods, or ideas among countries and regions accelerates” (p.38). From a different perspective, globalization as the spread of ideas describes the continuous adoption or imposition of ideological, technical or organizational patterns from one place to another (Tilly, 2004). This globalization as the spread of ideas includes, for example, the indoctrination of indigenous communities in South, Central and North America after 1492, or even the current enforcement of northern educational ideologies and practices in Colombia. Finally, globalization as an increased coordination or interdependence at a world scale describes “the process whereby countries become more integrated via movements of goods, capital, labor, and ideas” (Bloom 2004, p.59), a process in which technologies and languages have played a central role (Watson, 2004).

From a historical perspective, globalization does not by any means represent a new phenomenon. As presented above, globalization processes have accompanied human history as a product of the constant movement of peoples and capital



around the globe (McKeown, 2007). Coatsworth (2004), for example, differentiates at least four major cycles of globalization, which may be summarized as 1) the discovery and colonization of America, 2) the migration of African slaves to the Caribbean; 3) the pre-depression age; and 4) the post World War II globalization era. This paper is devoted to this current era.

The current wave of globalization in relation with education systems is studied from three main perspectives: economic, political, and cultural (Suarez- Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004). From an economic point of view, globalization and education are investigated in their relation with international markets, transnational trade, neoliberalism, privatization, financial issues, transnational capital flow, poverty, economic development, inequity, and the different economic agendas that serve the consolidation of private capital and the knowledge economy (see e.g., Bloom, 2004; Stiglitz, 2002; Stromquist, 2002). From a political angle, analysts explore the connection between globalization, power relations, notions of autonomy, top-down vs bottom-up models of reform, and the transformation of the state and the school system vis-à-vis the increasing influence of local and international actors, agencies, and countries that exert power in areas traditionally controlled by the government (see e.g., González & Ocampo, 2006; Munck, 2005; Robertson, 2007). Finally, from a cultural perspective, investigators study cultural formations, transformations, and conflicts brought about by the media, technology, immigration, and dissemination of languages, discourses and practices. They study how local agents and communities are influenced by these moves, how language and school policies are affected by these transnational flows, and how different actors reinterpret these global trends (see e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Watson, 2004). This second part of the paper examines these economic, political, and cultural conceptualizations and how they may help us understand what is happening in Colombia in terms of education and language policymaking.

#### **4. ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION AND EDUCATION AND LINGUISTIC POLICIES**

The current era is characterized by economic globalization, and it is within this context that educational and linguistic policies need to be interpreted.

Economic globalization has shaped the way we interact with other individuals, how we perceive the public and private sectors, and how we position ourselves as customers in the market (Lauder et al, 2006). It has introduced a new set of values and discourses in which terms such as “capital,” “market,” “profit,” “competitiveness,” “property,” “accountability,” “trade,” “industrialization,” “individual choice,” and more recently, the so-called “knowledge economy” and “human capital” have been re-dimensioned and reinforced. Economic globalization has become the ideal platform for neoliberal discourses to be widespread, whereas international trade, capital mobility, technology, knowledge, multinational companies, the International Monetary Fund, The World Trade Organization, and the World Bank have become its main drivers (Bloom 2004).

The current wave of economic globalization consolidated under Thatcher (UK) and Reagan (US) leadership in the 1980s, was later adopted in Latin American countries under the so-called “Washington Consensus,” and was introduced in Colombia under the presidency of Cesar Gaviria in what is known as “la apertura económica”. Nevertheless, and after two decades of its initial introduction, different indicators confirmed that this model was rendering wider inequalities and social exclusion across and within nations. For instance, while the number of multinational companies around the world increased from about 65.000 by the 1990s to nearly 850.000 a decade later, the number of poor and indigent people in Latin America increased by 5 million and 1.5 million respectively from 1990 to 1995 (Munck, 2005). In the years to come, poverty continued to be extremely high in Latin America, 40% in 2002 according to the latest report of *Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo*—BID (BID, 2007), while the internal conflict between the state and different forces threatened the sustainability of the whole economic model. In a couple of decades, inequality and poverty in the world even concerned those benefited by the model, and called their attention about the need for a “softer” approach.

This is why by the end of the 1990s, leaders of the global economy called for a more socially oriented method to address growing inequalities, in a move that Joseph Stiglitz (2002) referred to as the “Post-Washington Consensus”. This economic approach retained the basic tenets described above, but masked its

negative effects by devoting some resources to social causes and emphasizing on human capital for economic development in the post industrial “knowledge economy”.<sup>5</sup> Under this new approach, the call was for economic growth that not only depended on the possession of money but also on being able to compete in terms of human capital (Becker, 2002, Guile, 2006), i.e., information and communication technologies, cutting edge information, creative ideas, and people who might speak international languages. That is why apparently progressive governments across Latin America began to emphasize the importance of education, technology, English, flows of information, and education credentials in order to compete in the global economy, while structural issues such as poverty, lower wages, informal and precarious employment, as well as social exclusion were disregarded in international conversations about policymaking.

If we study the effects of economic globalization and the Washington and Post Washington consensus in education and linguistic policies in Colombia, we will find enough evidence of its application across the nation. For instance, in Medellín, recent studies show that the progressive plan of former mayor, Sergio Fajardo, followed similar guidelines determined by the economic model of the last decade. As presented by Bernal (2006), while the former mayor is still seen as one of the best in the recent decades, and as one who changed the way we do politics in the city, a critical examination of his government plan 2004-2007 showed that, while most of the budget was invested in education (40%), a scarce 5% of the public spending was devoted to structural programs related to poverty reduction. His education programs, which included the consolidation of a “bilingual” program in order to position the city as an international center for business and foreign investment, sharply contrasted with the high indices of poverty (64%), unemployment (13%), informal employment<sup>6</sup> (58%), lack of health care (40%) and lack of a retirement plan (94.5%), which, combined, continued

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5 Drucker (1969) defined “knowledge economy” as the “application of knowledge from any field or source, new or old, to spur economic development” (as cited by Guile, 2006, p. 355.)

6 The term “informal employment” is used in Colombia when describing those freelance workers who mostly work independently and lack of a formal contract, do not have a fixed salary, have an unstable job, are excluded from the health and pension system, and live on a day by day basis (see also Munck, 2005, p.32).

to exclude people from the possibility of a better life. The former city mayor mainly focused his attention on education at the expense of some of the most oppressing issues that currently affect the majority of the population and actually determine students' possibility to stay in the school system<sup>7</sup>.

This does not mean that the administration of Sergio Fajardo was not positive in many respects, that public investment in education is not desirable, or that having former academics join politics is a bad thing. What this example does illustrate is that even in the most progressive governments of the current era we can clearly see the traces of the current model that overemphasizes on education and ignores the structural issues that renders inequality. This critical analysis is crucial, because as Lauder et al (2006: 39) have clearly emphasized:

[I]t explains why the expansion of education alone in these [poor] countries will not resolve problems of economic development, and may lead to high levels of frustration, if not social unrest, as educated youth are unemployed or locked into low-wage work.

The direct relationships between education, world languages, social mobility, and cultural and economic capital, become more convoluted in times of globalization, even when we assume that governments are progressive, and that promoting more education and bilingualism will be enough in times of human capital and economic competitiveness, on the one hand, and global social exclusion, on the other.

## 5. POLITICAL GLOBALIZATION AND THE CURRENT REFORMS

The current wave of globalization is not just about economic and human capital, it is also about power distribution and relations among and within countries accompanied by a deep transformation of the local state. That is why, analysts of political globalization focus on the study of the nation state, liberalism and

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7 In the city of Medellín, with a population of less than three million people, 13.000 children dropped out of school in 2005 mostly due for their inability to pay for their tuition or their need to work in order to survive (Bernal, 2006)

neoliberalism, relations of power between the foreign and the local, and the transformation of the government and the citizens in times of political, economic and cultural reform. In the field of applied linguistics, theorists explore, among other issues, the role of English as the language of power, teacher and student autonomy, and how foreign organizations exert an influence on state policies and local practice (see e.g., Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992).

From a political point of view, neoliberalism can be described as “the ideology behind globalization in the 1990s” (Munck, 2005, p.121). It is based on classical views of individual choice, freedom, personal property, and competitiveness, combined with contemporary calls for state intervention in order to guarantee the normal functioning of the global market and the accumulation of private capital (Robertson, 2007). In opposition to the concept of the welfare state where the public and common good were prioritized by the government, the state in times of neoliberal globalization underfunds and dismantles public services, privatizes public institutions in order to favor and liberalize the private market, and places the final responsibility for success or failure in the global market upon the individual, an approach that tends to ignore the historical and structural conditions that favor those agents who are better equipped within the system (Bloom, 2004; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Guadarrama González, 2006; Perkins, 2004; Stromquist, 2002).

The current wave of economic and political globalization is mainly run by transnational decision makers such as the World Bank, The International Monetary Fund, The World Trade Organization, and the transnational corporations that drive the circulation of capital around the globe (Stromquist, 2002). According to their economic, political, and strategic priorities, these entities control the global financial and trade market. In this highly deterministic decision making pyramid, some countries stay in the agricultural age, others move to industrialization, and a select group move to a knowledge based economy, where the highest economic benefit is now granted<sup>8</sup>. As stated by Becker (2002, p.293), the international division of labor is perpetuated as richer

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8 For a clear example of how this stratification of countries is perceived in the United States, see Commission on the Skills of the American Workplace (2006). *Tough Choices for Tough Times*. Washington, D.C.: National Center on Education and the Economy.

countries focus their resources on “high-knowledge products and services,” while poorer nations such as Colombia continue to specialize in “lower-skilled and raw material-intensive products.”

In the case of Colombia, the National Government materializes these international agendas in documents such as *Vision 2019 Educación: Propuesta para discusión* (Colombia. Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006a). In this policy document, while the government calls for English as a means to become more competitive in the global market (p.61), it proposes an educational system oriented towards technical modalities by increasing the percentage of students in this sector from 6.3% in 2005 to 30% in 2019, that is a 5 times increase in 14 years, whereas the number of students in professional programs offered by universities is expected to barely move from 18.3% in 2005 to 20% in 2019 (p.23). As the government arguably states in this plan, “the number of students registered in professional programs widely surpasses those in technical and technological tracks, which generates serious pertinence problems in front of the needs of the productive sector” (p.14). As it is evident in this analysis, learning English or investing in education may not necessarily represent considerable economic and social benefits for the country if all we want is a cheap and bilingual labor force according to the international distribution of human and economic capital determined abroad.

In times of economic and political globalization, education systems are reformed according to international expectations in a new “state theory of learning” (Lauder et al., 2006) that some scholars conceptualize as the “new orthodoxy of school reform” (Hargreaves et al, 2001). From this perspective, in times of contemporary globalization, nations and states move from an agrarian and industrial economy where elementary and secondary education were considered to be sufficient to compete, to a new global knowledge economy in which tertiary education, research, information, and technology are rendered to determine international competitiveness and thus local economic development (Bloom, 2004). In this move, and at times when neoliberalism becomes the dominant ideology in international policy, the state moves from being a guarantor of social welfare to be an educational provider and a national regulator. Conversely, local policy makers adopt international standards that reduce schooling to the production of a qualified workforce according to transnational expectations and development agendas that, as explained above, are driven by international financial and

trade organizations (Samoff, 1996; Stromquist, 2002). Economic and political success, in this new scenario, is thus determined by how you generate, access, transmit, use and control the knowledge created by intellectuals and scientists, and how you exert economic, political and military power to impose the rules of the game. This is how political and military power, transnational economic capital, communication technologies, the internet, international languages, and human capital become the engine of the global economy; education and research become its fuel; and English its universal code.

In order to make nations and individuals more competitive in the national and global market, educational systems are profoundly restructured (Stromquist, 2002). Content, methods, and purposes are redefined according to international standards; discourses and practices associated with curriculum, standards, and test alignment become central in national and international school reform; schools, universities, teachers and students are watched and certified by reinvigorated accreditation and evaluation systems guided by imported standards of good practice; teachers are hired or fired by private contractors; and discourses such as professionalization of teaching, data-driven interventions, scientifically-based research, research-based school reform, school quality, accountability, choice, and autonomy are used as misleading slogans that serve the purpose of the new orthodoxy around countries (see e.g., Contreras, 1997; Furlong, 2002; Tatto, 2007; Veugelers, 2004; Zeichner & Ndimande, 2008).

Additionally, the public sector is also found to be insufficient and unprepared for the new global challenges, which opens the doors for private investors presented as guarantors of high quality and innovation. This is how the education sector becomes an opportunity for business, educational centers transform into profit making businesses, and students are reduced to clients, in a shift that Molnar (2005) described as selling *to* schools, selling *of* schools, and selling *in* schools. In a more recent move, which is now introduced in Colombia through the National Bilingual Program and its accompanying policies, the state argues for a thorough and external evaluation of the public education system, which justifies the appointment of mostly international educational researchers, centers, and consultants to determine “quality”. These foreign agents and agencies are given the status of local educational authorities and testers with enough power to influence local policy and practice in schools



and universities. They determine what is a “good” or “bad” practice, which programs and institutions can be certified, which teachers should or should not be hired or fired, and what credentials can be granted to students and by whom. In times of economic and political globalization, the unelected local and international private sector turns to exert more influence over local matters than the publicly elected officials (Munck, 2005).

As presented by local investigators, education and linguistic policies have been highly influenced by economic and political globalization in Colombia<sup>9</sup>. For Ocampo (2002), the last two decades have been characterized by the state enforcement of reforms with recommendation of the World Bank. These changes include: 1) the so-called “municipalización,” a policy that assigned school districts the financial responsibility to pay teachers; 2) school economic self-sustainability; and 3) concentration of resources on the poorest subsets of the population, which on the surface seems to be a progressive idea, but in practice it serves to exclude taxpayers from the benefits of the state supported system and dismantles the public education sector by reducing spending. These moves have created a dramatic drop in the number of people covered by the public school system, increased teachers’ job instability, lowered quality in public schools, and consolidated a private school system targeted to educate children from socioeconomic strata 3, 4, 5, and 6 (Ocampo, 2002; Bernal, 2006).

These regulations have had a negative effect not only on foreign language teachers but also on practitioners in distinct areas (Saldarriaga & Toro, 2002). For instance, a local review on teacher autonomy (Usma, 2007) confirmed that although the General Law of Education empowered school communities to redesign their curricula, teachers at different educational levels continue to struggle when they want to use their professional discretion. They have not been granted the time, resources, guidance, working stability, or administrative

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9 For the purpose of this paper I have focused on Colombia, although different scholars describe the effects of economic and political globalization on global school reform and national schools systems worldwide. See e.g., Apple, M.W., Kenway, J., & Singh, M. (2005); Carter, D.S.G., & O’Neill, M.H. (Eds.) (1995); Fleming, D. (1998); Furlong, J. (2002); Hargreaves, A., Lieberman, A., Fullan, M., & Hopkins, D. (1998); Hargreaves, A. & Earl, L. Moore, S., & Manning, S. (2001); Lipman (2004); Tatto (2007).



support to succeed in this task (Frodden & Picón, 2005; McNulty & Usma, 2005; Usma & Frodden, 2003) and have been highly constrained by national standardized tests mandated by the state (Agudelo Valderrama, 2006)<sup>10</sup>. As this educational researcher inquired:

On what grounds do educational authorities claim that Colombia has embarked on “an educational revolution” and that schools have *curricular autonomy* when, on the other hand, the provision of professional learning opportunities of practicing teachers and school administrators is an issue that has been ignored and, on the other hand, the quality of their professional activity continues to be measured by the results of the *one* standardized External Examination? (Agudelo Valderrama, 2006, p.536)

As we may conclude from these investigations, these problematic conditions have continued to affect the quality of education provided to students in Colombia, and served to justify stringent and disempowering regulations such as the National Bilingual Program described above. In times of global school and linguistic reform, a vicious circle reproduces itself in Colombia when neoliberal regulations are enforced, teachers react against them, quality in the public system is affected, parents find attractive responses in the private sector, and the state finds new motivations to continue to cut public expending and exert stringent control over school and teachers by adopting more top-down policies. As is the case with economic globalization, the relationship between the different elements in the equation is convoluted and not easy to solve, but it is in this context that current policies need to be situated.

## 6. CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION AND ITS STUDY IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

Exposure to new people, ideas, languages, commodities, or technologies change the way we interact with each other and how we perceive, make sense, and

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10 As this paper was written, outsourcing was becoming the dominant approach for hiring teachers even in public universities such as Universidad de Antioquia. This new modality is having a negative effect on university professors' working stability, and motivating personnel to move out of the public system. This ongoing study will continue to explore these issues more in detail.

act on the world. And that is what cultural theorists investigate in times of globalization: the impact of internationalization on people's interaction, daily life, and behavior. This final section explores this dimension of contemporary globalization as it applies to education and language policy in Colombia.

Analyses of cultural globalization and its effects on education and linguistic policies resemble and differ from those described in previous sections (Singh, Kenway, & Apple, 2005). While the previous structuralist analyses of economic and political globalization tend to conclude that the current wave is driven by central organizations applying universal recipes that lead to predictable processes, students of cultural developments use a dialectical, complex, and a postmodern approach. They conclude that the relationship between globalization, education and world languages is highly unpredictable, as it depends on local reconstruction, as well as historical and contextual factors that shape how global trends are interpreted in different communities (Appadurai, 1996, 2000; Tomlinson, 1999). However, these approaches do not necessarily restrain a certain level of generalization when scholars focus on the micro "in order to illustrate the macro" (Watson, 2004, p.142).

In the study of cultural globalization and its effects on people's behavior and sociocultural practices, different scholars have found evidence of the emergence of particular global subcultures; specifically, the "international faculty," the "Davos culture," "Non Governmental Organizations," and "transnational workers" (Watson, 2004; 2008). For the purpose of this paper, I will focus my attention on the first two groups as they are directly connected to education and language policy adoption and implementation and helps us better understand recent reforms in Colombia.

One of the subcultures being created in times of cultural globalization is defined by Watson (2008) as the "international faculty club". They are described as "an international network of people who share similar values, attitudes, and research goals" and "wield tremendous influence through their association with educational institutions worldwide" (p.1). In the case of education in Colombia, this international faculty club is characterized by promoting notions of autonomy, professional development, reflective practice, multiculturalism,

and now, bilingualism. They have become indispensable references in academic papers like this one, and are usually invited to teacher and research conferences quite frequently organized with the economic support of U.S. and U.K. government educational institutions.

Members of this club correspond to the so called “indigenous foreigners” presented by Popkewitz (2000, p.10) and defined as those “heroes and heroines [who] circulate as part of global discourses of reform.” In the case of applied linguistics in Colombia, members of this group tend to speak English as their mother tongue, which makes them more attractive to local communities in search for interaction with native speakers of this dominant international language. This critique does not mean that members of this club may not serve important educational and social causes, or illuminate papers and investigations like this one, but implies that in the context of cultural globalization the knowledge and experience of some northern elites are privileged over local practitioners.

The existence and influence of this club is confirmed throughout the adoption and implementation of the National Bilingual Program in Colombia. Quintero Polo (2007) describes the way the national government discharged the whole responsibility of the adoption of this reform on these foreign representatives, and how leaders of Colombian universities were called to participate, but their voices were silenced and substituted by European views of language, teaching, and learning. This is the main reason why representatives of the most important public universities in the country decided to withdraw from the implementation process, instead of just accepting that their names and institutions be used to authenticate the imposed policy. As he stated, Colombian leaders had been expected to validate the program, in a top-down decision making process in which foreign actors controlled the whole agenda.

Processes of cultural globalization also favor the formation of another transnational subculture called “Davos culture.” This corresponds to “an elite group of highly educated people who operate in the rarefied domains of international finance, media, and diplomacy”, follow specific manners and etiquettes, and share common values and notions about the world economy, democracy, markets, or globalization (Watson, 2008, p.1). In Colombia, for

example, these “cosmopolitan” citizens (Munck, 2005) represent a self-selective elite of men and women who attend influential schools and universities, speak English fluently, use similar discourses, are members of exclusive clubs, move around similar milieus in their respective cities, and use the media to make their familiar and personal affairs issues of national coverage and interest. Members of these elites, even in nations like Colombia, conform to a group that attend bilingual schools, work in multinational corporations, travel around the world, and, using Bourdieu’s theory of capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986), we may say that and combine and transform economic, social and cultural capital in order to maintain their status. English as an international language, in this context, represents an advantage for members of this group, especially when the government regulates and sets the stage for the successful journey of those instructed to be “bilinguals”.

As we may conclude from this analysis, the US and European sorting process through schooling seems to be copied in Colombia. We may assert that as soon as students register in public vs private institutions and different quality of foreign language education is granted to them, children are being tracked into different paths that will determine their future welfare, opportunities of entrance to higher education, and future role in the knowledge economy described above. Thus, in the context of globalization and competitiveness, and when the government is setting the stage for those who may speak two languages, being able to speak English will represent an asset, while being monolingual will become an enormous drawback for those who lack social and economic capital (social connections and money), and all may offer in the market is represented in terms of their human capital (knowledge, skills, and dispositions). This is why not granting all the students within the private and public system with the same education quality and with the possibility to be proficient in English is placing them into different tracks within the global and national job market. In other words, we may argue that in the context of cultural, economic, and political globalization not providing all students with the same options is an unethical decision by the central government. It is a subtle strategy that will continue to reproduce privilege through national education and language policies; one that will continue to exclude groups of people from the possible benefits offered by formal schooling, although we already argued that education is not enough either.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE AGENDAS

In this review, I have explored new education and linguistic policies in Colombia and their connection with economic, political, and cultural globalization. This research has allowed me to argue that despite their appealing appearance, these new reforms do not necessarily address some of the most oppressing needs of the majority of the population in Colombia. As I described, these reforms highly obey to transnational economic and political agendas and tend to direct public attention away from structural problems such as the uneven distribution of capital in our society, the processes of exclusion that affect most of the population in our country, and the existing gap between public and private schooling.

Additionally, I have posited that the top-down approaches to reform employed throughout the formulation of the National Program of Bilingualism in Colombia are neither new nor beneficial. They have accompanied previous centralized efforts to reduce public spending in education, standardize the system, reduce teacher autonomy, dismantle the public sector, and de-stabilize teachers work. These processes have led to teachers' reaction against the reform, and have created a vicious circle in which the state regulates and imposes new obligations on teachers, teachers reject or ignore them, quality decreases according to the new expectations, and the government finds another justification to impose new reforms that continue to feed the cycle. As presented in this paper, current reforms follow the same tradition, but now with the influence of international actors such as the British Council. This vicious circle seems to perpetuate as new regulations do not really contribute to a solution, but just add up to a history of impositions and refusals.

This harsh reality calls for alternative agendas that may target the structural conditions that render social exclusion through schooling and policy. These new agendas need to address the fundamental factors that widen the gap between public and private education in Colombia; depart from the local and most oppressing needs and priorities of the population; and value the important knowledge that is produced by local practitioners in schools and universities. This paper represents another attempt to make this new agenda a possible reality, and signals our personal commitment to these social endeavors.

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