

Education Community Dialogue towards Building a Policy Agenda for Adult Education: Reflections Drawn from Experience

Tatiana Lotierzo Hirano

*Latin American Campaign for the Right to
Education*

Giovanna Modé Magalhães

*Latin American Campaign for the Right to
Education*

Camilla Croso

*Latin American Campaign for the Right to
Education*

Laura Giannecchini

*Latin American Campaign for the Right to
Education*

Fabiola Munhoz

*Latin American Campaign for the Right to
Education*

In this article, we share the experience of the “Amplifying Voices” initiative. Held by the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education (CLADE) within the scope of public policy advocacy, “Amplifying Voices” applies the principles of consultation and dialogue in youth and adult education communities, aiming at a stronger connection between expectations and decision making processes with regards to adult education policies. Over the past two years, this initiative has promoted listening and attentive dialogue in order to strengthen participation and affirm the importance of actors’ voices in shaping policy and promoting social change.

“It is not in silence that [people] make themselves, rather it is in their words, their work, their action-reflection.” (Paulo Freire, 1980, p. 78)

In this article, we share some thoughts on the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education’s (CLADE) experience with consultation and dialogue in education communities, within the scope of public policy advocacy. We focus on the case of the “Amplifying Voices” initiative, which aims to provide an open space for critical thinking and dialogue for youth and adult education actors, towards shaping education policy and promoting social change.

CLADE is a plural network of civil society organizations acting in the defense and promotion of the right to free public education for all as a responsibility of the State, regarding the dimensions of availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability, and accountability. Such commitment implies recognizing education as a fundamental human right and an enabling right that allows for the realization of all other rights. As articulated by Katarina Tomasevski (2005), the right to education includes the following dimensions:

- a) *Availability*: functioning educational institutions and programmes have to be available in sufficient quantity within the jurisdiction of the State;
- b) *Accessibility*: educational institutions and programmes have to be accessible, physically and economically, to everyone, without discrimination, within the jurisdiction of the State;
- c) *Acceptability*: the form and substance of education, including curricula and *teaching methods*, have to be acceptable (e.g., relevant, culturally appropriate, and of good

- quality) to students and, in appropriate cases, parents; and
- d) *Adaptability*: education has to be flexible so it can adapt to the needs of changing societies and communities and respond to the needs of students within their diverse social and cultural settings.

For those involved in the Campaign, the unconditional defense of the human right to education goes hand in hand with efforts for greater participation at all levels of education policy: from its design to the monitoring of its implementation and evaluation. Thus, one of the core premises of the Campaign is “promoting pluralistic and collective action among the diverse members of civil society in the fight for ensuring the right to a public and free education for all” (CLADE, 2010). The Campaign seeks to involve “boys, girls and youth, adults, non-governmental organizations, teachers unions, education workers’ associations and social movements” (CLADE, 2010). According to this perspective, all citizens should have their voices heard and that means that their participation is crucial to relevant political and decision-making processes.

Regarding education policy, it is crucial that the right of members of the education community—including students, teachers and other education professionals, parents and civil society groups—to participate in public debates be promoted and respected. This means that they should be recognized as the main actors to be consulted and considered during debates on public education policies and also that their perceptions and desires for an education that is meaningful to them should be the basis for collective action towards developing a public education policy agenda. Díaz (n.d.) quotes Boaventura de Sousa Santos as saying:

The idea of democracy must be understood as something much broader than that which exists under the capitalist system, in that democracy is in fact the entire process through which we transform unequal relations of power into relations based on shared authority. This is important within the family, as it is in the factory, on the street, in the community, in the public space and within relations between countries. As such, additional structural spaces that go well beyond conventional political spaces must be established, thereby radicalizing democracy and making it possible to consolidate the principles of shared authority as a political objective. (p. 2)

Nevertheless and contradictorily, the voices of those actors directly impacted by education policies are the very ones that are least audible in the processes for developing an agenda for public education. At least in Latin America and the Caribbean, recent protests demanding free public education for all, as well as other rights, clearly reveal the lack of truly participatory spaces in which citizens can convey their thoughts and make recommendations regarding policies and measures that aim to improve education. Ordinary people are rarely asked about the kind of education they desire, what knowledge is meaningful to them, or how they evaluate the education that is currently being offered.

A second premise is that participation leads to critical reflection, generating an opportunity to think about one’s rights and, in turn, offering the potential for transformational action. Dialogue is therefore seen as a moment of self-awareness and realization. According to Freire (1980):

Conscientization cannot exist outside of a “praxis,” or better yet, without the act of action-reflection . . . For this very reason, conscientization is an

historical commitment. It also means historical conscience: it means critical insertion into history, and that [people] must take on their role as actors who build and rebuild the world. . . . Conscientization does not seek a separation where the conscience is on one side and the world on the other. Rather, it is based on a conscience-world relation. In turn, the false conscience, i.e., the state of semi-intransitive or naïve transitive conscience, is overcome, enabling a better critical insertion of conscientized persons in a reality that is demystified. (p. 26)

A third premise for these initiatives is that research-action is valuable activity (Freire, 1980). That is, we believe that the exercise of listening and dialogue contributes to the collective building of knowledge, unlike more traditional forms of research.

Finally, the fourth premise is that this exercise can be a way to document and give visibility to concrete cases that often remain invisible in the media, as well as in official statistics and documents. We agree with Tomasevski (2005), that the fight for making human rights a reality should not be guided by statistical data alone, but rather by concrete cases and stories. Rights violations become more real and significant when cases are documented at the source, also providing input into the design of strategies for combating such violations. Taking these four premises as a starting point, we now look closer at the experience of “Amplifying Voices.”

Youth and Adults: You Have the Word

“Amplifying Voices: Views and proposals for youth and adult education from the perspective of its subjects” was conceived as an initiative based on the recognition that all people are rights-bearers and should be heard and participate in decision-making processes, particularly those addressing policies and practices that affect them. The focus on the public sector was highly emphasized, due to a Campaign priority to advocate for public education at all levels, what is considered a *sine qua non* to the realization of education as a human right. As such, the name, “Amplifying Voices,” mirrors the initiative’s main objective: to enable the expectations, demands, and public policy recommendations of those who study or have studied in youth and adult education classes to be known and taken into account by public policy makers and by society as a whole.

The expression “youth and adult education” (Y&AE, or EPJA in Portuguese and Spanish) refers to a level of education aimed at illiterate young people and adults, as well as those who could not complete their basic education. In Latin America and the Caribbean the concept of youth and adult education has been reinforced by educators, theoreticians, and activists who follow the path opened by Paulo Freire, as a way to promote students’ empowerment through their self-recognition as rights bearers and key actors in the political and other decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Another factor that contributed significantly to EPJA practices in the region is the influence of the region’s popular education tradition, which assumes that some ethical, political, and pedagogical approaches are essential within the framework of a politically emancipatory project. From this point of view, one prioritizes the participation of vulnerable sectors that otherwise might be excluded from educational processes. In its pedagogical dimension, popular education is about cultivating self-awareness of one’s knowledge and power to develop one’s thoughts on reality, taking everyday experience as the beginning of educational

process. Additionally, popular education encourages people to *rebuild the world* (Freire, 1980) or take action to promote social change.

It is worth noting that such an understanding of EPJA springs mostly from the educational experience in itself. For this reason, EPJA remains a key issue in the Latin America and the Caribbean region, due to the lack of public policies and resources that effectively contribute to the realization of this right. In 2011 more than 48 million people in Latin American and the Caribbean were illiterate, or 8.4% of the region's population (United Nations Children's Fund, 2013). Most are female rural workers, indigenous persons, and people of African descent, which calls for urgent measures focusing on these groups.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, there are between 40 and 50 million indigenous persons and more than 150 million of African descent; according to SITEAL (2011), these two groups are disproportionately among the poorest and most marginalized people in the region. They tend to have the most precarious jobs and less access to a relevant quality education, and are often excluded from decision-making processes. Depending on the country, the percentage of adult indigenous individuals who are illiterate or have limited literacy varies from 60% to 90% of the population (SITEAL, 2011). It is also worth noting that in most countries in the region illiteracy is higher among African descendants who live in rural areas than those who live in urban areas. Among indigenous and African descendants, women are the most marginalized in terms of accessing and completing formal education.

“Amplifying Voices”: Conception and Challenges

The “Amplifying Voices” initiative structures itself around a website where EPJA students and teachers from Latin America and the Caribbean can post their stories in video, audio or written form, and also find stories from students and teachers in their own and other countries (see <http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja>). Actually, when “Amplifying Voices” began in 2011, CLADE staff made an effort to map similar initiatives, identifying EPJA experiences being carried on in different places and by different actors. This step was critical because such experiences had limited visibility on the Internet and therefore were not being used for cross-regional analysis of EPJA practices and policies.[1]

Among the experiences that were visible on the Internet, the majority placed emphasis on the success of certain literacy training models and not on the EPJA students' and teachers' voices. While the goal of allowing EPJA students to have their voices heard at a regional and a global level was a step towards their empowerment and the possibility of impacting public EPJA policies, the choice of collecting and presenting such stories through an Internet site also reflected a commitment to promote regional exchanges of knowledge and personal experiences. “Amplifying Voices” departed from recognition of the web as a fundamental tool for the political advocacy activities that were already being carried out by CLADE at that time. That is, due to the fact that CLADE is a decentralized campaign that includes national members in 15 countries, as well as international partners, the use of technology has been an essential tool for political mobilization, especially because it brings the concept of political advocacy to a different level, adding to the participation of Campaign members in face-to-face meetings and events.

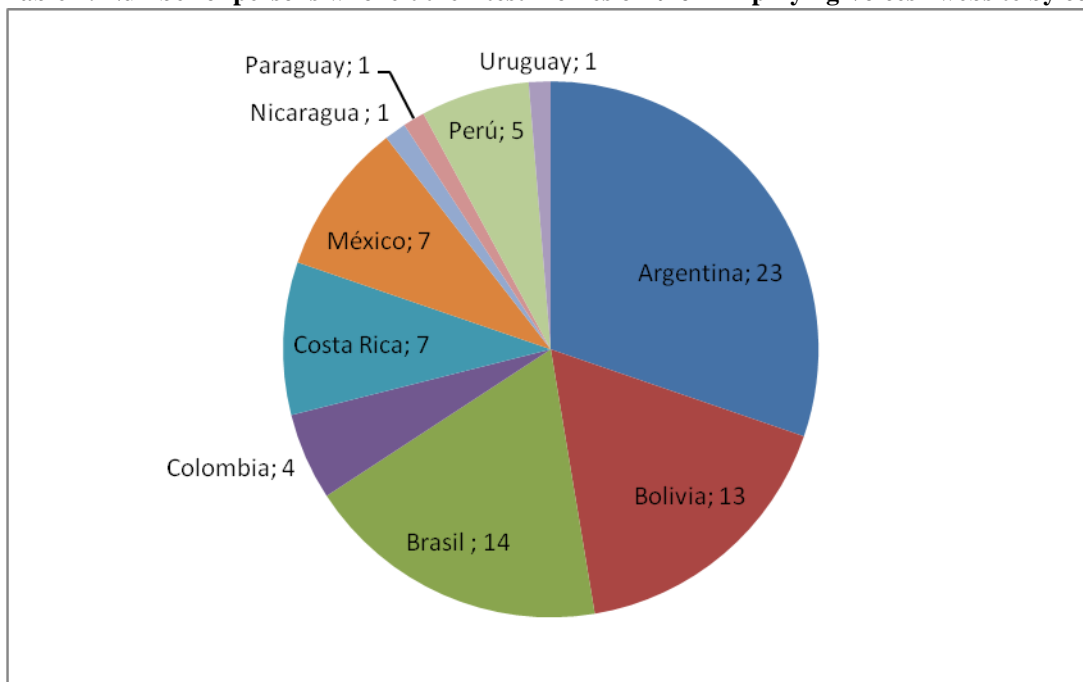
Similarly, in spite of its Internet-based dimension, “Amplifying Voices” also included efforts to combine distance and face-to-face approaches. The challenge was how to foster engagement of EPJA students from a wide range of contexts, including those who might not be acquainted with or have frequent access to the Internet. This necessitated converting this

website into an important tool to promote exchange and raise voices, individually and collectively. The answer for CLADE was to invite teachers, in addition to students, to become involved. This decision proved valuable because the teachers became responsible for collecting their students' stories and delivering them to CLADE staff. At the same time, this strategy encouraged teachers to involve their students in reflexive processes. This included promoting students' reflection on the very issues that were important to "Amplifying Voices," opening the possibility of drawing recommendations concerning EPJA policies for these students.

It is important to highlight that in addition to teachers and students, there was also a crucial engagement from members of civil society organizations in the implementation of this initiative. "Amplifying Voices" was able to involve different facilitators who either helped CLADE staff reach out to teachers and students or uploaded the video, audio, and written testimonies to the website.

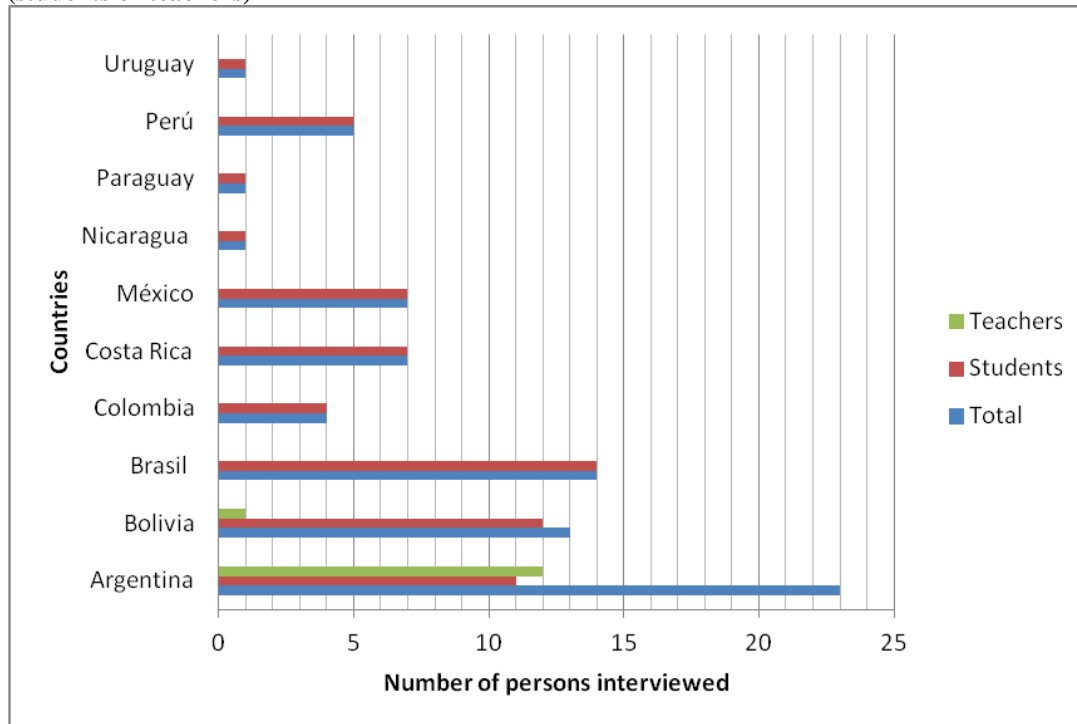
This is, of course, a very challenging initiative, which is still (and gradually) being implemented. Thanks to all these concentrated efforts, the website currently represents the opinions of 76 persons (13 teachers and 63 students) from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Paraguay, and Uruguay. The "Amplifying Voices" website (<http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja>) receives 1,500 visitors per month on average.

Table 1: Number of persons who left their testimonies on the "Amplifying Voices" website by country



Source: Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education

Table 2: Number of persons interviewed for the “Amplifying Voices” website, by country, by group (students or teachers)



Source: Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education

In addition to giving visibility to these messages through the on-line platform, CLADE has worked to communicate these actors’ demands and recommendations in different political advocacy spaces in which it participates. The Campaign actively takes part in regional and international meetings and conferences that provide unique opportunities to dialogue with heads of State and other representatives of various government bodies, as well as key actors from multilateral organizations and other stakeholders. These events are invaluable opportunities for political advocacy, allowing recommendations from civil society to be presented to public authorities.

To illustrate, CLADE was present at the 21st Ibero-American Congress of Education, which was organized by The Ibero-American States Organization (OEI is its acronym in Spanish) in September 2011. This Congress was attended by all ministers of education from Latin America and the Caribbean, plus Portugal and Spain. The Congress was also important because it was followed by the Ibero-American Congress of Permanent, Technical and Professional Education, attended by more than 5,000 teachers, mostly from the EPJA sector. At the September Congress CLADE presented to the ministers the recommendations received through the “Amplifying Voices” website to that date (see <http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja/propuestas>). An interactive exhibition was set up to show the videos and resources from the “Amplifying Voices” site.[2]

A Closer Snapshot of “Amplifying Voices” Recommendations

From CLADE’s perspective, policies and programs for EPJA must be in line with the expectations of EPJA students. This understanding guided the interviews aimed at finding out these students’ expectations, views, and recommendations for education policies and practices.[3] These interviews were semi-structured around two guiding questions. *What are*

your expectations about education? What obstacles did you find in your way to receive education?

The excerpts below highlight the main issues that emerged from an analysis of the interview data. Each interviewee decided how he/she wanted his/her name, age, and location to be revealed. Each excerpt concludes with a link to the internet page where the full testimony can be found.

Four main issues were identified by the interview data analysis: a) experiencing new forms of interaction through written culture; b) increasing one's knowledge and/or self-confidence; c) realizing rights of citizenship and increasing the feeling of belonging to society; and d) being able to work and recovering one's dignity. The excerpts also allowed for identification of the issues of accessibility, relevance, and discrimination as crucial to realizing the human right to education, according to the framework elaborated by Tomasevsky (2004).

Experiencing New Forms of Interaction through Written Culture

This theme refers specifically to students who took part in activities that enhanced their literacy skills. Most of these testimonies mention daily experiences wherein the student was negatively affected by the fact that he/she did not know how to read and write, which resulted in experiences of exclusion and discrimination. As an illustration, Balvina, an indigenous woman from Peru, comments:

My father wouldn't send me to school. In the past parents wouldn't send us to school. . . . Our parents would say: "to send letters to men, that is why I will send you?" My siblings have not gone to school either, but the boys studied by themselves. My father never allowed me to study . . . I could not sign papers in my community's assemblies. . . . Now I'm learning how to write, so I can sign, so I will not be afraid anymore . . . I will not falter anymore or hide behind other people. Now, I can sign at the assemblies, for I have learned. . . . Come to school, women! I'm learning, and we all will learn, so that we are not left behind. I want my children to know that this is their right, my right, the right of everybody to go to school. If they want to learn, they won't feel ashamed anymore for not knowing it. They will write whenever they need, without asking anyone for help as I did in the past. . . . And my children know it as well. I want all of them to complete school. So, I will remain as the only one who was illiterate." (Retrieved from <http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja/2011/asi-ya-no-tendre-miedo/>)

Increasing Knowledge and Self-Confidence

Interviewees indicated that they increased their interest in knowledge as they realized their right to education. In turn, the experience enhanced their sense of autonomy and self-confidence in social relationships, for example, within the family context. María Marina, an 84-year-old Mexican woman, exemplifies this theme:

I came back to study in order to move forward and learn, 'cause I couldn't do so when I was a child. My parents didn't send me to school. Now, I am given the option to go on with my studies. . . . The major difficulty I faced was to reconcile studying with being a housewife—and my husband didn't like it. But I wanted to study. . . . I recommend that we continue our studies even after we

become adults. It is a very important thing to do . . . especially if you didn't have the chance to do so when you were young. (Retrieved from <http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja/2011/maria-marina-olvi-a-estudiar-para-seguir-adelante/>)

Realizing Rights of Citizenship and Increasing the Feeling of Belonging to Society

Here responses referred not just to having access to written culture but also to the possibility of being able to exercise one's citizenship rights and increase one's participation in democracy. Interviewees also mentioned their desire to learn new things and participate in everyday life decisions and/or perform everyday tasks in equal conditions with other people, without feeling inferior. For instance, Julia Aparicio de Sánchez, a 53-year-old field worker and housewife from El Cónдор, Bolivia, explained:

Now I'm 53 years old, but I feel strong, this is why I continue to work. I'm from the countryside and I am the mother of 12 children. Before learning how to read and write I was like a blind person. I would see signs and papers everywhere in the city, but I did not know what they were all about. I could not sign my own name. . . . But I had the chance to learn how to read and write, and math, and thanks to that I can now decide where to go when I'm in the city, and I can read the letters sent by my children, and also attend other qualification workshops. I demand [public authorities] the implementation of projects to improve my community. Now I can count money faster whenever I sell or shop [for] something. I don't have to press my fingerprint anymore; I can sign my name now. I can control my home expenses better. I can enter any place with more confidence and without asking so many questions, because I can read. Now I can find out where offices and shops are. I also see life with different eyes, as if a blindfold was taken off my face. . . . Finally, I say that I want to go on and tell other women to qualify themselves as well. They must learn, and so they can claim for their rights too. (Retrieved from <http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja/2011/asi-podremos-reclamar-nuestros-derechos/>)

Being Able to Work and Recovering One's Dignity

In this theme interviewees emphasized the relation between education and work opportunities. Being able to find a job, with better labor conditions, meant that they and their families could regain dignity. For example, Marivaldo Rodrigues de Souza, a 43-year-old janitor living in São Paulo, Brazil, reported:

I had a hard life. I was not raised by my parents. I've always worked for others, in the fields. I'm from the State of Bahia. I came to São Paulo two years ago. Because I've never gone to school, I was hired by a third-party cleaning company, but the salary is not good, and then I decided to quit and go to school. . . . I started studying so I could receive some training to work at least as doorkeeper, so I can provide my family with a better life. I have a very good teacher. A teacher who knows how to educate; she can explain the subject. . . . In Bahia, I would not have the chance to study, because the school was in the city, which was far away, and there was no public transport. Then I took all this time to go to school. Now, when I got here, I found this opportunity. . . . I think that whoever quits school should return, because school is everything in life. (Retrieved from

<http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja/2011/marivaldo-a-escola-e-tudo-para-mim/>)

We identified three themes (accessibility, relevance, and discrimination) that arose in interviewees' responses to our second guiding question: *What obstacles did you find in your way to receive education?* We present excerpts from some of the EPJA students' testimonies given during the interviews that illustrate these themes.

Accessibility

Jessica Carolina Morales, a 23-year-old student from Colombia, began by highlighting obstacles related to accessibility. She mentioned as barriers the distance required to reach school combined with the lack of transportation, as well as the fees that are charged:

I like to study very much. And I believe it is good for me, so I will be someone in life. I want to continue with my studies, I want to go to school to become a teacher and help children. . . . One difficulty is that my feet hurt; it is difficult to walk. My knees hurt as well [and it was aggravated because I had to walk long distances to go to school]. . . . Another complicated issue is money. They charged us fees for the painting of the classroom and even to enter the lab. . . . I would recommend that they give opportunity to people like me, so that we can go to school without paying such an expensive price, 'cause some people are sick and also don't have money. (Retrieved from <http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja/2011/jessica-no-habia-comida-en-la-escuela/>)

Relevance

Some/many/all of the students interviewed pointed to the fact that academic content was not relevant to their daily reality and some/many/all mentioned the cultural dimension of language as a barrier, or at least a factor, discouraging participation in some EPJA programs. For instance, language was mentioned as a barrier by Ana Bertha Rojas Salvatierra, an indigenous woman from Peru.

I'm the oldest of 7 siblings, and my native language is Quechua. I was admitted to school at the age of 9. I had to walk about one hour and a half from my community to school. . . . I'd study from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and I was one of a few women who attended school. Most of the other students were men, and they would mock me. . . . From 1st to 6th grade of primary school, the only thing I learned was: "Tito up the donkey." They wouldn't teach us math, and so I couldn't add or take away or even read. . . . Another difficulty was my native language. I could not understand advanced Spanish classes. (Retrieved from <http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja/2011/alicia-las-mujeres-son-discriminadas-especialmente-las-mujeres-andinas/>)

Discrimination

In the majority of interviews students mentioned discrimination—especially gender discrimination—as a huge obstacle (see previous quotes by Julia, Balvina, and María Marina). Cristina Barreto Choque, Secretary of Bolivia Women's Confederation, also mentioned gender discrimination as undermining women's right to education; it is worth noting the value of the interviewee's mention of her country's Constitution and how her comments reinforce and reflect that focus of several human rights instruments:

In terms of education, women have big responsibilities. . . . We still see, in the Bolivian education system, that our country is far behind schedule in which regards [*sic*] women. We're fighting the fight of our ancestors. In the past, here in our communities, for instance, the role of women was to serve as housewives, taking care of their husbands, and feeding the cattle. Only men had the right to education. Today, in our country, in particular in the fields, there are women and young girls using computers. That's why we demand education for all. . . . I believe that first of all we must have self-confidence as women, and acknowledge our rights. In the past, they said men had rights, not women, but today we realize that this is not true. They both have their rights. We have the right to education and everything else provided by the Federal Constitution. (Retrieved from <http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja/2011/cristina-nuestro-pais-esta-muy-retrasado-para-las-mujeres/>)

Conclusion

Based on the above-quoted and all the other testimonies, CLADE has created a set of recommendations related to education policies and practices, and has used various fora and channels to communicate these recommendations to government officials and other stakeholders. In summary, EPJA students demand that States:

- treat education as a right, reinforcing its connection with other human rights;
- provide free education, i.e., without cost to those participating;
- turn lifelong education into a reality;
- approve and implement policies that treat EPJA as a priority;
- adopt measures towards the end of discrimination in education, particularly with respect to gender, age, and indigenous groups;
- take into account linguistic diversity in the design and implementation of education policies; and
- organize school times to facilitate the attendance of students who also work.

“Amplifying Voices” is a recent initiative that CLADE intends to make permanent. From CLADE’s perspective, the initiative validates our central premise regarding the importance of dialogue in the process of the “conscientization” (Freire, 1980, p. 26) of political-social actors—in the strengthening of democracies and in exercising human rights. This initiative fosters actors’ reflections on the concrete impacts of education on their lives, entailing and/or facilitating political action as a main purpose. “Amplifying Voices” brought about examples of consciousness-raising processes involving the affirmation of rights, the recognition of individuals as rights-bearers, and the self-awareness of the EPJA students as legitimate political actors.

In the context of new decentralized and horizontal political practices (Díaz, n.d.) those of us involved in CLADE recognize the importance of human agency in promoting change. By encouraging people to voice their experiences and recommendations for changes in policies and practice, the “Amplifying Voices” initiative seeks to increase self-awareness about individual rights, as well as to connect people so that their aspirations can be pursued at the group, community, national, and international levels. In that sense, the experience of “Amplifying Voices” may lead to social transformations—including moves toward fuller realization of education and other human rights and progress toward achieving more just and

egalitarian societies (Fraser, 2007) in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Notes

- [1]. Some existing programs aimed at promoting students' voices on the web would not contemplate either a Latin America and Caribbean regional approach or an EPJA approach.
- [2]. A similar exhibition was set up during the VIII Assembly of the International Council on Adult Education, held from June 14-18, 2011, in Malmö, Sweden. For further information, see <http://www.icae2.org/>.
- [3]. Interviews were organized within the following context: (a) interviewees were selected based on recommendations from members of civil society organizations that work directly with EPJA (mostly members of CLADE), identified during field visits by CLADE staff to schools or EPJA centres, or self-selected after spontaneous access to the "Amplifying Voices" website; (b) interviews were conducted face-to-face by CLADE staff or representatives of civil society organizations that work directly with EPJA (most were members of CLADE), or interviews were self-initiated and uploaded by visitors to the website—either way, interviewees followed instructions that included a script of questions (see <http://www.campanaderechoeducacion.org/vocesepja/participe/>); (c) the interviews are part of a continuous process, so they have been conducted at different times; and (d) the analysis and transcription of the interview data has been done by CLADE staff.

This article was written collaboratively; the authors work in the Executive Coordination Office of the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education (CLADE).

Tatiana Lotierzo Hirano E-mail: tatiana@campanaderechoeducacion.org

Giovanna Modé Magalhães E-mail: giovanna@campanaderechoeducacion.org

Camilla Croso E-mail: camcroso@gmail.com

Laura Giannecchini E-mail: laura@campanaderechoeducacion.org

Fabiola Munhoz E-mail: fabiola@campanaderechoeducacion.org

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