

Equal opportunities?**Edgardo Zablotzky, Member of the National Academy of Education and Vice-Chancellor of the Universidad del CEMA.****Buenos Aires Herald, Enero 20 de 2017.**

The decision by President Macri to send to Congress legislation that establishes the obligatory nature of schooling for all children from three years old is a remarkable initiative looking to introduce greater equality of opportunities. The early stimulation of children is fundamental, as demonstrated, for example, by the seminal contributions of James Heckman, the recipient of the Nobel Prize of Economics in 2000.

Nevertheless, as indicated by Dr. Abel Albino, a man synonymous in our country with the fight against the infantile malnutrition, “in order to have education it is necessary to have a brain. Eighty per cent of the brain is formed during the first year of life. It grows a centimeter per month. The formation of the central nervous system is completed in the first two years of life. If during this lapse the child does not receive the necessary feeding and stimulation, cerebral growth will stop and if itself is not developed normally, it will affect the child’s intellectual coefficient and capacity for learning”.

A recent report by the Universidad Católica Argentina reads that “in Argentina, half of our children suffer for some form of malnutrition before they turn two years old, just consider anaemia, low stature, obesity or low weight. This is to say that the consequences of poor feeding already make their impact at the moment of greater growth, where vital structures are being developed”.

How is it possible to talk about equality of opportunities in front of this picture?

The national government far from hiding this serious problem, has admitted it, unlike the last administration of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. For example, it has signed agreements with the Fundación Conin, within the framework of the Plan Nacional de Primera Infancia, which will make possible to open ten centres for prevention and three for recovery for severe cases of undernourishment, and the government will also collaborate in the fortification of other 20 areas of prevention which are already working under the management of the Foundation.

There is no doubt that the direction is the correct one, but to my understanding the magnitude of the applied resources is not. This article puts forth for consideration by readers a proposal with respect to how to release much greater resources for probably the most important social debt of our country: infantile malnutrition.

The government, the economic manager of public goods and resources, must decide how much to spend and what on to maximize the objectives of society, taking into account the existence of limited resources when doing it.

It is clear that in our country the ominous consequences that we all know have been ignored. It is not possible to spend permanently more than what we have and the budget must be assigned to the areas of greater social impact. Let us apply this simple idea to the disgrace of infantile malnutrition.

What public policy is more inclusive - to dedicate a greater budget to assure suitable nutrition to all kids during their first two years of life or to maintain free and unrestricted entrance to universities, with the costs that this implies, subsidizing many students who attended during their primary and high schooling, private institutions?

Would not be more socially efficient to grant scholarships to those young people who require it and whose grades would support them? Rather than to those students

who can pay for their university studies? I believe yes. An undernourished child in his first years of life, almost with certainty, will not reach university. Is it fair that he does not have the opportunity to do so, by only having been born in a humble home? What are we talking about when we speak about inclusion or equality of opportunities?

We have learned in our country - for more than 10 years - that one thing is the discourse and another very different thing is the reality.

Nothing comes for free, of course, and university education does not either. The unrestricted, free entrance to universities for students who can pay their studies prevent these resources from being assigned to other targets, like tackling infantile malnutrition with greater efforts. This is a high cost that it is not possible to disregard.

For that reason, this article proposes that readers ask themselves if free university education should be maintained for those students who can pay the cost of their studies, or whether those resources should be used to tackle the shame in our country that is infantile malnutrition.