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Please daddy, fight for my education

By **Edgardo Zablotzky**

Teachers take note: children cannot take measures to defend their rights

As in previous years, the beginning of the school classes took place amidst strikes and teacher mobilisations motivated by the usual salary discussions. Nothing new, nothing extraordinary. After all, what better predictor of the arrival of Autumn is there than teacher conflicts that will mostly hurt those children who have less?

However, this morning reading the newspapers an unusual piece of news made me think about the terrible educational reality facing our country: a general strike of children, decreed by their union delegates, and demanded in the midst of strong tantrums.

In one recent radio interview, a 10-year-old boy, a member of one of the childrens' unions in the province of Buenos Aires, said that: "There was no alternative but to reach this instance, given the lack of response from the adults with regard to their desire to go to school."

A very studious teenager stated in several media: "The lack of respect for the National Constitution, which in Article 75, sub-clause 22, incorporates the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is embarrassing." Faced with the re-questioning of journalists, he clarified that "Article 28 of the Convention explicitly recognises the right of the child to education."

Some analysts predict a crisis scenario if their claims are not recognised, since several groups have already decided not to play, much less eat or go to bed when their parents require it, for 48 hours, although the measure of force may extend several more days.

In unofficial statements the possibility arose of large concentrations of children in the play areas of squares, accompanied by their parents, who would be facing extortion by threats of crying for hours at night, not respecting the elementary right of the parents to a night's sleep after a day of hard work. Probably a judge will have to rule in the face of presentations already made by some unions of parents in defence of the aforementioned right.

The conflict has escalated in virulence after the childrens' claims rose in tone, with groups from very poor families demanding the strict fulfillment of Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that the right to education must be able to be exercised under conditions of equality of opportunities.

"How is it possible to talk about equality of opportunities?" asked a very poor and hard-working girl.

"Since I go to a public school I do not have classes again because of another strike by the teacher unions while in other schools the children have classes? When I grow up, I will not know the same as those children who have class," she complained, stammering while crying.

It is time to come back to reality. How is it possible that in a country where strikes and street demonstrations are everyday events, I have never heard about a great street demonstration of parents demanding education for their children? It is clear that the education system has made the parents so lethargic that they do not perceive the damage that their children suffer from not receiving an adequate education.

It is obvious that children cannot take forceful measures in defence of their rights. If our society does not privilege their right to learn, our children and adolescents will have no future in the society of knowledge in which they will develop their lives and we, the adults, will be the only culprits.

How can we help them? How can the government provide real equality of opportunity for every child, regardless of the family's economic situation?

The parents who decide to send their children to a private school have to receive a voucher for an amount equivalent to the cost of educating a child in a public school. The government would continue subsidising education, but the resources will be assigned to the students instead of the schools. The fact that the parents would be able to choose which school is better for their children will place them in a better position to demand excellence.

The system would not harm anyone but the teacher unions. No family would be forced to stop sending their children to the public school where they are studying at present. If they choose another option, it is because they think that the alternative provides better educational services, or a more suitable education for the necessities, tastes or aptitudes, of their children.

Given the Argentine educational reality, it is time for our government to do so — there are no excuses anymore for not providing equality of opportunities for every and each one of our children.

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