

EDITORIAL

Tribute to Jaime Niño Díez: A Complete Educator

In 2016, the country suffered a definite and irreparable loss: the death of Jaime Niño Díez, well-remembered Minister of Education between 1996 and 1998, during the government of President Ernesto Samper Pizano (1994-1998).

Niño Díez was, perhaps, extremely unique and represented a rare case in the Colombian environment: the last minister of education who knew about education! After Niño Díez, there were ministers distinguished for their management skills, but none of them had devoted their entire life to education as public officials, researchers, members of the Parliament, teachers, or university directors.

And with a good reason. He had led the great national literacy campaign “Simón Bolívar,” which was a decisive step to overcome the backwardness still present in the country with regard to this vital matter. He was general director of the Colombian Institute for the Promotion of Higher Education (Icfes), general director of the Colombian Institute of Educational Credit (Icetex), Secretary of Education in Bogotá, Vice Minister of Basic Education, president of the Superior Council at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, rector of the Universidad Autónoma de Colombia, rector of the Universidad Piloto, director at the Universidad Simón Bolívar, and professor at the Universidad Nacional and Universidad del Valle. His ideas on higher education are still very much in force today and are periodically resurrected by public officials.

Niño Díez proposed the creation of the Superintendence of Higher Education, which was recently brought back to attention again. He was also an assiduous advocate of public education and public universities in Colombia. He came up with original ideas to manage the financing of public universities, which unfortunately could not be executed due to lack of political will. Through regulations in higher education, he also sought to ensure higher standards for the opening and operation of undergraduate programs in higher education, which was put back into practice in

recent times. He was an advocate of teachers, because he understood that, in order to improve education in Colombia, it was essential for school teachers to have fair and dignified working conditions. To this effect, he appointed Abel Rodríguez as vice minister, who was a historic educational leader, respected like no one else for his knowledge of the educational reality in Colombia.

This sociologist from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia also dealt with political affairs as a representative to the Chamber, Senator of the Republic, ambassador plenipotentiary in the United Nations, and national commissioner of television. In his time as a parliament member, he managed to earn a well-deserved reputation as an education expert, which allowed him to preside over the Fifth Commissions of the two Corporations and, thus, to influence the fate of national education. His memory here undoubtedly reminds us of the importance of choosing capable and well-trained people for positions of popular election.

Legal education, which he connected to the frequently mentioned crisis of the legal profession, led him to create study commissions and prepare normative projects in order to regulate the teaching of law. His incursions in this field left us a wealth of knowledge and a school regarding what legal studies should look like in the contemporary world.

In this area, I had the opportunity to join a commission that worked on the subject, designated by Niño Díez, conformed by William Zafra, the then Dean of Law at the Universidad Javeriana; Marco Gerardo Monroy Cabra, the then Dean of Law at the Colegio Mayor de Nuestra Señora del Rosario; Germán Palacio, from the Universidad Nacional, the then vice rector of one of its campuses, and Jairo Rivera from the Universidad Externado.

As a good sociologist, who had also studied MA in Education at the University of Toronto, Jaime Niño Díez understood that the guidelines for academic programs should be designed according to the needs and challenges of the respective profession, as well as linked to the social, political, and economic problems of the country. He had a key idea: the binding links between the characteristics and attributes of education and the needs and demands of society.

Personally, I had the opportunity to work under his direction, first in Icfes, thanks to his kind invitation, and later in the Ministry of National Education, where I was invited by Olga Duque de Ospina, Minister of Education. Many things that I learned

in matters of higher education were thanks to his generosity and the opportunities he gave me. My thanks and best regards to him who left a mark among us.

Now that the Faculty of Law at the Universidad Católica de Colombia embarks on a journey to reform and update its curriculum, we hope that the teachings of Jaime Niño Díez and the example of his career will guide us along this path.

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