



**Assessing Nicaragua's Primary School Policy:  
A Limited Notion to Education?**

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***Disclaimer:***

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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## Special Dedication

I also wish to take this opportunity to dedicate this research paper to all of the 2,194 Palestinian children, women and men who lost their lives this past summer due to the brutal 51-day massacre carried out by the terrorist state of Israel on the Gaza strip; a massacre in which the Russell Tribunal found evidence of incitement to genocide.



\*Classrooms in Gaza suffer from shortage of school supplies, as well as bearing the scars of Israeli onslaughts.

The last part of July and first week of August has been the time of my life in which I have felt the most powerless, impotent and helpless. Watching every day the death and destruction that was being caused by Israel filled me with sadness and made me question if there exists such a thing as humanity. As bombs were being systematically dropped on Gaza children, the fact that the world apparently was more interested in the World Cup final than in what was happening in Gaza infuriated me. These were moments in which I felt no motivation whatsoever for writing this research paper. My mind could not escape seeing what was happening to the population of Gaza. I went to the ISS library and started reading Edward Said books to try and dig deeper into the history and struggle of the Palestinian people.

I long for the day in which I can see a Free Palestine, where its citizens don't have to worry about the military checkpoints, robbery of their land, illegal settlements, home demolitions, torture, detentions, imprisonment, apartheid, discrimination, not to mention the multiple crimes against humanity that Israel continues to carry out in Gaza and the West Bank to this day.

# Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>List of Appendices</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Acronyms</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ix</i>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background	1
1.1.1 The MDGs	3
1.1.2 The PNDH	4
1.1.3 Ministerial Decree 018-2007	5
1.2 Problem Statement	6
1.3 Research Objective and Research Questions	10
1.4 Research Methodology	10
1.4.1 What is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)?	11
1.5 Constrains and limitations	12
1.6 Chapter Organization	12
<b>Chapter 2 Conceptual Framework</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 Rights Based Approach to Education	13
2.2 Other Concepts	14
2.2.1 Inequality	14
<b>Chapter 3 Critical Discourse Analysis</b>	<b>17</b>
3.1 CDA of education policy in PNDH (2007-2011 period)	17
3.2 CDA of education policy in PNDH (2012-2016 period)	22
3.3 Chapter 3 Conclusion	25
<b>Chapter 4 Overview of Nicaraguan Primary Education</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1 Primary school system (2007-2011): Inputs	26
4.1.1 Public Spending on Education	26
4.1.2 Teacher Training	30
4.2 Primary school system (2007-2011): Outcomes	32
4.2.1 Dropout Rates	32
4.2.2 School Environments	33
4.2.3 Schooling	35
4.3 Chapter 4 Conclusion	36
<b>Chapter 5 Concluding Remarks</b>	<b>38</b>
<i>Appendices</i>	<i>39-42</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>43-46</i>

## List of Tables

Table 1.1 Fairclough and Wodak summarize the main tenets of CDA	11
Table 3.1 Five Questions to Measure Equality in Schooling Systems	24
Table 4.1 Budget, Enrollment and Spending per Student, 2007-2008	27
Table 4.2 Teacher Training, Primary Schools	30
Table 4.3 Allocations to Teacher Training Program, 2006-2011	30
Table 4.4 Example of public school teacher monthly salary	31
Table 4.5 Teacher salaries and cost of basic food baskets, 2008-2011	31
Table 4.7 Schools with access to drinking water, 2008	33-34
Table 4.8 School Environments – 2010	34-35
Table 4.9 Schools without Infrastructure – 2010	35

## List of Figures

Figure 4.1 Public spending on primary education, % GDP, 2000-2011	27
Figure 4.2 Public spending per student, % GDP per capita, 2009	28
Figure 4.3 Public spending per student in Central America, % GDP Per Capita, 2009	28
Figure 4.4 Public spending at university level, 2009	29
Figure 4.5 Costa Rica public spending at university level	29
Figure 4.6 Dropout rates, 2007-2009	32
Figure 4.7 Primary school dropout rates by departments, 2009	33
Figure 4.8 Average schooling years, population 10 yrs and older, 2009-2012	35

## List of Appendices

Appendix 1 Political-Administrative Map, Country Profile and Macroeconomic Indicators of Nicaragua 38-39

Appendix 2 National Human Development Plan (PNDH) Word Count 40-41

## List of Acronyms

BCN	Nicaraguan Central Bank
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
ECLAC	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
EFA	Education for All Initiative
EMNV	Survey of Living Standards Measurement
FIDEG	International Foundation for Global Economic Challenge
FSLN	Sandinista National Liberation Front
FUNIDES	Nicaraguan Foundation for Economic and Social Development
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IIEP	Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policy
INIDE	National Institute of Development Information
MDG's	Millennium Development Goals
MDG2	Goal # 2 of the Millennium Development Goals
MHCP	Ministry of Finance and Public Credit
MINED	Ministry of Education
NER	Net Enrolment Rate
NLC	National Literary Crusade
PNDH	National Human Development Plan
RAAN	Autonomous Region of Northern Atlantic
RAAS	Autonomous Region of Southern Atlantic
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDP	United Nations Development Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPE	Universal Primary Education
WB	World Bank

## **Abstract**

The objective of this research paper is to analyze the notion of education of the primary school policy as seen in Nicaragua's National Human Development Plan (PNDH). For the last half-century, education has obtained a key role in the development organizations such as United Nations, World Bank, etc. Education gained widespread recognition as being crucial to development in 2000, when world leaders agreed on a set of eight development goals known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In such set of goals, achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) for all children by 2015 became goal 2 (MDG2). Nicaragua committed itself in 2000 to achieving the MDGs and the current government has reaffirmed its compromise towards achieving MDG2. This research paper will attempt to reveal how the MDGs set forth a limited notion of education and how the Nicaraguan government has adopted it. I believe that in effect MDG2 is limited because it only provides three quantitative indicators to measure progress, while not providing attention to other issues e.g. inequalities. Imperative to understand that the adoption of a limited notion to education is just one of the many factors that can help explain why the Nicaraguan primary school system is in such dire straits. Hence for example, enrolment rates may be above average but other crucial aspects such as teacher training, infrastructure problems, budget allocations, etc, are being overlooked by the government. This study will draw on secondary sources and on a discourse analysis of Nicaragua's National Human Development Plan (PNDH) to present these issues.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Primary education<sup>1</sup> is one of the key pillars of human development. Although there is no agreement on a universal concept of education (Spring 2000: 4), the impact of education is strong, especially for the lower levels of schooling (Colclough 2004: 166-167; World Bank 2003: 26-29). This is the reason why I am focusing on the primary school system and not on the whole education system of Nicaragua. However, this is not to say that pre-school and secondary, as well as technical and university levels should be overlooked or ignored. Indeed education should be seen as a whole; each level acting as building block for the next. The relevance of primary schooling is that without a well-functioning primary school system it simply does not make sense to put more emphasis on secondary or post-secondary levels, although this is not to say that the policies of each level should be divorced from each other, quite the contrary. As Colclough suggests, primary education can directly help alleviate poverty, it can bring important gendered benefits, it has high social returns, and can bring other social benefits such as lower infant and child mortality rates, higher child nutrition, etc (Colclough 2004: 166-167).

Being a student from the GPPE major, I believe that analyzing Nicaragua's education policy is relevant to the objectives of the Development Studies field.

## **Keywords**

Education, Primary School System, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), MDG2, National Human Development Plan (PNDH), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Nicaragua, inequality

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<sup>1</sup> Schooling is just one of the forms that education might take; hence schooling cannot be considered the whole of education (Curren 2007: 7). Being fully aware of this, in this paper when I say primary education I am referring to primary schooling.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Nicaragua<sup>2</sup>, along with most of its other Central American neighbors, has faced multiple negative impacts to its political, social, economic and cultural stability in the last century. Populism, caudillos, foreign invasions, military dictatorship<sup>3</sup>, revolution, counter-revolution and civil war, political transitions<sup>4</sup>, structural adjustment programmes, macroeconomic imbalances, natural disasters<sup>5</sup> and rampant corruption<sup>6</sup> have all formed part of Nicaragua's history. These events have shaped the current national configuration of the country, incrementing social inequalities as well as poverty levels and making Nicaragua the second poorest country of the Western Hemisphere –only behind Haiti. Nicaragua ranked 129 out of 186 countries in the 2013 UN Human Development Index (UN 2013: 146). The population below the income poverty line (US\$1.25 per day) between 2002-2011 was 11.9% and the national poverty line between 2002-2012 was 46.2% (UN 2013: 161).

Regarding education, Castro argues that since the mid-nineteenth century the lack of political consensus in the educational field has generated frequent changes, preventing the advancements experienced during a given period from achieving continuity over the next period (Castro 2007: 4). Vijil suggests that education has never been a state policy but rather a policy of governments and many times, a policy of ministers (Vijil 2008: 25). A noteworthy exception is the 1980s decade: As Arnove points out, one year before the Sandinistas toppled the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship in 1979, the FSLN<sup>7</sup> had issued a reform program that included the fight against illiteracy (Arnove 1987: 269). In drawing a balance sheet on the 11 years of Sandinista rule, others have also mentioned some significant gains in the area of education, e.g. the National Literacy Crusade (NLC), but also greater share of resources to education especially in the early years of the revolution, as well as the role that education played in helping to overcome inequities between countryside and city, males and females, the Atlantic and Pacific coasts (Prevost 1997: 12; Arnove 1987: 291). Within just days of the revolutionary triumph, the Government of National Reconstruction announced the NLC, which mobilized diverse sectors of the population around a new set of national goals; society would be organized according to a model different than that of the semi-feudal system of the Somoza dynasty (Arnove 1987: 270). Hence, to inculcate a new set of values, it was necessary to “establish a massive program of education with an approach based on communal efforts in which the elitist model was to be left behind” (Arnove 1987: 291). Therefore, the NLC of 1980, acting as a model of educational and social change, proved that education became a national state policy. But as of 1990, each

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<sup>2</sup> The political administrative map, country profile and macroeconomic indicators of Nicaragua can be found in Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> The U.S.-backed Somoza Dictatorship lasted from 1936 until the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> As part of the multiple peace agreements reached between the Sandinistas and the Contras and under a civil war context, it was agreed that general elections would be held on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1990. Sandinistas lost the election and peacefully gave up power to opposition candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro.

<sup>5</sup> Particularly devastating were the 1972 earthquake and the 1998 Hurricane Mitch.

<sup>6</sup> Ex President Arnaldo Alemán (1997-2002) was listed in 2004 by the UN Human Rights Commission as one of the 10 most corrupt presidents of the last 200 years alongside Fujimori, Milosevic, Lazarenko and dead ones like Duvalier, Marcos, Suharto, among others (El Nuevo Diario 2004).

<sup>7</sup> *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* or Sandinista National Liberation Front.

political party that came to power acted as if education began with them (Vijil 2013). As a result of this short-sighted mentality, all previous efforts in the field of education are considered failures and the new government therefore proposes to start from scratch (Ibid). Previous experiences are simply not evaluated objectively so as to decide what to discard, retain or improve (Vijil 2013). This was true of the U.S.-backed neoliberal Chamorro Administration (1990-1996) which was keen to erode those positive changes that had taken place in the education arena during the revolutionary period of the 1980s.

The former is true for things that might even appear to be trivial, such as changing the name of the Ministry. During President Bolaños' Administration (2001-2006) the Ministry was called Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (MECD) and currently in President Ortega's Administration it is called Ministry of Education (MINED). In describing the characteristic features of public education during the Chamorro administration (1990-1996), former Nicaraguan Minister of Education, Dr. Miguel De Castilla says that it was an education that was 1) shattered, 2) privatized, 3) religious, 4) antidemocratic, 5) unequal, 6) of poor quality and 7) inefficient (De Castilla 1997: 31-40). De Castilla says:

“By the nature of the project it serves, education under the neoliberal regime is deeply exclusionary, sectarian, disruptive and fragmentary. The education system operates as a non-system, that each of its parts follows its own pace, process and movement without relating with their parallel systems” (Author/Based on De Castilla 1997: 32).

De Castilla claims that under the three right-wing governments 1990-2006, education was seen as a commodity to be traded in the market (El Nuevo Diario 2013). In essence, the underlying rationale was that there was no free lunch and as such, all those who wanted to make use of education had to pay for it, hence the collection of enrolment fees made to parents.

Moreover,

“Through the implementation of educational decentralization model known as "school autonomy" pre-primary and primary public education institutions since 1993 gradually have passed state responsibility in the field of education to the private sector, deepening the lack of equity in the school system regarding the impoverished population of the country” (Author/Based on De Castilla 1997: 33).

De Castilla further acknowledges that on the one hand the Chamorro government eroded the positive aspects of the 1980s revolutionary era and on the other it began a privatization process of the public school system (Jacobs 2008). Systematic budget cuts affected the Ministry of education, parents were charged fees to enroll their children into schools and corruption became common practice (Ibid). De Castilla explains that during the three previous governments (Chamorro 1990-1997, Aleman 1997-2002, Bolaños 2002-2007) before the FSLN returned to the presidency, the ministry of education directly financed the public schools (Jacobs 2008). The way the money was calculated was by looking at the number of students a public school had; the more students enrolled in a particular school, the more money they received from the ministry (Ibid). Castilla further explains that the new Sandinista government conducted an investigation in March 2007, in which they discovered that 125,000 students that had been enrolled in 2006 were non-existent; these were phantom students, however the schools had received the money as if the students existed (Jacobs 2008). This telling example gives an idea of the climate of corruption surrounding the public school systems for the 1990-2006 period.

Currently, Nicaragua's primary education appears to have more areas in which it is performing poorly than areas in which it might be performing well. Let us begin with an area in which it is doing satisfactorily. Certainly, Nicaragua has made improvements regarding some educational aspects such as high net enrolment rates (Vijil 2008: 28). FIDEG identified the following enrolment rates for the 2009-2012 period: 86.2% in 2009, 87.5% in 2010, 87.7% in 2011 and 89.1% in 2012 (FIDEG 2012: 21). In this aspect, we could say that Nicaragua is performing well with regards to the first indicator of MDG2. Moving on to the negative side, some critics consider that Nicaragua's primary school system continues to lag behind its Central American neighbors (Castro 2007: 3). To illustrate with one example we can look at how primary school survival rates do not pass 50% (IEEP 2011: 31). This means that for every 100 students that start 1<sup>st</sup> grade, 50 do not make it to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. These rates are the lowest for any Central American nation; Costa Rica and Panama having the highest survival rates in the Central American region (PREAL et al, 2014: 15). Another telling example has to do with public spending per primary school student. Nicaragua is the second last with regards to this indicator as it spends U\$9.9 per student, meanwhile Belize, Costa Rica and Panama spend U\$16.3, U\$14.6 and U\$12.4 respectively (FUNIDES 2011: 7). As chapter 4 will explain in more detail, the problem is not only that spending per primary school student is low, but also that spending per university student is disproportionately high.

### 1.1.1 The MDGs

In the context of the Millennium Summit in New York in the year 2000, Nicaragua committed itself to achieving by 2015 the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The second MDG is to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) for boys and girls by 2015 (UN 2000). As will be explained afterwards, MDG2 has a specific target as well as three indicators to measure progress. The criteria for meeting MDG2 were set out in detail by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee in 1996 (Colclough 2004: 167). Moreover, such targets and indicators have become reference points for publications such as the World Bank's *World Development Indicators* (White & Black 2004: 2). These targets have received such strong support from key institutional actors, e.g. the targets were championed by the Department for International Development (DFID) and later adopted by the World Bank (White & Black 2004: 11). As my critique will show, the problem with MDG2 and its targets and indicators is that quantity has been given more emphasis than other key issues such as inequalities. For instance, Payne & Phillips argue that as emphasis of the MDGs<sup>8</sup> focused on absolute poverty, questions of inequality<sup>9</sup> were entirely absent. For some authors, inequality issues would fall under the quality<sup>10</sup> aspect of education. Even though quality has no agreed upon definition or general theory, some frameworks have aimed at defining it (EFA 2004: 20). The EFA (Education for All) initiative defines quality education as one that "satisfies basic learning needs, and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living" (UNESCO 2009: 16). Furthermore, the

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<sup>8</sup> Payne & Phillips argue that the MDGs as well as the PRSP papers are integral part of a Post- Washington Consensus approach, depicting it as a "re-morphing of neoliberal approaches" in which the focus continues to be the optimization of economic, juridical and social governance in order to build an ideal environment for international finance and investment (Payne & Phillips 2010: 163).

<sup>9</sup> This refers to inequalities in the broad sense of the word, not only those pertaining to education. Because of this I have chosen to include in the appendices some examples of current social inequalities in Nicaragua.

<sup>10</sup> Urquiola differentiates between quantity and quality in education. He puts the example of enrollment rates and years of schooling as falling under the quantity aspect and mentions skills, reading proficiency, etc as falling under the quality aspect (Urquiola 2011: 813).

Dakar Framework for Action refers to the quality of education in terms of learning outcomes: “especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills” (Dakar Framework for Action 2000: 17).

### 1.1.2 The PNDH

One of the electoral promises of the FSLN that was included in the electoral program of 2006 was to elaborate a National Human Development Plan, PNDH<sup>11</sup>, in which the human development model of the government was to be outlined in detail. The 2012-2016 PNDH is a 261 page document consisting of six main parts and twelve chapters. Currently, this document has become something of a bible-esque document for the current FSLN government, as all ministries need to have their institutional plans in line with what the PNDH says. To have a better grasp of the context under which the PNDH came about it is important to make a brief recall of the political situation of Nicaragua in 2006-2007. After the revolutionary period of the 1980s Nicaragua went through three different neoliberal governments starting from 1990 to 2006. As the governing party (PLC) split into two factions in 2005-2006, this gave the FSLN the golden opportunity to come back to power in the general elections of November 2006. The FSLN received 38% of the vote; meanwhile the other two parties ALN and PLC received 28.30% and 27.11% respectively. As the FSLN officially returned to power on January 10, 2007, it took as one of its main policies the elaboration of a National Human Development Plan. As mentioned above, such document has become a *de facto* governmental framework and reference document for all policies, since the institutional plans of ministries have to be in accordance with the basic tenets of the PNDH.

In other words, at the governmental level the PNDH has become the dominant discourse. Ministerial plans, reports and projects had to refer to the basic doctrine of this obscure document. I call it obscure because to this day nobody is really sure who wrote this document. Unlike some other education documents like the *Curriculo Nacional Básico* (National Basic Curriculum), the PNDH has no technical sheet in which the reader can find lists regarding authorities, general coordination, executive committee, authors, technical support, etc. The document looks more like a political party manifesto than as a serious and formal human development plan. The PNDH was said to have gone thru a wide period of consultations, however the opposition has disputed this. Critics have said that the plan was never shared with members of the Nicaraguan civil society. In May 2008, the Plan was presented to the donor community, asking the international community to align and reformulate their programs with the newly established social objectives of the new Government. Analysts have criticized the PNDH for what they called a ‘zero-dialogue’ environment when the document was presented to members of the donor community (El Nuevo Diario 2008). Moreover, this first presentation of the PNDH was regarded by the donor community as being excessively ideological and not able to be operational (Confidencial 2009). As a result, the Government agreed to create a sort of technical summary of what came to be known as the 2009-2011 PNDH<sup>12</sup> (Ibid). The document set to meet the donor demand of having a more professional tone to it, although still maintaining elements of the Governments rhetorical discourse (Confidencial 2009). This technical

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<sup>11</sup> The original PNDH in Spanish (March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 version) can be accessed thru this link: [http://www.ni.undp.org/content/nicaragua/es/home/library/mdg/publication\\_1.html](http://www.ni.undp.org/content/nicaragua/es/home/library/mdg/publication_1.html)

<sup>12</sup> Such version is a 151 page document (about 100 pages less than the 2012-2016 PNDH) and can be accessed here: [www.magfor.gob.ni/descargas/planes/PNDH.pdf](http://www.magfor.gob.ni/descargas/planes/PNDH.pdf). A difference that I see is of course its shorter length and less government symbols, particularly in the cover pages; perhaps this is what the donors wanted when they requested a more ‘professional’ undertone to the document.

version allegedly is a document for professional reference, to which the foreign aid programs can be formulated (Confidencial 2009).

A look at the following quote from the strategic education plan will help understand the importance that the PNDH has:

*“El Plan Estratégico de Educación 2011-2015 se inserta dentro de las Políticas y Estrategias del Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional dirigidas a la restitución del derecho a la Educación para todas y todos, las y los nicaragüenses por medio de la construcción de un modelo educativo que asegure cobertura con justicia, equidad y calidad, tomando como referentes: El **Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Humano** (PNDH), marco de todas las políticas del Gobierno” (MINED 2011: 56).*

“The 2011-2015 Strategic Education Plan is inserted into the Policies and Strategies of the Government of Reconciliation and National Unity, directed to the restoration of the right to education for all Nicaraguans by building an educational model that ensures coverage with justice, equity and quality, taking as reference: the **National Human Development Plan** (PNDH), as framework for all policies of the Government” (Author/Based on MINED 2011: 56).

As I explore later<sup>13</sup>, the PNDH has many inconsistencies, but essential for this study is that it does not move away from a limited notion of education. As chapter 3 will demonstrate, the education notion adopted by the Nicaraguan government thru the PNDH is still narrow and limited and has not actually moved away from the notion that we find in MDG2. As a consequence, important issues, such as inequality issues as well as budget allocation issues are overlooked, simplified or right out ignored.

### 1.1.3 Ministerial Decree 018-2007

While Nicaragua committed to achieving the MDG's in 2000, the ruling party at that time had been moving towards a semi-privatization of the public primary school system as De Castilla explains. Things would appear to change in 2006, when the Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN, won the general elections. On January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007, one day after Daniel Ortega officially took power, Ministerial Decree No. 018-2007 was approved. The decree was titled *Acuerdo Ministerial No. 018-2007 (se prohíbe en los centros educativos públicos el cobro de “aportes voluntarios” a los padres de familia)* or Ministerial Decree No. 018-2007 (prohibited in public schools the collection of "voluntary contributions" to parents) (Asamblea Nacional 2007). Such decree was published in the official Gazette on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007 and the main legal rationale behind it was article 121 of the Nicaraguan Political Constitution itself (Ibid). Such decree also took into consideration the following legislative documents:

- 1) Ley No. 582, *Ley General de Educación* (Law No, 582, General Education Law) which in its article 8 establishes that entry to public schools free for all Nicaraguans.
- 2) Ley No. 413, *Ley de Participación Educativa* (Law No. 413, Education Participation Law) which in article 16 says that any type of fees in schools is prohibited and that no one can be excluded from school for economic reasons.

\*Source: (Author/Based on Asamblea Nacional 2002, 2006)

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<sup>13</sup> A Critical Discourse Analysis of the PNDH will be carried out in chapter 3 with regards to analyzing the limited notion to education.

This decree prohibited the “voluntary contributions” that had occurred with the three previous governments and which were *de facto* monthly economic charges made to parents, thus violating the right of Nicaraguans to access free public education (Asamblea Nacional 2007). In 2007, the Nicaraguan government started what they called a process of “salvaging the education system and restoration of the rights of the people” by eliminating illegal and unconstitutional economic charges in public schools (PNDH 2013: 78). The passing of such ministerial decree can be linked to the rights-based approach that also can be found in some of the PNDH passages that I analyzed in chapter 3. For the government, eliminating those fees inexorably meant guaranteeing the right to a free education for all.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

The Millennium Summit took place on September 6-8, 2000 at the UN headquarters in New York City. In this summit, world leaders announced with great fanfare that they had agreed on adopting eight Millennium Development Goals, or what Attaran (2005: 1) calls the “zeitgeist of the global development enterprise”. Related to this research paper is MDG2 which deals with achieving Universal Primary Education (henceforth UPE). The target of MDG2 is to “ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to **complete** a full course of primary schooling” (UN 2003: 3). Moreover, three quantitative indicators were established to measure progress towards achieving MDG2:

- 1) Net enrolment ratio<sup>14</sup> in primary education
- 2) Proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach grade 5
- 3) Literacy rate of 15–24 year-olds

\*Source: (UN 2003: 3)

Even if this paper is not looking at whether or not Nicaragua will achieve MDG2 by 2015, I consider important to briefly elaborate on the following point: Reading though the MDG2 target, I think that the key word is ‘complete’, which I have put in bold. This deals with survival rates, since a child that drops out before completing the full course of primary schooling has not statistically survived. There is no rationale for having used grade 5 instead of grade 6 in the second indicator; in many countries a full course of primary schooling ends in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and not in the 5<sup>th</sup>. This can be an example of the problems with these one-size-fits-all type of development goals. That being said, I think that the specific targets of MDG2 are not the best set of performance measures, especially if we know that these targets are treated by the development mainstream as “defining the objectives of policy in terms of outcomes” (White & Black 2004: 12). The targets define the expected outcomes, “rather than inputs in the form of resources” (White & Black 2004: 3).

I am arguing that these indicators are deeply problematic because they fail to see other crucial issues such as unequal access, unequal literacy rates by regions, sex and ethnic minorities,

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<sup>14</sup> UNICEF defines the net enrolment ratio as the “number of children enrolled in primary school who belong to the age group that officially corresponds to primary schooling” (UNICEF n.d.). Gross enrolment ratios on the other hand refers to the number of children enrolled in a level “regardless of age, divided by the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the same level” (UNICEF n.d.).

teacher training, teacher training centers, availability of teachers, decreasing the pupil-teacher ratio, school infrastructure (and maintenance), unequal budget allocations, among others. Hence, what I am saying here is that the MDG2 is so narrow that it only looks at what I have highlighted in yellow. This is not to say these issues are not important, they certainly are. However, by focusing on these only, other crucial aspects which are not necessarily quantitative are ignored. Bottom line, MDG2 is limited and narrow in its scope and its specific targets are not a good set of performance measures. Additionally, the Nicaraguan government, thru the PNDH, has endorsed this limited view. More specifically, the government congratulates itself with regards to the first indicator concerning net enrolment rates, since this is the part where they are doing well. Part of the reason why they are performing well in this area has to do with Ministerial Decree 018-2007 that President Ortega passed in January 2007, whereby enrolment fees charged to parents were eliminated.

Furthermore, the distribution of school meals, backpacks, textbooks has also been an incentive for more parents to enroll their children in primary schools. Then, even if it is true that net enrolment rates are high, the PNDH remains silent not only on the issue of survival rates (indicator #2) but on other crucial aspects that will be referred to in chapter 3 and 4. Next I will briefly present some critiques that have been made to the MDG's. Although not all of them are related to education, I will refer to them since I think it provides a more complete grasp of the critique that I wish to make to the limited notion of education adopted by the development mainstream. In his critique to the MDG's, Samir Amin reminds us that the goal of achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) was set out by UNESCO in 1960, hoping to achieve it in a ten year period (Amin 2006). Some of the reasons why ground began to be lost in the 1980s and 1990s were due to the reduction in public expenditures and the privatization of education, two issues that the MDG's did not examine in fact nor in theory (Amin 2006). Many critics consider that there are at least four problems with the MDG framework: limitations in the 1) development process, 2) structure, 3) content and 4) implementation and enforcement (Fehling et al, 2013). With respect to the development process, several analysts have commented on problems regarding who identified the goals and targets, how and why certain goals were chosen and with what political agendas (Fehling et al, 2013).

Amin insists that the MDG's were not the result of an initiative from the global South, but instead were pushed by the U.S., Europe and Japan and co-sponsored by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Amin 2006). Regarding structure issues, the whole framework made the MDGs national priorities but without the initial participation and consultation of developing countries; as a result, this has led to a lack of national ownership for the goals (Fukuda-Parr 2010: 1). With regards to content issues, equity and equality are insufficiently addressed (Fehling et al, 2013). For example, reducing inequality<sup>15</sup> within and between countries is a missing goal (Fukuda-Parr 2010: 9). Regarding implementation and enforcement, authors criticize the MDG framework for promoting quick fix solutions and short term planning instead of structural changes (Fehling et al, 2013). Related to this point, others insist that another major problem with the MDG's is their "abstraction from the social, political and economic context in which they are to be implemented – the political economy of the MDG's" (Antrobus as cited in Bond 2006: 4). Furthermore,

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<sup>15</sup> Fukuda-Parr proposes a new, ninth Millennium Development Goal to be added: to reduce inequality (Fukuda-Parr 2010: 9). She argues that this is necessary in order to make the MDG's aligned to the original purpose of the Millennium Declaration (Ibid).

“To the extent that all the goals relate to the role of the state, one must ask how feasible it is that states weakened by the requirements of policy frameworks of Neoliberalism and whose revenues are reduced by privatization and trade liberalism can be expected to achieve the goals and targets of the MDGs” (Antrobus as cited in Bond 2006: 4).

Amin points out that liberalism is without question assumed to be perfectly compatible with the achievement of the goals (Amin 2006). According to Amin, the real goals of the MDGs are:

- 1) Extreme privatization, aimed at opening new fields for the expansion of capital.
- 2) The generalization of the private appropriation of agricultural land
- 3) Commercial “opening” within a context of maximum deregulation
- 4) The equally uncontrolled opening up of capital movement
- 5) States are forbidden in principle from interfering in economic affairs

\*Source: (Amin 2006).

Analysts like Fukuda-Parr have asserted that the MDG’s have maintained the neoliberal economic strategy intact, thus the fundamental policy approach of Neoliberalism continues to be applied (Fukuda-Parr 2010: 8-9). By the same token, Saith has expressed that the MDGs “privileged and legitimized an uncritical acceptance of the neoliberal globalization playing field for the development game” (Saith 2007: 1). Likewise, Saith condemns the reductionism of the MDGs, saying that the MDGs is just a template of goals, targets and indicators, with no mention of process, policy, pathways or politics involved; the MDGs framework constitutes “the end of alternatives”, arguing that such framework puts public-private partnerships as the only pathway (Ibid).

Regarding education affordability, Langford criticizes the fact that there is an absent target for a free education (Langford 2010: 4). Johnston claims that MDG2 predicates on the human capital concept, which “contains fundamental theoretical and empirical weaknesses” (Johnston 2011: 5). The latter would mean that the MDGS have a human-capital approach, in addition to a target-approach. Clemens et al. claimed in 2007 that the MDGs would not be met by the majority of countries primarily because of how the MDGs were set out, that is, some targets are irrelevant for countries’ realities (Clemens et al. 2007: 2). For example, some targets are irrelevant to the reality of a specific country: e.g. a country may already have an above-average net enrolment rate, hence goals must be country specific and flexible and also take historical performance into account. (Clemens et al. 2007: 13). These authors emphasize on the unreasonable expectations of could have been achieved within short time and unreasonable expectations about the role of aid<sup>16</sup> in the development process (Ibid).

So far I presented a general overview of the critique to the MDG’s as well as the limited notion of education applied by the MDG’s. Next, I present some quotes from the World Bank in which the narrow notion of education can also be seen. In the 2003 book *Achieving Universal Primary Education by 2015: A chance for Every Child*, the World Bank stated that more equitable distribution of education is “correlated with lower poverty and inequality and faster economic growth ... and combined with sound macroeconomic policies, education is fundamental in the construction of globally competitive economies and democratic societies” (World Bank 2003: 1). The problem with

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<sup>16</sup> Clemens et al. suggest that an increase in aid flows by themselves would be insufficient to reaching the MDGs. (Clemens et al. 2007: 13).

this statement is that it is silent on the issue of existing inequalities e.g. within a country, a region, an educational system, etc. The WB also says that expanding education is far “easier to implement than the redistribution of other assets such as land or capital” (Ibid). Is it ‘easier’ or simply ‘better’ for them not having governments dealing with such redistribution issues?

Issues of equitable distribution of education are not entirely absent in the debate. For instance, goal 4 of the MDG’s talks about the elimination of gender disparities in primary education by 2015. Another example is the ensuring of 50% improvement levels in literacy, especially for women, as well as access to free primary education for ethnic minorities (WB 2013: 25). Following from these examples, inequality is considered in the development mainstream, although not explicitly. The problem that I find is that the case for UPE does not really go beyond economic terms. Thus, education is presented as a road that will inevitably lead to steady and fast macroeconomic growth paths accompanied by more productivity and efficiency; a tautology. This can be directly linked to Johnston’s critique of the human-capital approach of the MDGs. In the words of Johnston:

“The human capital approach assumes that greater amounts of education will raise individual productivity thereby increasing income (and hence reducing poverty) and raising economic growth rates generally. The implication is that a supply of educated workers will create the demand for educated workers, and this will raise growth levels generally. If economic growth does not occur, then it is because of government-introduced distortions that prevent the efficient use of those with higher skills (Easterly 2002). As such, human capital theory is a special case of Say’s Law; a textbook neoclassical economics proposition that suggests, in a perfectly operating set of markets, the very act of supplying of a good will always call forth its own demand. As we shall see, a Say’s Law-approach to education is at odds with the operation of a real economy” (Johnston 2011: 5).

Consequently, I argue that it is necessary for Nicaragua to move away from this limited focus and place more emphasis on other key issues. The latter constitutes the essential part of my problem statement: the development mainstream continues to see education thru a narrow lens, while overlooking inequality<sup>17</sup> issues; and governments such as that of Nicaragua have not moved away from this limited notion of education. As I will argue subsequently, this narrow scope can be one of the reasons as to why the primary school system of Nicaragua continues to be in such appalling shape. As I will explain afterwards, the use of discourse analysis in chapter 3 will be helpful to identify how the government has accepted this limited notion of education. The problem is that the discourse itself is flawed, meaning that it adopts the same notion of education as that of MDG2. As was mentioned above, this is problematic since the target and indicators of MDG2 has become the ultimate objective in the government’s education policy. Hence, the government focuses on the outcomes that are related to the MDG2 targets. It assumes that these targets are the most effective and appropriate ones and seems to be putting most of their efforts into achieving only these indicators.

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<sup>17</sup> Appendices 5 and 6 will offer some quantitative data of various types of socioeconomic inequalities in Nicaragua. Although I am not establishing a causal link between education and inequality, I think that the education-inequality nexus is central to my argument and analyzing some of the wider social inequalities of Nicaraguan society can help understand how education can produce inequalities and conversely, how inequalities can produce barriers to accessing education.

### **1.3 Research Objective**

The objective of this research paper is to make a contribution<sup>18</sup> to the existing literature on Nicaraguan primary school policy. In this study I am interested in showing how the Nicaraguan education policy –as reflected in the PNDH- has a limited notion of education, overlooking other crucial issues which can help improve the primary school system.

#### **Research Question**

How has the Nicaraguan Government, thru the PNDH, endorsed a limited notion of education such as that of MDG2? This question has the following related sub-question:

#### **Sub-questions**

How are inequality issues in the primary school system not given enough importance in the PNDH?

In what ways is the limited notion of education adopted in the PNDH affecting Nicaragua's primary school system?

My hypothesis is that the limited notion of education that the government has endorsed can to some extent help explain the continuation of the structural deficiencies in Nicaragua's primary school system.

### **1.4 Research Methodology**

My research methodology will consist in analyzing secondary sources. Both qualitative and quantitative secondary data will be used. Thus, I will work with books, policy documents, legal texts, articles, academic publications as well as statistical databases. In this study I also utilize tools from Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the core policy document: Nicaragua's 2012-2016 National Human Development Plan (PNDH). In chapter 3, I provide the discourse analysis of the education policy of the 2012-2016 PNDH (pages 78-84). In responding to my research question and to the first sub-question, I used discourse analysis to analyze the education policy section of the PNDH. So, for example, in trying to show that there is a limited notion to education in the PNDH, I carefully read the education policy of the PNDH and then retrieved and analyzed those passages in which a limited notion is evident. Although some of these passages do not particularly deal with primary schooling, I nonetheless decided to include them as they were useful for visualizing the limited notion of education employed by the PNDH. Throughout most of the education section of the PNDH there is an absent frame on inequality, therefore in this case the critique is done with regards to the absent frame itself. In chapter 4 I will present data from the national education statistics as well as from NGOs and independent organizations so as to provide a general overview of the situation of the Nicaraguan primary school system. My analysis of the data presented in chapter 4 will help answer my second sub-question.

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<sup>18</sup> The main contribution of this research paper is to combine both a quantitative analysis of Nicaragua's primary school system with a discourse analysis of the education policy section of Nicaragua's National Human Development Plan.

### 1.4.1 What is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)?

Critical Discourse Analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk (Van Dijk 2001: 352). CDA attempts to de-mystify ideologies and power thru the systematic investigation of semiotic data, which in this case would refer to the written data: the PNDH. The intention of a CDA analyst is to uncover power relationships and demonstrate inequities that are embedded in society (Rogers 2004: 3). CDA combines a model of grammatical and textual analysis with sociopolitical and critical theories of society (Gee 2004: 20). What results is a systematic method in which there is a recursive movement between linguistic and social analysis (Rogers 2004: 7).

In answering what is *critical* about CDA, Norman Fairclough argues that CDA is *critical* insofar as it aims to contribute to “addressing the social wrongs of the day by analyzing their sources and causes, resistance to them and possibilities of overcoming them” (Fairclough 2009: 163).

<b>Table 1.1 Fairclough and Wodak summarize the main tenets of CDA</b>
<b>CDA addresses social problems</b>
<b>Power relations are discursive</b>
<b>Discourse constitutes society and culture</b>
<b>Discourse does ideological work</b>
<b>Discourse is historical</b>
<b>The link between text and society is mediated</b>
<b>Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory</b>
<b>Discourse is a form of social action</b>

\*Source: (Fairclough & Wodak as quoted in Van Dijk 2001: 353)

Gee suggests that discourses are inherently ideological and expands on this point by adding that discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society (Rogers 2004: 5). Gee identifies then what he calls *dominant Discourses* and *dominant groups*<sup>19</sup> (Rogers 2004: 6). A central idea in CDA is that of *power*, more specifically, *social power* of certain individuals, groups or institutions (Van Dijk 2001: 354). Van Dijk defines social power in terms of control, hence, groups have more or less power if they are able to more or less control the acts and minds of members of other groups (Van Dijk 2001: 355). Access to specific forms of discourse e.g. politics, media, is itself a power resource (Ibid). Therefore, Van Dijk explores two elements of *power*

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<sup>19</sup> This research paper is arguing that the dominant discourse is the PNDH, but within the education policy of the PNDH itself, issues such as that of enrolment rates appear to be the dominant discourses that are being reproduced.

*as control*: control of public discourse and mind control (Ibid). The former deals with how access to or control over public discourse and communication is an important symbolic resource, while the former deals with how controlling people's minds is the other fundamental way to reproduce dominance and hegemony (Van Dijk 2001: 356-357).

## 1.5 Constraints and Limitations

First, since no fieldwork<sup>20</sup> will be carried out, the research will have a limitation concerning the data collection methods. All of the data will come from secondary sources, although when using CDA, the PNDH is treated as my primary source. Second, as a researcher that is socio-politically committed to social equity and justice I am fully aware that in conducting the CDA, my own interpretations of texts can be affected by my own bias and assumptions. However, it is important to remember that discourses are not closed units, instead they are “dynamic entities that are open to reinterpretation” (Reisigl & Wodak 2009: 89). Hence, by no means I am saying that the CDA conducted in this research paper is the only possible and/or valid interpretation for the texts that will be analyzed.

Another limitation has to do with causality. The point of this study is not to make the causal claim that a limited notion of education is solely responsible for the deficiencies of the primary school system. Indeed, the limited notion –as reflected in the official policy: the PNDH- is problematic. However, this is just one of many other variables that could explain why Nicaragua's primary school system is in such dire straits. Instead, what I try to argue is that insofar the government does not depart from the limited notion of education as found in MDG2 and insofar deep educational reforms are not conducted so as to place much more attention on inequalities the tendency can be that Nicaragua's primary school system as well as its wider socio-economic realities might not change for the better. One final limitation could be the one regarding translation. The PNDH is in Spanish and when doing the CDA I had to carry it out over the passages that I translated.

## 1.6 Chapter Organization

This research paper is organized as follows: Chapter 1 has discussed the background, the problem statement as well as the research questions, methodology and limitations of the paper. Chapter 2 will set out the conceptual framework that will be used. Here, basic concepts from the Rights-Based Approach as well as the concept of inequality will be explained in more detail. Chapter 3 will explore Nicaragua's 2012-2016 National Human Development Plan, thru the use of a Critical Discourse Analysis. Chapter 4 will then bring forward a general overview of the current situation of Nicaragua's primary school system. In this chapter, quantitative data will be presented to provide an overview of issues such as teacher training, budget allocations, etc. Finally, I will provide my concluding remarks in chapter 5.

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<sup>20</sup> No fieldwork was carried out primarily for financial reasons but also for personal/family issues that did not allow me at the time to go back to Managua.

# Chapter 2

## Conceptual Framework<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1 Rights Based Approach to Education

Education is a basic right for all peoples according to article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN n.d.). Parts 1 and 2 of article 26 reads as follows:

“(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace”

Source: (UN n.d.)

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its Article 13 also mentions that everyone has the right to education (UN General Assembly 1966). Part 2 (a) of article 13 reads:

“2. The states parties to the present Covenant recognize that, with a view to achieving the full realization of this right:

(a) Primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all;”

Source: (UN General Assembly 1966: 3)

Additionally, the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child says in its Article 28 that states shall make primary education compulsory and available free to all (CRC 1990). Some parts of article 28 read as follows:

“1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity.

(e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.

3. States Parties shall promote and encourage international cooperation in matters relating to education, in particular with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world”

Source: (UN General Assembly 1989a, 1989b)

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<sup>21</sup> Initially I had in my mind the use of a critical approach to education in this study. Such approach basically was a neo-Marxist approach to education that could be used to further analyze and critique public schooling systems in capitalist societies. However, as my supervisor told me, most of what the authors of the critical approach were talking about was related to the contents of education. As I could not get access to the primary school textbooks, my analysis was not really going to deal with contents. Resigned, I decided to eliminate the critical approach while keeping the Rights-based approach (which can be visible in some parts of the PNDH), and inequality as a concept.

The preamble of the World Conference on Education for All, assembled in Jomtien, Thailand from 5-9 March, 1990 reads as follows:

“- Recalling that education is a fundamental right for all people, women and men, of all ages, throughout our world;

- Understanding that education can help ensure a safer, healthier, more prosperous and environmentally sound world, while simultaneously contributing to social, economic, and cultural progress, tolerance, and international cooperation;

- Knowing that education is an indispensable key to, though not a sufficient condition for, personal and social improvement;

- Recognizing that traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value and validity in their own right and a capacity to both define and promote development;

- Acknowledging that, overall, the current provision of education is seriously deficient and that it must be made more relevant and qualitatively improved, and made universally available;

- Recognizing that sound basic education is fundamental to the strengthening of higher levels of education and of scientific and technological literacy and capacity and thus to self-reliant development; and

- Recognizing the necessity to give to present and coming generations an expanded vision of, and a renewed commitment to, basic education to address the scale and complexity of the challenge; proclaim the following”

\*Source: (UNESCO n.d.)

Going back to Langford’s point of the lack of any reference in MDG2 to making education free for all, it is interesting to see how the UDHR and the ICESCR both talk about making education free. However, the CRC and the World Conference on Education for All do not mention this point anymore. The Dakar Framework for Action and the Education for All (EFA) goals, reaffirmed that education is a fundamental human right, key to sustainable development (Dakar Framework for Action 2000: 8). In addition, EFA reaffirms that governments must ensure basic education of quality for all, regardless of gender, religion, wealth, location, language or ethnic origin (Ibid).

## **2.2 Other Concepts**

### **2.2.1 Inequality**

As has been mentioned *ut supra*, the limited notion of education of MDG2 overlooks many other important aspects that any Ministry of Education should look into. As will be revealed in chapter 3, the PNDH pays minimum attention to issues such as those connected to inequality. The reason why I have included this concept in my conceptual framework is because inequality issues in the PNDH are outright not given the same importance as access issues. While the intention of this study is not to focus on inequality, I think that it is imperative to understand the wider ramifications that a limited notion of education can have on any given school system.

A simple definition of inequality may be lack of equality. As Romero & Margolis point out, the discipline of sociology was partly developed as “inquiry into the persistent inequalities that founders perceived as the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism decimated the medieval world” (Romero & Margolis 2005: 1). Marx would see that capitalist society was “riven with persistent and illegitimate inequalities”; Weber would investigate the economic inequalities of Catholic and Protestant societies; Durkheim would be concerned with the increasing conflict between capital and labor and how this threatened social order (Romero & Margolis 2005: 1-2). For Tilly, inequality is a relation between persons or sets of persons in which interaction generates more advantages for one than for another (Tilly 2000: 2). Moreover, inequality results from unequal control over value-producing resources (Ibid). Hayden says that inequality has two components: the first is a vertical relationship of inequality (hierarchy), that is, inequality measured in the same dimension (wealth, chain of command, for example) (Hayden 2007: 4). The second dimension refers to horizontal differences between individuals or groups, usually due to different and specialized roles, all of whom may have the same relative wealth and power in a community, but who are unequal in terms of what they do and their roles (Ibid).

Others define social inequalities as differences in income, resources, power and status within and between societies; such inequalities are maintained by those in powerful positions via institutions and social processes (Naidoo & Wills as cited in Warwick-Booth 2013: 3). Romero & Margolis reminds us how the American sociological view of the 1940s-1960s, in an attempt to refute Marx, vigorously attempted to reduce the issues of inequality to social stratification. This was intended to create a science demonstrating that Western capitalist societies had turned into meritocracies and that the few cases of inequality were on their way to being eliminated (Romero & Margolis 2005: 2). Payne & Phillips point out that the Neoliberal argument posited not only the inevitability of inequality, but also its supposed benefits (within and between societies) (Payne & Phillips 2010: 161). In the words of Payne & Phillips:

“Inequality is seen to provide sets of incentives that encourage aspiration, effort and risk taking, and consequently improve efficiency. Inequality is in this view, a desirable situation. It is also seen as questionable that inequality in itself should be a cause for moral concern” (Payne & Phillips 2010: 161).

Regarding inequality in the MDGs, Saith points out that the MDG template of targets “cares not about inequality and says not a jot about social exclusion” (Saith 2007: 2). To the contrary, the world’s poor is told –albeit not explicitly- that levels of inequality do not matter as long as their own levels of absolute poverty are reduced (Ibid). Saith provides the example of the former Dutch minister for development cooperation, Agnes van Ardenne-van der Hoeven, when at a speech given during the launch of the 2005 UNDP Human Development Report she said that:

“the poor [woman] in the Jakarta slum should not be concerned about overnight millionaires generated by the stock exchange, so long as she had money to send her child to school” (Saith 2007: 2).

Moreover, Saith reveals the example of Arjun Sengupta, a senior Indian economist who defends the rights-driven approach to development and how he argued that:

“it would be fine to leave the top 20 percent undisturbed to enjoy their wealth, and for government policy to focus separately on the bottom 80 percent” (Saith 2007: 2).

The latter has to do with pressing redistribution issues that the MDGs simply does not mention. This can be linked to Payne & Phillips' argument about how the underlying rationale of the MDGs was to leave inequality issues untouched. Saith continues by saying that the way the MDGs are written, it seems as if the majority of the world population should ignore, acquiesce to or even welcome the dramatically high and rising levels of inequality (Saith 2007: 2). For example, with regards to MDG3, Fehling et al. say that MDG3 deals with decreasing gender disparities not gender *inequalities* since focus is reduced to “numerical imbalances, whereas substantive asymmetries are left unaddressed” (Fehling et al. 2013). Fukuda-Parr (2010: 8) suggests that the MDGs agenda was not to “redress the increasing inequality between and within countries resulting from liberalization and economic globalization”.

## Chapter 3

### Critical Discourse Analysis

In this chapter I will carry out the Critical Discourse Analysis of Nicaragua's National Human Development Plan (PNDH). As I have mentioned earlier, I will focus on the education policy section of the PNDH and try to shed light on the limited view of education that it takes, such as the one of MDG2.

The PNDH version I will work with is a March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 version. Even though the data that I will present in chapter 4 is mostly from the 2007-2011 time frame, I believe that working with the 2012-2016 PNDH will not be a problem. The reason why I argue this is because the 2012-2016 PNDH has a section regarding the 2007-2011 period, in which it mentions what it considers achievements of the government regarding education in the 2007-2011 period. In such section, the limited notion of education is clearly visible. Furthermore, although I have access to the 2009-2011 technical summary version, this document only has a one page and a half section on education policy, out of which less than half a page is dedicated to primary schooling. Therefore I believe it makes much more sense to directly analyze the 2012-2016 version, which has more pages dedicated to primary schooling. Moreover, by analyzing this version of the PNDH, we can see two important points:

- 1) When analyzing its own 'achievements' for the 2007-2011 period, the government did not move away from the narrow education view as that of MDG2.
- 2) In analyzing the 2012-2016 education policy, it is clear that the limited notion of education remains unchallenged and therefore prevails.

Important to say is that the lack of authorship still remains in both versions. Henceforth, when referring to the PNDH, I am referring to the PNDH 2012-2016 version. Page 8 of the PNDH says that the PNDH is a living plan, in continuous construction, open to inputs of the Nicaraguan society, which is subject to periodical adjustments so as to adapt to internal and external processes of change (PNDH 2013: 8). A revised 2014 version however has still not appeared publicly.

Now I will engage in CDA for parts of the PNDH that I find most relevant for this research paper, particularly the section on education. Chapter III of the PNDH (pg 77-104) is called *El bien común y la equidad social de las familias Nicaragüenses* or The Common Good and Social Equity of Nicaraguan Families. The "Education Policy" is found in pages 78-84. The fact that a 261 page human development plan dedicates only 5 pages<sup>22</sup> to its education policy I think is already problematic, especially since the PNDH says that it sees education as the main development axis of the country. The education policy section is divided into two sections: the first section, "Education in 2007-2011" offers a brief recap of what the Government views as achievements in the education sector during Mr. Ortega's first term in the presidency (2007-2011). The second section, "Education Policy 2012-2016" provides a brief overview of the education policy of the Government for the second period.

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<sup>22</sup> Appendix 3 shows that education is repeated 224 times throughout the PNDH, however, the education policy is only 5 pages long. Furthermore, even though the word inequality appears 52 times in the PNDH it only appears twice in the education section of the PNDH.

### 3.1 CDA of education policy in PNDH (2007-2011 period)

I will now engage in the analysis of some of the passages from the “Education in 2007-2011” section (pg 78-80). Some of the following passages do not necessarily deal with primary schooling, however I have included them because they are still very helpful in illustrating the limited notion of education in the policy.

Passage 370 on page 78:

SA: Stated Assumption, UA: Unstated Assumption, SC: Stated Conclusion, UC: Unstated Conclusion

#### Key words

“El Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional inició a partir del año 2007 un **proceso de rescate del sistema educativo y de restitución de los derechos del pueblo** al eliminar la autonomía escolar promovida por los gobiernos neoliberales y con ella, principalmente los cobros en las escuelas públicas, que eran ilegales e inconstitucionales. Así, a partir del 10 de enero del 2007 el **pueblo goza de la restitución del derecho de la educación gratuita y universal**, que se establece en el Artículo 120 de la Constitución Política de Nicaragua” (PNDH 2013: 78)

English Translation of the Text	Further Commentaries	Assumptions and Conclusions
<p>“The Government of Reconciliation and National Unity initiated since 2007 a <b>process to rescue the education system and restore the rights of the people</b> by eliminating the school autonomy promoted by the neoliberal governments and with it, the illegal and unconstitutional fees that were collected in public schools. So, <b>as of January 10, 2007 the people enjoy the restoration of the right of free and universal education</b>, as set out in Article 120 of the Constitution of Nicaragua” (Author/Based on PNDH 2013: 78).</p>	<p>The text has a sort of rights-based approach at the beginning when it says that it restored the right to education by means of doing away with enrolment fees charged to parents in the previous administrations.</p> <p>In the last sentence we see some populist rhetoric, when it says that ‘the people’ now enjoy the right to free and universal education. While it is true that enrolment fees have been eliminated, this does not lead to an immediate universality in education. Here, a clear manipulation of the universality notion of education is visible. In the midst of such discursive injustice, to use Van Dijk’s term, this manipulation is</p>	<p>SA: The government has come to the rescue of the education system</p> <p>UA: Education system is better-off without school autonomy</p> <p>UA: The education system is indeed has improved with the new Sandinista government</p> <p>UA: Elimination of enrollment fees leads to universal education.</p> <p>SC: Nicaragua now has free and universal education</p>

	highly misleading because just eliminating enrolment fees does not automatically bring forth universal education, even if we were to define universality in terms of MDG2 indicators.	
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Passage 371 on page 78-79:

SA: Stated Assumption, UA: Unstated Assumption, SC: Stated Conclusion, UC: Unstated Conclusion

### Key words

“Analfabetismo. También se ha restituido el derecho de ser alfabeto y abrir así la oportunidad de tener una educación que refuerza la capacidad del pueblo para ejercer una ciudadanía activa y como sujeto de desarrollo, una mejora en la economía familiar y de las condiciones de vida. El porcentaje de analfabetismo en el año 2006 alcanzaba un 22.0 por ciento de la población a nivel nacional. Durante el período 2007-2011, reduciéndose la tasa de analfabetismo de 16.5 por ciento en 2007 a 3.0 por ciento en 2011” (PNDH 2013: 78-79).

English Translation of the Text	Further Commentaries	Assumptions and Conclusions
<p>“Illiteracy. The right to be literate has been reinstated and the opportunity to have an education that strengthens the ability of people to exercise active citizenship as subjects of development has opened up, an improvement in the family economy and living conditions. The illiteracy rate in 2006 reached 22.0 percent of the national population. During the 2007-2011 period, the illiteracy rate was reduced from 16.5 percent in 2007 to 3.0 percent in 2011” (Author/Based on PNDH 2013: 78).</p>	<p>Again we see a language of rights: in this case, the right to be able to know how to read and write.</p> <p>The document presents literacy rates for 2006, 2007 and 2011. While teaching people (especially adults) how to read and write is definitely important, the document appears to present literacy as an end and not as a means to achieving the more fundamental goal which I think is to help these people achieve at least a full course of primary schooling. Moreover, we are not told about the institutional follow-up that these new literate groups will receive. Such follow-up is necessary,</p>	<p>UA: The right to read and write was violated under previous governments</p> <p>SA: Literacy strengthens active citizenship of peoples</p> <p>UC: Nicaragua has become since 2011 a country free of illiteracy</p>

	<p>since if absent, these people because of a lack of practice may in the short-run forget what they have learned and go back to being illiterates.</p>	
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Regarding illiteracy, it is important to say that in June 2009, UNESCO certified Nicaragua as a country free from illiteracy (La Jornada 2009). UNESCO considers a country to be free from illiteracy if it has less than 5% illiteracy rates (Ibid). By June 2009, Nicaragua had 4.73% of illiterate population (Ibid). However, opposition media outlets presented in 2012 information from ECLAC<sup>23</sup>'s statistical yearbook, in which Nicaragua was presented as having 30.3% illiteracy rates in 2010 (ECLA 2011: 50). ECLAC shows the illiteracy rates for 2005 at 31.9% which means that from 2005 to 2010, there was a decrease in illiteracy of only 1.6% (Ibid). Moreover, ECLAC's projection is for Nicaragua to have 28.8% illiteracy rates in 2015 (Ibid). UNESCO's representative for Nicaragua, Dr. Juan Bautista Arrien, in April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012, then sent a letter<sup>24</sup> made public to ECLAC rebutting the figures presented by ECLAC. I present this example to show how the discussion sometimes can be very short-sighted. Dr. Arrien of course is not part of the government, but government officials, especially from MINED<sup>25</sup> also refuted ECLAC's figures. What I am trying to say is that the discussion sometimes is too superficial. Numbers apparently is all that matters. The notion that reducing illiteracy rates is an end, is terribly limited. This can be connected to the MDG2 since the third indicator of MDG2 deals with literacy rates of 15-24 year olds. While analyzing this third indicator some questions can come to mind: e.g. why is MDG2 focused only on the literacy levels of this particular age group? What about programs to incorporate the new literates into further education so that they could eventually graduate from 6<sup>th</sup> grade? The point I am trying to make is that the government is not alone in adopting a narrow view of literacy. The MDG2 suffers from it as well.

Passage 372 on page 79:

SA: Stated Assumption, UA: Unstated Assumption, SC: Stated Conclusion, UC: Unstated Conclusion

### Key words

“Educación Inicial. El modelo educativo neo liberal limitó el acceso a la población en edad escolar al sistema educativo. La matrícula de Preescolar en el año 2006 era de 209,950 niñas y niños y al 2011 se incrementó a 227,559 niñas y niños. De igual manera, la Tasa Neta de Escolarización (TNE), experimentó un incremento al pasar de 52.3 por ciento en el año 2006 a 57.0 por ciento en 2011, aumentando en 4.7 puntos porcentuales. Asimismo, el porcentaje de retención escolar aumentó de 84.1 por ciento en el año 2006 a 94.0 por ciento en el año 2011, lo que indica una mayor permanencia en estos niveles educativos” (PNDH 2013: 79).

<sup>23</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

<sup>24</sup> Letter (in Spanish) can be accessed here: <http://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:1416-representante-unesco-en-nicaragua-refuta-cifras-de-cepal-sobre-alfabetismo>

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Education.

English Translation of the Text	Further Commentaries	Assumptions and Conclusions
<p>“Early Education. The neoliberal educational model limited access to education for the school-age population. Pre-school enrollment in 2006 was 209,950 children and in 2011 increased to 227,559 children. Similarly, the net enrollment ratio (NER), experienced an increase, going from 52.3 percent in 2006 to 57.0 percent in 2011, increasing by 4.7 percentage points. Also, the percentage of retention increased from 84.1 percent in 2006 to 94.0 percent in 2011, indicating a greater permanence in these educational levels” (Author/Based on PNDH 2013: 79).</p>	<p>A clear antagonism is created in this us vs. them type of discourse. The ‘neoliberals’ limited access to education, meanwhile us do not. Implicit we can find also a rights-based language, in which the present-day government provides the right to access to pre-school.</p> <p>In this discursive maelstrom, we can observe how the passage is heavily loaded with figures and numbers. Actually there is a sort of fetishism of numbers here. The numbers in themselves are presented in such a way that the numbers gain more importance than the underlying process of pre-schooling. Again, net enrolment rates are simply not good enough. This is a very limited view. Retention is indeed crucial but it only takes into account those people that stayed in the system.</p>	<p>SA: The current government does not limit access to education</p> <p>UA: Higher NER’s and retention rates inexorably leads to an improvement in the early education school system.</p>

Passage 373 on page 79:

“Educación Primaria. En el año 2011 la TNE Ajustada de educación primaria fue de 95.2 por ciento experimentando un incremento de 3.3 puntos porcentuales en relación a la del año 2007 (91.9 por ciento). La retención escolar en la educación primaria ha mejorado en los últimos años alcanzando en el año 2011 un 92.0 por ciento incrementándose en 5.1 puntos porcentuales con respecto a la de 2006 (86.9 por ciento). El porcentaje de aprobados en educación primaria pasó de 83.7 por ciento en el año 2006 a 92.0 por ciento en el año 2011” (PNDH 2013: 79)

“Primary Education. In 2011 the Adjusted NER<sup>26</sup> in primary education was 95.2 percent experiencing an increase of 3.3 percentage points compared to 2007 (91.9 percent). School retention in primary education has improved in recent years, reaching 92.0 percent in 2011, an increase by 5.1 percentage points compared to 2006 (86.9 percent). The pass rate in primary education increased from 83.7 percent in 2006 to 92.0 percent in the year 2011” (Author/Based on PNDH 2013: 79).

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<sup>26</sup> Net enrolment rate.

The reason why I chose this passage is two-fold: First, it is the only part in the “Education in 2007-2011” section that specifically deals with primary education. Second, it is a passage in which the reader can clearly see how the government has a limited notion of education. Thus, this passage helps answer the main research question of this research paper. Looking at the first sentence one can see how the document mentions frames NERs. The fact that it is also the first statistic that is provided to the reader should already be a wake-up call. As was mentioned in chapter 1, net enrolment rates are the first indicator of MDG2. It is a simplistic quantitative indicator that disregards other crucial aspects of a school system e.g. inequalities. The problem with this kind of data is that it provides a false impression of the state of affairs of the primary schooling system. A net enrollment rate only takes the enrollment rate of the primary school levels (grade 1 to 6 for the case of Nicaragua). Hence, it does not provide us with information about how many children repeated a grade, how many did not regularly attend classes, how many dropped out, how much was the delayed entry, etc.

Even more, it does not attempt to trace (and tackle) the root causes of why a child would drop out, not attend regularly or entered school after classes have begun, for instance. While the second sentence does take into account retention, it gives a quick statistic that also does not provide existing inequalities regarding retention rates across gender, region, ethnic groups, etc. The third sentence suffers from the same problem as the first. It is highly misleading and tries to create the impression that Nicaragua is in line with the MDG2 target and indicators. While it may be true that the more children are passing their grades, the problem that I find is that it only takes into consideration those children that stayed in school. Thus, a passing rate forgets about those who dropped out, to mention one example. To be able to pass you need to have had remained in school. Therefore, it is actually an exclusionary statistic. Everything is reduced to enrolment and passing. I consider it necessary to explain that passing rates must not be confused with survival rates. The two are different. A passing rate shows how many children made it to a next grade. Survival rates on the other hand deal with how many girls and boys who started grade 1 finished grade 6. It is in this specific statistic that Nicaragua continues to perform poorly, since survival rates do not surpass the 50% threshold. Moreover, as will be shown in chapter 4, dropout rates for 1<sup>st</sup> graders exceed 15%; a troubling figure that reveals the real situation of Nicaragua’s primary school system.

### **3.2 CDA of education policy in PNDH (2012-2016 period)**

In this part of the study I will perform the CDA of the education policy of the PNDH dealing with the 2012-2016 period. The name of this section in the PNDH is labeled *Política de Educación 2012-2016* or Education Policy 2012-2016, and it can be found in pages 80 to 84.

Passage 380 on page 80:

“El Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional seguirá garantizando y fortaleciendo el derecho de la población a una educación gratuita. En el marco del Modelo de Desarrollo del país el proceso de educación se despliega desde un enfoque de derecho humano fundamental bajo el principio de universalización de la educación. En ese sentido se está desarrollando un nuevo modelo educativo con el que se logrará que cada vez más personas especialmente los más empobrecidos los de las áreas rurales y de comunidades indígenas y afro descendientes ingresen a las escuelas en la edad que les corresponde y progresen en forma continua” (PNDH 2013: 80).

“The Government of Reconciliation and National Unity continues to ensure and strengthen the people's right to free education. Under the development model of the country, the education process unfolds from the perspective of a fundamental human right, under the principle of universal education. In that sense, we are developing a new educational model that will ensure that more people, particularly the poor and those in rural areas and belonging to indigenous and Afrodescendant communities enter school at the right age and make continuous progress. With the new educational model, a new coherent, comprehensive, complementary and articulated education model is being developed” (Author/Based on PNDH 2013: 80).

In the first sentence of this passage it is evident that the discourse utilizes a rights-based language such as the one that we encountered previously in the conceptual framework. This excerpt emphasizes that education is a human right and that the Government will ensure the right to free education. As has been mentioned before, enrolment fees were charged to parents in public schools during the three previous governments (1990-2006). With the enforcing of Ministerial Decree 018-2007, there is no question that public education is now free. The text gives too much attention to the elimination of enrolment fees. Certainly they have positively contributed –as chapter 4 will show- to having more girls and boys enroll in primary school. Regarding the so called new education model the text is silent in mentioning the specifics of how this model will be reached. I think that a truly new education model would be achieved if there were education policies aimed at structurally reforming the education system. Tackling issues that are completely absent from MDG2 would indeed be a step in the right direction. Aside from the elimination of enrollment fees, and some policies such as the distribution of school meals and school kits<sup>27</sup>, the quantitative evidence that I will provide in chapter 4 will prove that Nicaragua’s primary school system is suffering from the same eternal problems e.g. poor teacher training, inadequate school infrastructure, severe underfunding, etc.

Part I of passage 382 (page 80) illustrates the limited notion that the government has regarding what it has called the battle for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (an idea directly linked to the second indicator of MDG2):

“Como parte de ésta [batalla] se irán eliminando las inequidades campo-ciudad al completar en todas las escuelas la oferta educativa hasta el sexto grado e incorporando más maestros, avanzando paulatinamente hacia el noveno grado. Asimismo, se continuará con la entrega de la merienda escolar a niñas y niños de educación Preescolar y primaria, así como con la entrega de paquetes educativos, uniformes y textos a los estudiantes de más escasos recursos económico” (PNDH 2013: 80-81).

“As part of this [battle for 6<sup>th</sup> grade] rural-urban inequalities will be gradually eliminated as we complete education provision in all schools through sixth grade and adding more teachers, gradually moving towards the ninth grade. It will also continue with the delivery of school meals to children in primary and preschool education, as well as the delivery of educational packages, uniforms and textbooks to students of scarce economic resources” (Author/Based on PNDH 2013: 80-81).

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<sup>27</sup> Provision of *merienda escolar* (school meals) is carried out by the Nicaraguan government hand-in-hand with the World Food Programme (PMA 2014). Such policy reaches one million children from pre-school and primary levels (PMA 2014). In 2013, about 400,000 *paquetes escolares* (school kits) were provided to children of public schools. (La Voz del Sandinismo 2013). Both these policies have made the NERs to continue to be well above average and even increase.

In this passage we can have a closer look at how the Government frames inequality. As a matter of fact, this is the only time in the education policy section of the PNDH that the word *inequality* appears. Reading though the rest of the section, one does not see the word appear. Taking a look at appendix 2, inequality appears 52 times throughout this 261 page PNDH. Hence, we can see the absent frame of inequality with regards to the PNDH education policy. This helps answer my first sub-question.

The text mentions education provision as being related to gradually eliminating rural-urban inequalities. Table 3.1 presents five questions that can help measure the equality of a school system. Analyzing table 3.1 and part I of passage 382, a link can be drawn between what the government mentions as the *provision* of education and *adding* of more teachers and the first two levels of equality which Regnault identifies. Clearly, the government is not moving beyond the first and second level of access, hence the limit is clearly visible. Of course I am not arguing that other structural problems supersede the importance of education provision and availability of teachers. All of them deserve the same kind of consideration and attention. Actually, the second part of this passage lists things such as delivery of school meals, school kits, uniforms, textbooks and other materials that have been given to those children that come from the most underprivileged groups of society so as to provide them with an incentive to enroll in school. I am not criticizing this at all. In fact none of the three previous governments had ever made the effort to provide children from the most impoverished families with such school packages.

In relation to the distribution of school kits/packages the last paragraph of passage 382 (I) says:

“En el período 2012-2016 se entregarán 1,500,000 paquetes educativos solidarios. Para el 2015, se espera que el 35 por ciento de niñas y niños de Preescolar y primaria reciban mochila y útiles escolares. Al 2016, a 1,200,000 estudiantes de educación Preescolar y educación primaria se les brindará en sus escuelas la merienda escolar, el 100 por ciento de días lectivos del año (120 días)” (PNDH 2013: 81).

“In the 2012-2016 period 1,500,000 solidary educational packages will be delivered. By 2015, it is expected that 35 percent of pre-school and primary children receive backpacks and school supplies. In 2016, school meals will be delivered to 1,200,000 students in preschool and primary education, 100 percent of school days a year (120 days)” (Author/Based on PNDH 2013: 81).

The problem lies in that these measures are only dealing with one side of the problem: enrolment. These measures, although good in nature, may distract us from looking at the real picture which is that higher enrolment rates alone will not do. Thus, what I am trying to argue is that the PNDH has a constrained view on these issues.

**Table 3.1 Five Questions to Measure Equality in Schooling Systems**

1. Is education service/provision in the area accessible? If so, until what grade? (equality of opportunity)
2. Are there teachers in each area with enough training (equality of opportunities)
3. Are there programs to level the socioeconomic differences? (equality of access)
4. Are there institutional policies that integrate individual, gender and socio-cultural differences? (equality of access by gender and ethnic-cultural groups, race)
5. Are citizens educated with full exercise of their rights without any discrimination?

\*Source: (Author/Based on Regnault 2006: 23)

If we were to convert this table into a pyramid and turn it upside down, we would have level 1 as the base of the pyramid. Surely, this is how we should see these levels. All three indicators of MDG2 do not even talk about provision or service delivery. Similarly, MDG2 does not mention anything about teachers and what the issue of teachers entails for a schooling system. Availability of teachers, teacher training centers, teacher salaries, teacher-pupil ratios, among others, are some of the pressing issues that the PNDH should also be looking at. We could say that the first indicator of MDG2, net enrolment rates (NER's) are in a way related to education provision. If there is no education provision the NERs will be low. Regardless, the fact remains that MDG2 ignores these issues.

Even though I do not wish to expand beyond my initial scope (this paper is not raising the question of what would constitute a complete universality definition), I believe that taking into account the questions raised by Regnault would certainly be helpful in arriving at a more comprehensive concept of universality. Besides, the text is misleading and highly ambitious as it says that gradually the government will move towards improving the provision and availability of teachers to the ninth grade. This all sounds good but the PNDH does not tell the reader how this availability of teachers will take place. Although the issue of having more teachers available to teach does not only deal with financial resources, money is indeed a huge part of it. As chapter 4 will show, teachers need not only better salaries, but also better and more training. For this to happen, much more teachers training centers need to open. All of this requires financial resources and of course, political will. The government has not even won its so-called battle for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and this part of the text is already hinting at succeeding in expanding education to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The intention might be good, but I believe that even if the battle were to be expanded until the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, if the government and the Ministry of Education (MINED) do not start moving away from the MDG2 limited notion of education, structural improvements might not take place anytime soon.

Moving on in part I of passage 382 (pg.81) we find this quote:

“Como resultado de la Batalla, para 2016 se espera una matrícula escolar total de 1,789,144 estudiantes (pre-escolar, primaria y secundaria)” (PNDH 2013: 81).

“As a result of the Battle, expected total enrollment for 2016 is 1,789,144 students (pre-school, primary and secondary)” (Author/Based on PNDH 2013: 81).

As we can see, the text continues to frame enrolment rates as the panacea to Nicaragua’s education problems. Remembering what Fairclough and Wodak, CDA addresses social problems and I think that this limited notion of education is the social problem. It is a problem because it distracts even the policy makers themselves (who might think that there is nothing wrong with MDG2) of the wider issues that also need to desperately be addressed. I think that having this narrow view on education has serious ramifications across the primary school system. Gee talked about dominant discourses and dominant groups. Having that in mind, I do believe that the issue of net enrolment rates has become the *dominant Discourse* within the education policy section of Nicaragua’s PNDH. Actually, we can see how NERs actually play a double role: they are the dominant discourse and also the defining objective of education policy as far as outcomes are concerned. The discourse in this case cannot be dissociated from reality. The government, thru its actions (i.e. elimination of enrolment fees, distribution of school meals and kits) is actually remaining faithful to its dominant discourse.

### **Chapter 3 Conclusion**

This chapter has engaged in analyzing the education policy of the current Nicaraguan government as seen in the National Human Development Plan (PNDH). In addition, I have aimed at providing discursive examples of how the Government has not challenged the mainstream notion of education as seen in MDG2 and how it has continued to embrace and follow it. As part of its discourse, a rights-based element is visible especially when the PNDH talks about every children having the right to free education. Having a limited notion to education essentially implies that the government continues to place much more emphasis on access (e.g. enrollment rates, passing rates) than on other issues that are key if the structural problems of Nicaragua’s public education system are ever going to be solved. Concerning the latter, the PNDH does not address inequalities related to structural deficiencies that lie beyond the issue of access and enrolment rates. As the analysis of part 1 of passage 382 makes clear, inequality is just framed with regards to provision and teacher availability. But as chapter 4 will show, there are inequalities in other aspects as well which this PNDH forgets about, whether intentionally or not it remains unclear. In conclusion, the CDA of the PNDH passages that I have presented in this chapter has been helpful in demystifying the MDG2 ideology and its setbacks as well as in highlighting the limited notion of education that the Nicaraguan government continues to adopt.

## Chapter 4

# Overview of Nicaragua's Primary School System

Having engaged in the CDA of the education policy section of the PNDH, this chapter will now offer a general overview of the primary school system in Nicaragua which I think can help answer my second sub-question. Most of the data found in this chapter will correspond primarily to the 2007-2011 time frame (Mr. Ortega's first presidential term). While most official documents (e.g. INIDE, MINED) present 2009 data, I have included data from NGOs (e.g. FUNIDES, FIDEG) and think tanks such as IEEPP that also provide data for 2010 and 2011. For instance, data for public spending on education and budget allocations to teacher training is available up to the year 2011. Although INIDE has not presented 2012 or 2013 statistical yearbooks, in this chapter I will make reference to the 2014 national budget that can help have a grasp of how much the government is spending on primary education.

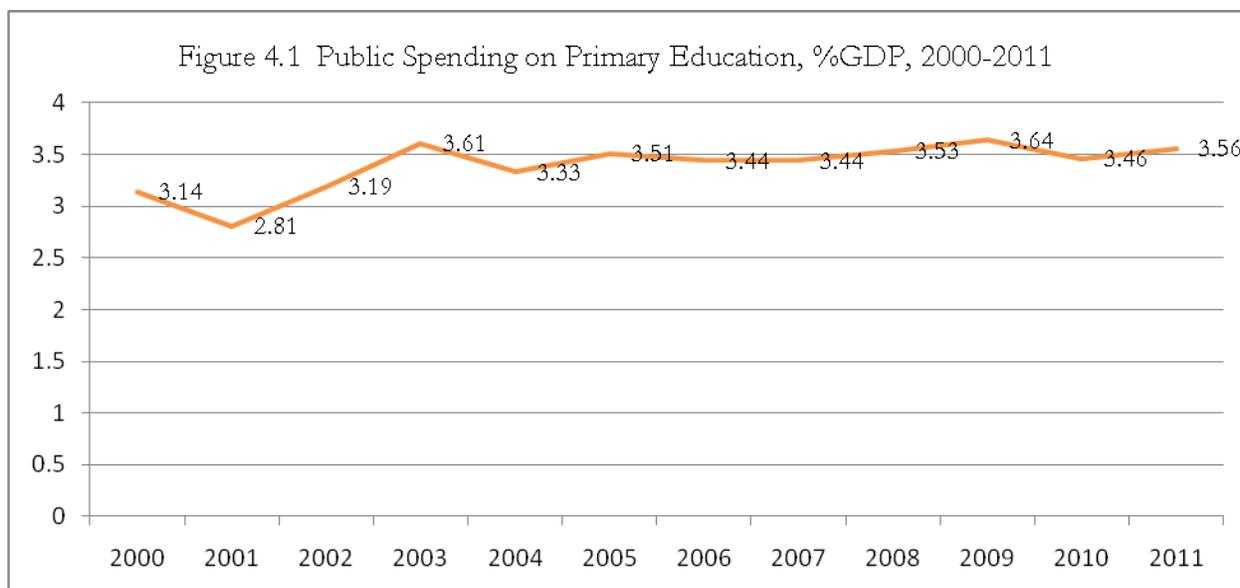
### 4.1 Primary school system (2007-2011): Inputs

In this section I will present some data which can be considered inputs to primary school system. I consider important to say that I am not establishing a causal claim with respect to inputs and outcomes. For example, I am not saying that the outcomes (which I will present later) are only a consequence of these inputs nor that the limited notion of education is the only thing that can explain the present-day situation of Nicaragua's primary school system. Other variables should be taken into consideration. For instance, Vijil considers other factors such as: the students' family and affective problems, the curriculum, the didactic materials, among others (Vijil 2013). In any case, I am presenting these figures to give the reader a general idea of the situation of Nicaragua's primary school system.

#### 4.1.1 Public Spending on Education

Although I do not think that budget allocations are the alpha and omega of public education, they are indeed important for analyzing the state of affairs of any public school system. The Nicaraguan primary education budget remains insufficient to guarantee a proper school infrastructure, but perhaps more importantly, it provides neither a good teacher training nor decent salaries (CIASES 2007: 1). Vijil suggests that by offering poor students a poor primary education, the current primary school system is actually not promoting development but instead is keeping Nicaragua in poverty and increasing social inequalities (Vijil 2008: 28). As figure 4.1 will demonstrate, Nicaragua does not invest more than 3.7% of its GDP on basic education, the fourth lowest amongst Central American countries (Vijil 2008: 24, PREAL et al. 2014: 9). However, Nicaragua continues to provide 6% of GDP to universities. According to Nicaragua's 2014 national budget, 16% goes to the Ministry of Education (MINED), out of which 64% goes to primary education (MHCP 2014). However, to resolve some of the most serious issues in our education system analysts consider that public spending should be between 7 and 8% of GDP (Vijil 2008: 24; Jacobs 2008). Costa Rica on the other hand invested in 2009 an estimated 6.3% of GDP on basic education. Related to the budget spending on spending Vijil suggests that:

“A country’s national budget is the clearest, most objective and verifiable indicator of the country’s priorities. Looking at the amount earmarked for the educational system and teachers’ salaries, we can see that education isn’t a priority to the State. It isn’t assigned the resources needed” (Vijil 2013).



\*Source: (Author/Based on FUNIDES 2011: 7)

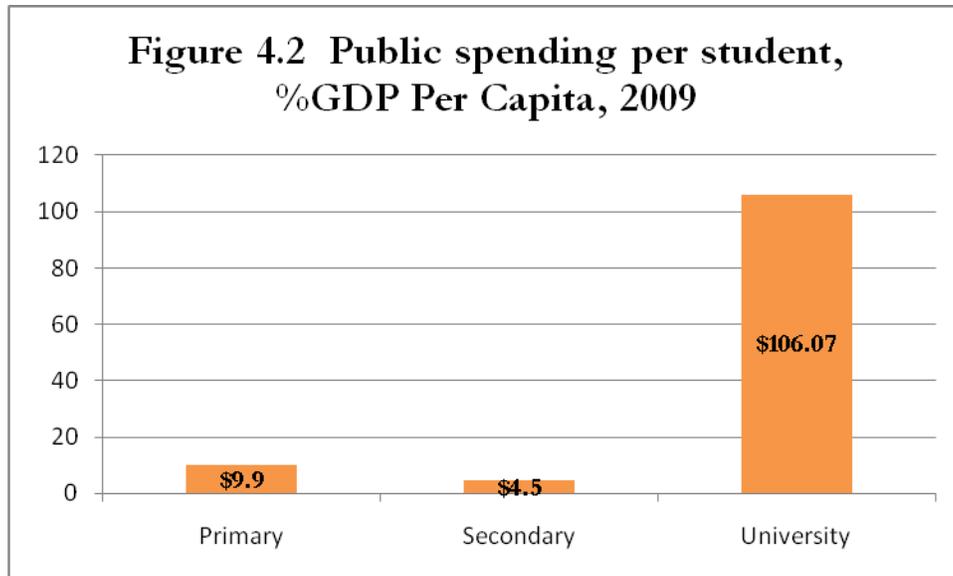
A further problem that the primary school system faces is that Nicaragua continues to be the Central American country that less invests per student (PREAL et al. 2014: 9). Not only that, it spends a disproportionate amount of money on university students as table 4.1 can show.

**Table 4.1 Budget, Enrollment and Spending per Student, 2007-2008**

	2007			2008		
	Budget	Enrollment	Spending per student	Budget	Enrollment	Spending per student
<b>Pre-School</b>	\$ 10.14 Mn	214,615	\$47.25	\$ 9.59 Mn	278,995	\$34.38
<b>Primary</b>	\$ 157.06 Mn	952,964	<b>\$164.82</b>	\$ 154.83 Mn	969,366	<b>\$159.73</b>
<b>Secondary</b>	\$ 26.62 Mn	372,628	\$71.44	\$ 39.43 Mn	446,598	\$88.30
<b>University</b>	\$ 88.46 Mn	80,927	<b>\$1,093.08</b>	\$ 96.59 Mn	88,996	<b>\$1,085.37</b>

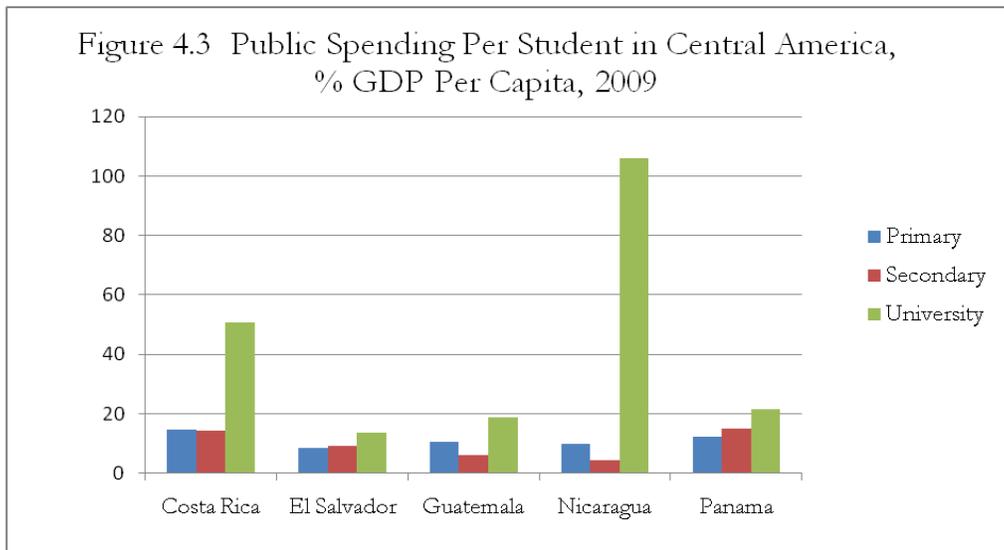
\*Source: (Author/Based on FUNIDES 2011: 8)

Looking at table 4.1, we can see the enormous disparities between the spending on primary school students and university students. An abysmal difference exists since a university student receives almost 11 times as much as does a primary school student.



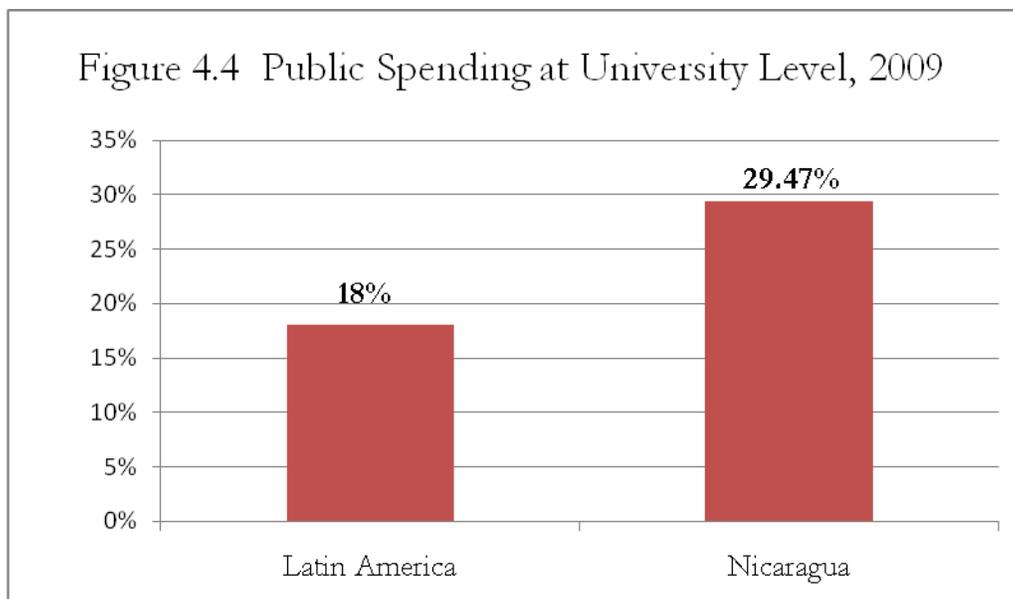
\*Source: (Author/Based on FUNIDES 2011: 7)

Comparing what Nicaragua spends on university students vis-à-vis its other Central American neighbors we can understand the notorious difference in these amounts. As figure 4.3 clearly depicts, Nicaragua spends almost two times more on university students than its southern neighbor Costa Rica and about five times more than its other Central American neighbors.

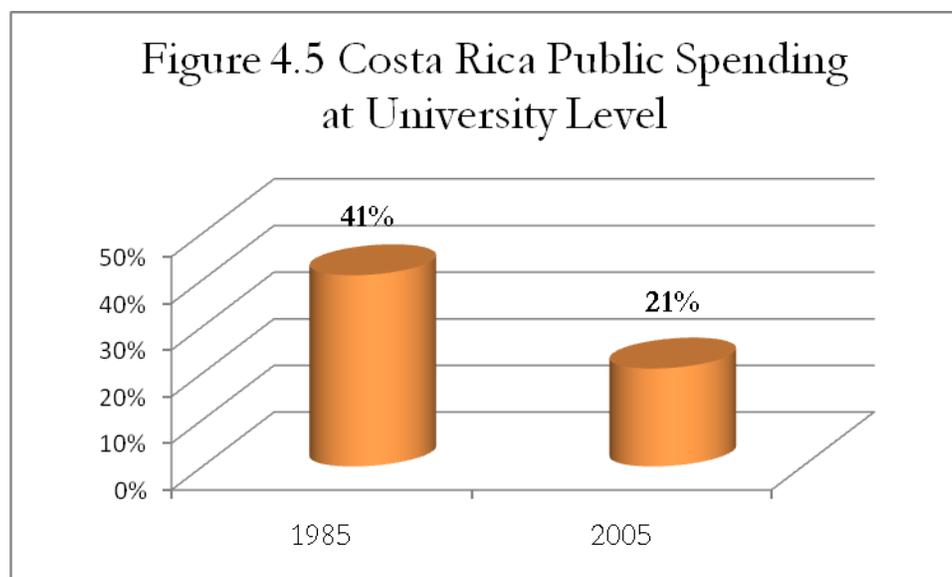


\*Source: (Author/Based on FUNIDES 2011: 9)

Figure 4.4 presents more evidence as to why the 6% that goes to universities should be critically analyzed in Nicaragua. Not only is Nicaragua spending disproportionately much more on university students than its Central American counterparts, it is also more than ten points higher than the Latin American average regarding public spending of the university system.



\*Source: (Author/Based on FUNIDES 2011: 11)



\*Source (Author/Based on FUNIDES 2011: 11)

Figure 4.5 shows how Costa Rica has been gradually decreasing its university system spending. A sound public policy on education in Nicaragua could consider gradually decrease the amounts provided to universities, increase the accountability of the money provided and gradually increase public spending on the primary school system. If this fails to happen (and by looking at the PNDH it appears that this is the case) the prospects for improving the public primary school system will remain unlikely.

## 4.1.2 Teacher Training

Teacher training continues to be Nicaragua’s Achilles’ heel. In 2007, there were a total of 31,488 primary school teachers, out of which 27% were empiricists or had not graduated (IEEP 2010: 12). Table 4.2 shows that for 2008 there were 32,654 primary school teachers out of which 27% had not graduated, meaning that they did not have the proper formation to teach (Ibid). As these values have remained constant, it is not surprising that the projection for 2015 continues to be between 27-28% empiricism rates (EDUQUEMOS 2011: 37).

2007		2008	
Empirical	Graduates	Total	Total
8,691	22,797	31,488	32,654

\*Source: (Author/Based on IEEP 2010: 12)

Nicaragua needs to urgently increase the number of graduated teachers from the *escuelas normales* or teacher training schools. These schools have the capacity to handle about 2,400 learners but have about 50% underutilization rates; case in point only about 500 new teachers are graduated annually, insufficient to meet the new working places that open every year (FUNIDES 2011: 17). What is more, the latter figure is highly insufficient if we consider that the national teacher deficit is estimated at 10,000 (Ibid). Primary school teachers had on average about 12 years of schooling (UNDP 2011: 136).

	Total	% MINED Total Spending
<b>2006</b>	\$2.10 Mn	1.34
<b>2007</b>	\$5.97 Mn	2.85
<b>2008</b>	\$4.01 Mn	1.78
<b>2009</b>	\$10.82 Mn	4.15
<b>2010</b>	\$3.35 Mn	1.37
<b>2011</b>	\$3.14 Mn	1.27

\*Source: (Author/Based on IEEP 2010: 20)

As table 4.3 shows, Nicaragua continues to underfund programs for teacher training. Between 2006 and 2008, less than 3% of the total budget of the Ministry of Education was spent on teacher formation (IEEP 2010: 20). This figure went up to 4.15% in 2009, but decreased dramatically in 2010 to 1.37% (Ibid). Looking at these figures it appears as if the Nicaraguan government is reluctant to provide more financial resources to teacher training programs. Vijil suggests that for Nicaraguan primary education to get out of the vicious circle in which it is, it becomes necessary to prioritize “teachers’ initial preparation [along with] improving their continued training once they are exercising their profession” (Vijil 2013).

Linked to the teacher training problem, we find that the salaries of teachers are incredibly low and this is key to comprehend why there is a shortage of professors. Teaching is seen as a ‘plan b’ type of job and in many cases as a complementary job to another economic activity already being performed by the person<sup>28</sup>. Looking at the example of table 4.4, we see that the average salary for a primary school professor is about 5,000 Nicaraguan Córdoba or U\$ 195 per month. As Vijil asks: Can a teacher feel stimulated or even appreciated with such low salaries? (Vijil 2013). Vijil recognizes that there have been teacher salary increases but she considers that these increases are still too minor, reason for which many teachers have left the profession in hope of finding better-paying jobs (Ibid).

		Córdoba (C\$)	U\$
<b>Years Service</b>	27 years (C\$ 40 per year)	1,080	50.57
<b>Titles/Degrees</b>	High School	150	7.02
	University	300	14.04
	Training	45	2.1
<b>Basic Income</b>		3,900	182.61
<b>Total Income<sup>29</sup></b>		5,475	256.35

\*Source: (Author/Based on IEEP 2010: 15)

Table 4.5 provides a dramatic example of the average monthly income of a teacher with 27 years’ service. Additionally, table 3.7 shows that for 2008, the salary for a professor could only buy 29% of the basic food basket (IEEP 2010: 14). Even if in 2011 a teacher could buy 9% more of the food basket, overall he/she still could not even buy half of the food basket. These teachers are mostly females, have on average 33 years of age and have a precarious socioeconomic condition (Elvir 2005: 7).

	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>No. Teachers</b>	39,894	44,666	44,333	44,631
<b>Annual Amount to Cover Salary</b>	\$ 64.26 Mn	\$ 82.3 Mn	\$ 90.8 Mn	\$ 90.95 Mn
<b>Annual Income Per Capita</b>	\$1,610.87	\$1,842.60	\$2,048.15	\$2,037.79
<b>Monthly Income Per Capita</b>	\$123.91	\$141.74	\$157.55	\$156.75
<b>Annual Basic Food Basket Cost</b>	\$434.29	\$414.48	\$406.64	\$413.21
<b>% of Food Basket Acquired</b>	29%	34%	39%	38%

\*Source: (Author/Based on IEEP 2010: 14)

<sup>28</sup> In many cases teachers, in order to cover the cost of the basic market basket, are forced to work “double shifts and even weekends, a situation that further affects their self-esteem, not to mention their health” (Vijil 2013).

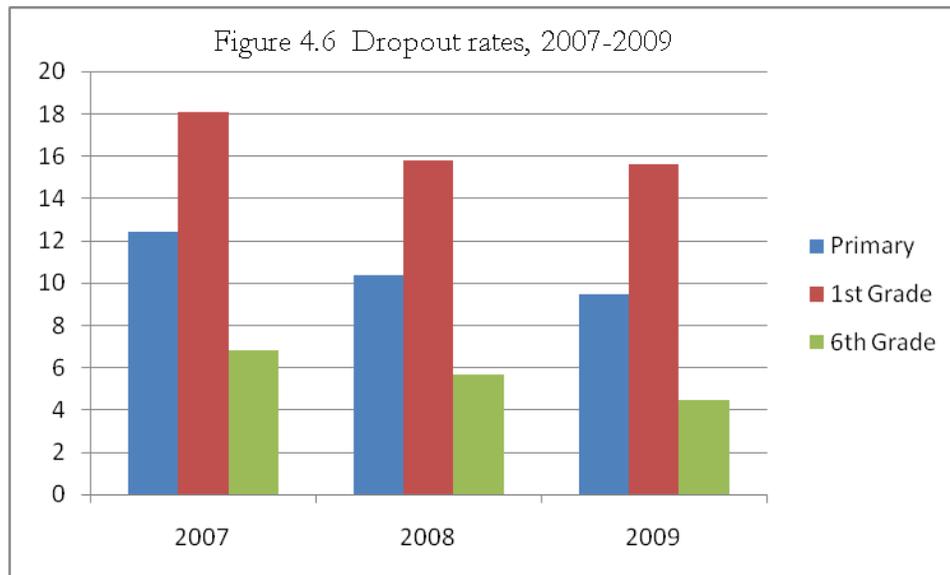
<sup>29</sup> Total income in this case equals the basic income of U\$ 182 (this is the normal salary of each month) + the additional U\$ 74 that the teacher would receive for his/her years of service and titles or degrees.

## 4.2 Primary school system (2007-2011): Outcomes

In this section I will present some of the data that I found which can be classified under the outcomes category. Again, I am not saying that e.g. high dropout rates, or poor school environments are only due to the inputs that I presented in section 4.3. Many factors at the micro, meso and macro levels can help explain why a child would dropout from 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Public spending is by all means not the only answer. It is just one of many.

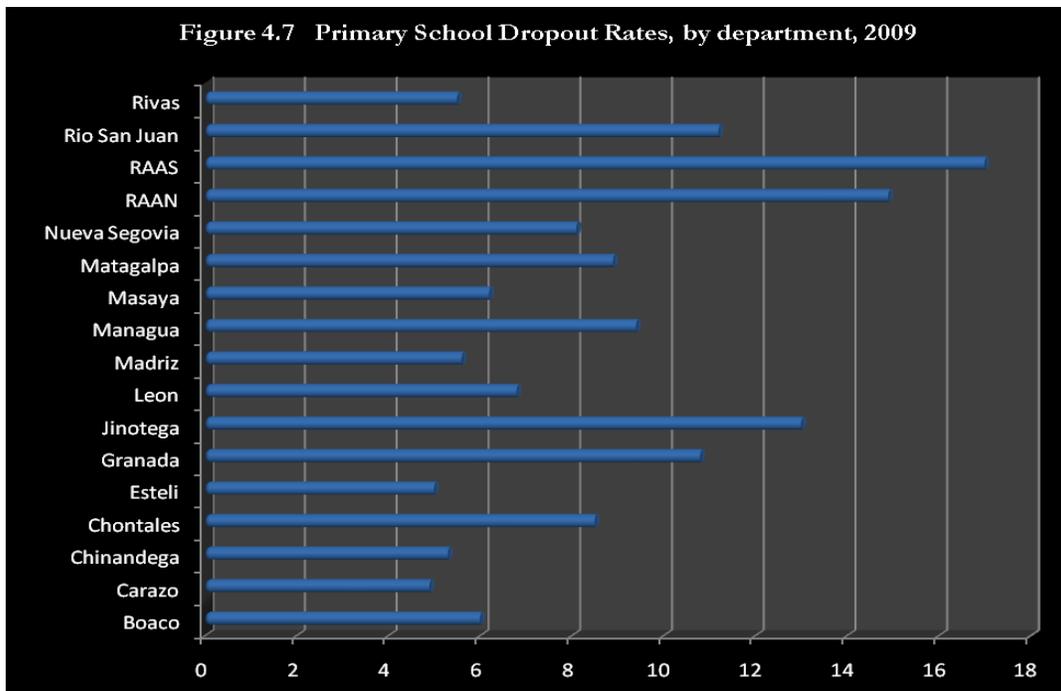
### 4.2.1 Dropout Rates

As was mentioned in chapter 1, Nicaragua is performing well above-average in regards to its primary school net enrolment rates. The problem lies in that many other aspects are still not given priority. In this respect, dropout rates (particularly in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade) are not given the required attention. The education policy section of the PNDH (pages 78-84) does not refer at all to this crucial issue. The limited notion of education adopted in the PNDH can be one of the reasons as to why such a critical matter is being ignored.



\*Source: (Author/Based on MINED 2011: 18)

Figure 4.6 shows that for 2008 and 2009, dropout or desertion rates in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade exceed 15%. This is troubling since 1<sup>st</sup> grade desertion is where the wider desertion problem begins. To put it simply: if survival rates are about 50%, then this means that 1<sup>st</sup> grade desertion accounts for 30% of total primary school desertion rates. In other words, a high dropout rate for 1<sup>st</sup> grade is a potent indicator of future survival rates for subsequent grades. In essence, if 1<sup>st</sup> grade is weak, this will most probably determine the weakness of other subsequent grades in the primary school system as well as in the other levels (e.g. secondary and university).



\*Source: (Author/Based on MINED 2011: 19)

Figure 4.7 shows inequalities regarding the desertion rates in the departments. For instance, the Autonomous Region of Southern Atlantic (RAAS) almost doubles the desertion rate of Managua. This is troubling since a child from the capital has 50% more chance of not dropping out and staying in school than a child from the Southern part of the Caribbean coast (RAAS). Yet again, this is not looked upon in the education policy section of the PNDH. Another setback that the primary school system faces is that there is a 25% rate of children who are 2 or more years behind regarding the grade they should be attending for their corresponding age, whereas for Costa Rica this rate is only 5% (OREALC/UNESCO 2012: 25).

#### 4.2.2 School environments

Infrastructure is another key structural problem of the system. For instance, the number of public schools with access to water is only about 49% (IEEP 2010: 18).

Department	No. Schools	% No. Schools with access to drinking water
Boaco	557	39.7
Carazo	281	81.5
Chinandega	667	72.3

Chontales	496	39.9
Estelí	560	52.9
Granada	238	75.6
Jinotega	986	33.8
Leon	704	57.4
Madriz	485	39.6
Managua	1209	<b>93.2</b>
Masaya	289	91.7
Matagalpa	1412	49.1
Nueva Segovia	825	29.1
RAAN <sup>30</sup>	251	<b>27</b>
RAAS <sup>31</sup>	439	<b>23.5</b>
Rio San Juan	1339	37.6
Rivas	1522	80.1
Total	12,260	48.5

\*Source: (Author/Based on IEEP 2010: 18)

As table 4.6 illustrates, inequalities are present since 93% of public schools in Managua had access to water, whereas in the two autonomous regions of Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast, only between 23% and 27% of schools had access to water (IEEP 2010: 18).

As of 2009, 10,750 schools (and a total of 29,857 classrooms) depended on public funding from the central Government, out of which 71% were located in rural areas and 29% in urban (MINED 2011: 41). Among these, 48% were in good condition; 33% in fair condition and 19% in poor condition (MINED 2011: 41). Tables 4.7 and 4.8 show the infrastructure problems of schools at the national level. The Caribbean region is the one with the highest percentage of classrooms in poor condition (19.45%), followed by the Pacific region (15.94%) and the Central Region (10.27%) (Ibid). The former information shows that most of the classrooms with poor conditions are located in the Caribbean region (RAAN and RAAS regions), which are mostly rural areas. Thus, we clearly see inequalities in the material conditions of public schools in Nicaragua.

**Table 4.7 School Environments - 2010**

Area/Level	Existing Classrooms			Requirement		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Replacement	Repair	Maintenance
Primary Education	5,224	15,675	20,900	4,278	6,958	9,664

\*Source: (Author/Based on MINED 2011: 42)

<sup>30</sup> Autonomous Region of the Northern Atlantic

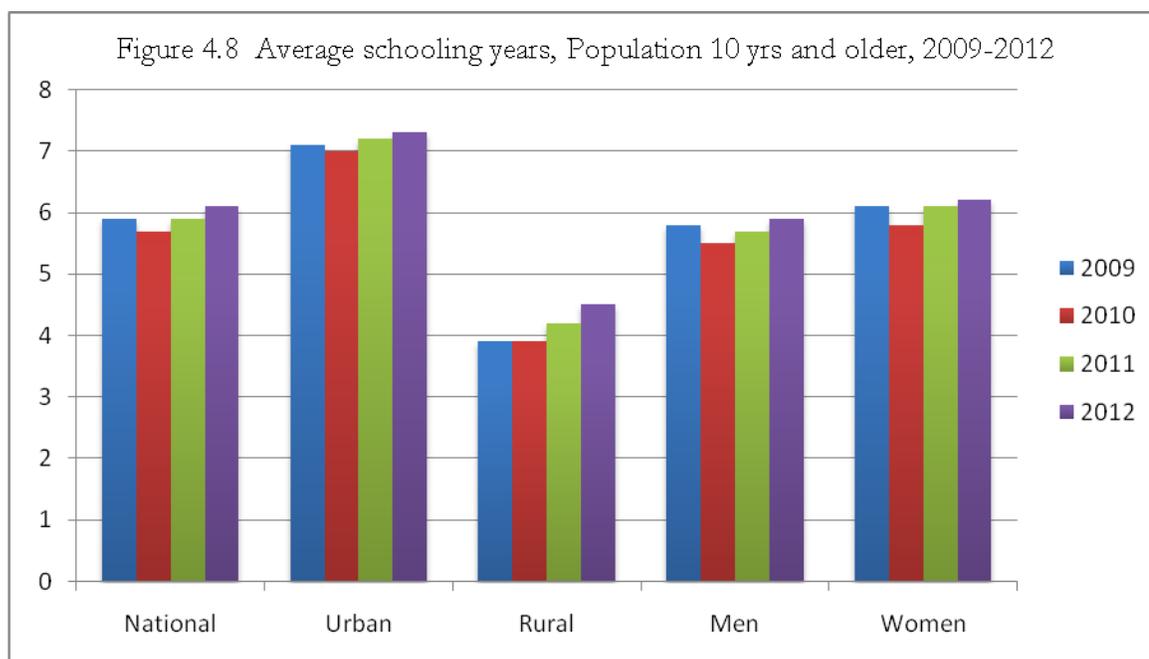
<sup>31</sup> Autonomous Region of the Southern Atlantic

<b>Place where it functions</b>	Schools	Enrollment
<b>Under a tree/branch</b>	265	6,484
<b>Under a tent</b>	23	542
<b>No Answer</b>	279	5,159
<b>Other</b>	476	14,664
<b>Total</b>	1,043	26,849

\*Source: (Author/Based on MINED 2011: 42)

### 4.2.3 Schooling

The education level of Nicaraguans is 5.6 years of schooling, with high inequalities since this is only 3.6 years in the rural areas and 7 years in the cities, while ECLAC maintains that 12 years is the least to keep people out of the line of poverty (Vijil 2008: 25). As figure 4.8 shows, there is not that great deal of inequality between the schooling years of females and males, however the inequality in this case lies in the regions: urban males and females continue to have much more schooling years<sup>32</sup> than rural males and females.



\*Source: (Author/Based on FIDEG 2012: 22)

<sup>32</sup> Urquiola makes clear that years of schooling is not the same as years in school. Average years of schooling refer to the grades which students have actually passed (Urquiola 2011: 819). Average years in school and average years of schooling may differ because of delayed-entry of students (Ibid).

## Chapter 4 Conclusion

Several points can be drawn from this chapter. The most obvious one is that the Nicaraguan primary school system suffers from multiple structural deficiencies. The statistic that is the most positive is the one regarding net enrolment rates (first indicator of MDG2). Net enrolment rates have remained well above average and the government constantly congratulates itself and feels jubilant for this ‘achievement’. Chapter 3 discussed how certain policies such as the distribution of school meals and kits and the elimination of enrolment fees have contributed to high NERs. At least two reservations need to be made here. First, it appears as if most of the governmental efforts are being directed at maintaining high NERs. Second, it seems as if the government is forgetting to focus on other vital problems of the primary school system. For instance, the fact that teacher salaries are so low that they cannot even buy half of the market basket is illustrative of the dire conditions of Nicaraguan primary school teachers. Evidence such as that of the budget allocations directed at teacher training programs are proof that there is not a policy that is going far beyond maintaining above-average net enrolment rates. If the contrary were true then we would be seeing more money being allocated into teacher training programs. As was mentioned *ut supra*, the structural deficiencies cannot solely be explained by the limited notion of education that the government has endorsed. Other variables also play a key role in these dynamics. However, I believe that some of these problems can at least partly be explained by such a narrow notion, since the government has put most of its efforts in achieving the first indicator of MDG2. As Josefina Vijil suggests, education in today’s Nicaragua is not helping us get out of poverty and overcome the lack of equity, but it’s actually reproducing poverty and inequality (Vijil 2008). Since there are so few well educated (these usually attend private schools<sup>33</sup>) and so many badly educated, we’re feeding the inequality of a society where the minority have plenty of opportunities and the majority have none at all (Vijil 2008).

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<sup>33</sup> In 2011, there was a total of 19,019 schools across the country out of which 2,625 (13.8%) are private schools (INIDE 2011: 129). In 2009, out of a total primary school system enrollment of 926,969 students, 72,272 (7.8%) were enrolled in private schools (MINED 2011: 16).

## Chapter 5: Concluding Remarks

To conclude I would like to say that I have found that the Nicaraguan education policy, as seen in the PNDH, has not moved away from the limited notion of education that is clearly visible in MDG2. The latter was showed thru means of the CDA and can be seen in chapter 3.

The governmental discourse uses a rights-based notion to education, specifically when talking about the right for all Nicaraguans to a free education. As this paper has described, it is true that Ministerial Decree 018-2007 as well as other policies such as distribution of school meals and kits has reaffirmed this right. However, this right to a free education does not go beyond issues relating to access. In fact, my chapter 4 findings show that indeed perhaps the only area where there is continuous success is the one regarding the maintenance of high net enrolment rates in public primary schools.

The government is clearly dedicating most of its effort to increasing net enrolment rates (access), overlooking other essential issues such as those related with broader inequalities and deficiencies within the primary school system and between school levels as well. As chapter 4 made evident, the primary school system continues to suffer from many structural problems. Following this, I think that the limited notion can partly explain why Nicaragua's primary school system continues to be in such bad shape. While Nicaragua's primary school system problems cannot be solely explained by the government's lack of a broad and comprehensive notion of education, I believe that analyzing the education policy of the PNDH helps to understand how this limited notion is causing more harm than good on Nicaragua's primary education sector.



<b>Country Profile</b>	
Official Name:	Republic of Nicaragua
Capital City:	Managua
Limits:	North - Honduras South - Costa Rica East - Caribbean Sea West - Pacific Ocean
Political-Administrative Division:	15 Departments, 2 Autonomous Regions and 153 Municipalities
Currency:	Córdoba
Total Surface:	130,373.47 Km <sup>2</sup>
Total Population (2013):	6,134,200
Female Population (2011):	2,977,745
Male Population (2011):	2,914,537
Population Growth Rate (2011):	1.3

\*Source: (Author/Based on INIDE 2005: 4; BCN 2014: 1)

<b>Macroeconomic Indicators</b>		
	2011	2013
Gross Domestic Product (U\$ Millions)	9,898.60	11,255.60
GDP Per Capita (U\$ Dollars)	1,650.70	1,831.30
Real GDP Growth (%)	5.70	4.60
Exports of Goods (U\$ Millions)	3,662.20	4,122.50
Imports of Goods (U\$ Millions)	5,844.00	6,401.90
Gross International Reserves (U\$ Millions)	1,892.30	1,993.00
Domestic Public Debt (U\$ Millions)	1,169.90	1,062.30
External Public Debt (U\$ Millions)	4,072.60	4,531.90

\*Source: (Author/Based on BCN 2014: 2)

## Appendix 2: PNDH Word Count

The methodology for carrying out this word count was as follows: First, I opened the PNDH in adobe acrobat reader. Second, I press ctrl+f. Third, I click on “open full reader search”. Then I just type the words that I want to see and although it does not give me the number of matches, it lists all the matches and then I simply count them and get the totals.

Word/Phrase	Frequency
Policy/Policies	490
Development	487
Social	376
Family	366
Government	283
Education	<b>224</b>
Right (s)	192
Poverty	169
Women	167
Economic	163
Human	154
Culture/cultural	151
People	138
Work/labour	135
Community	134
Productive	133
Rural	127
Transformation	127
Urban	89
Solidarity/solidary	82
Central America	76
Values	67
Youth	65
Citizen power	63
Sovereignty	61
ALBA	54
Poor	53
Inequality	<b>52</b>

Gender	46
Crisis	45
Economic growth	42
Equality	38
Latin America	33
School (s)	32
Macroeconomic stability	29
Environment	28
Democracy	26
Justice	25
Socialist	23
Christian	22
Peace	20
Direct democracy	19
Afro-descendants	17
Discrimination	16
Ethnic	16
Structural	15
Indigenous peoples	14
Autonomy	13
Participatory	13
Subsidy	12
Transparency	12
Equitable	11
Social programs	11
Decentralization	10
Changes	9
Neoliberal	9
Teachers	9
Humanity	8
Exploitation	6

Sandinista	6
Capitalism/capitalist	6
Shared social responsibility	5
Dignity	4
Pedagogic	4
Race	4
Exclusion	3
Privatization	3
Disability/disabled	2
Ideology	2
Income level	2

People of the South	2
Redistribution	2
Structural adjustment	2
Critical	1
Egalitarian	1
Hegemonic	1
Power relations	1
Religion	1
Sexual preference	1
Social class	1
Social justice	1
Underdevelopment	1

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