

Mexican Education From Great Hopes To Human Chiaroscuro

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NEVER LIKE BACK WHEN

The year 2000. From July, the election results were clear: Vicente Fox had won, and since he did not belong to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the Mexican political transition seemed to have finally arrived at safe harbor.

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After many decades the previously dominant party had been “ousted” from Los Pinos. This opened up double room for hope: the renovation of the executive implied another way of handling public affairs, including education, and between July and December the transition team would build the basis for the new national education strategy on all levels.

It was an unprecedented moment: enough time for calm planning in the hands of a plural

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team of experts and educational policy-makers together with the optimism of a new millennium. No small thing.

In December, Dr. Reyes Tamez Guerra, the former rector of the Autonomous University of Nuevo León, was appointed minister of education. When the Educational Development Plan was presented in 2001, it was clear that a large part of the document written by the transition team had been included. There was, then, a clear horizon and even an excess of enthusiasm typical of this kind of change: people said there would be an “educational revolution.” That motto was soon forgotten. Nothing is founded based on nothing in any society, and the inertia of a system that deals with one-third of the population, from pre-school to graduate school, as well as its administrative complexity, beat back such an ambitious aim. The winds of change, however, continued to blow.

**THE OVERWHELMING
WEIGHT OF POLITICS**

Before beginning a balance sheet of education in the administration that is now drawing to a close, it is indispensable to recognize that one of the structural limits of the renovation of the national educational process has, for many years, been an amalgam, an intricate, confused junction, of the ministry’s enormous, amorphous bureau-

cracy and the leadership of the National Educational Workers Union (SNTE), the country’s largest union.¹ Formally, the ministry (SEP) is in charge, but in reality, it shares authority, sometimes to a surprising extent, with the SNTE. It is, without a doubt, a central actor in the sphere of education; sometimes it seems to be a black hole capable of stopping any proposed reform that affects not only, or not mainly, its members, but also the maze of its leadership’s interests both in keeping control over professors and their jobs, promotions and benefits, and in the area of local and federal politics. Few realized it at the beginning of the current administration, which comes to an end in December 2006: professor Elba Esther Gordillo, the undoubted leader of the SNTE both then and now, and at the beginning of the term, the coordinator of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) congressional caucus, was an important ally for President Fox’s proposed structural reforms.² So, in the educational sphere, despite intelligent plans for change, a political pact at the highest level narrowed the margins for feasible action even more.

If the confused marriage between educational officials and the union apparatus is not unraveled and dissolved, the profound educational reform that Mexico immediately requires is walking on a minefield.

For politics to be involved, very involved, in educational matters is not strange. What is discouraging is that in

the equation, what is always sacrificed is education, pushed back to second or third place, in favor of very short term political interests. That was how things were during the administration that is coming to a close.

TOWARD A BALANCE SHEET

The excesses of the first public statements, the resounding clash with the complexity of the sector, the aforementioned political constraints and a normal dose of inexperience on the part of the new authorities put things in their place. They had to walk a narrow path, not broad avenues. And in that walk, like in all other human endeavors, we can see *chiaroscuros*.

One thing that should be recognized as an advance is the information policy and the broadening out of institutions created to evaluate the system: the results of international evaluations Mexico had participated in and would continue to participate in were public knowledge, not a secret like before. The National Center for the Evaluation of Education (Ceneval), which deals with secondary and higher education, continued to operate, and in 2002, the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE) was founded as a decentralized body in charge of providing trustworthy, valid, public data about the country’s basic education.³ In contrast with other times, now the public can find out about the evaluation of the quality of national education without disregarding the impact of the sharp inequalities plaguing us have on it.⁴

With regard to constitutionally mandatory education, certain paradoxes lead us to the side of shadow: while the trend in other countries is to increase

obligatory education to the end of high school (12 years including primary education), Mexico is perhaps the only country that has decided to “grow downward.” This contradiction emerges from the legislature’s decision to make the three years of pre-school obligatory, so that universal education does last 12 years, but does not include finishing high school, a level experts consider necessary to be “literate” in the codes of our time, characterized, among other things, by impressive technological advances.

Was that necessary? It does not seem so. Was it attractive for creating jobs controlled by the SNTE? The answer seems to be yes.

Primary school coverage is reasonable, although not universal and of only adequate effectiveness. However, the number of students in junior high school is lower, since drop-out rates rise, getting much worse in high school. What is outstanding about government action in the three levels of schooling? In primary school, an experimental program, Enciclomedia, became the banner most brandished about by the president and the minister of education. In all fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms, this system of virtual communication has been established, providing access to textbooks and a link to a certain encyclopedia, with the idea that this will give spectacular impetus to the educational process. Beyond the fact that many classrooms had no electricity—not to mention the miserable condition of the floors, roofs, windows and bathrooms—this highly touted and publicized program operated under a false premise: technological innovation leads automatically to a change in educational practices. And it is false because a good teacher, well trained and well-

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paid, with social recognition, using his or her creativity, can create an excellent learning environment simply by using a blackboard, chalk and books. A badly trained teacher could have a NASA lab in his/her classroom and students’ learning would stay the same or drop.

Technology was turned into a fetish without noting that changes in teaching practices are the basis for technology eventually being made good use of. The program is attractive, above all in TV ads, but the evaluation of its results, if it exists, is not yet public knowledge.

At the junior high school level, the true bottleneck in mandatory basic education based as it is on the absurd memorization of information and not thinking, really needed to be reformed. And there was an attempt to do so: known as the Reform to Secondary Education (RES), it began to operate in August 2006, four months before the end of Vicente Fox’s term. Although it was made into an inclusive process, with the commitment of the heads of education on a state-by-state basis and a goodly number of teachers, launching the new programs and the way in which they are to be carried out have met with such elementary problems as presenting these reforms to teachers through courses lasting only a few hours a few days before classes were to start; the lack of materials; and, a generalized feeling, judging by press reports, that those who will have to carry it out

every day are unnecessarily rushed. It has also met with resistance from conservative groups who object to the content of certain sections of the textbooks dealing with sexuality.

We are faced, then, with one of the most important reforms of basic education but without the certainty that this is the actual reform the country needs. But, why put it forward at the end of the administration? Why does the minister of education announce that soon there will be Enciclomedia in all secondary school classrooms as though, once again, this instrument were the crucial point, and not teachers’ understanding, training and commitment?

With regard to the high school level (which, now that secondary or junior high school is obligatory, should simply be called middle school), things have not advanced. Perhaps it is appropriate to mention that, as part of a reorganization of the SEP, it now has a vice-ministry specifically in charge of this area. However, a formal change is not enough: the country has too many systems with neither regional nor national coordination. This impedes their linkage with junior high school education and, above all, nourishing the student with basic knowledge and skills for his/her incorporation into the productive world or continuing higher education. While an attempt was made at least to reform junior high schools, those knowledgeable in the subject say that we are in a wasteland at the high

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school (or middle school) level, and this is very grave.

WHAT ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION?

It is no minor matter that several higher education policies originated prior to the beginning of Fox's "administration of change." Actually, this segment of our educational system has operated based on many programs and strategies dating from the 1990s. Ensuring continuity in an area does not mean that there are no adjustments, but there is a sustained line of action, something infrequent in a country used to "jumps" every time a presidential term ends.

The budget has grown 17 percent in terms of pesos controlled for inflation, but less than expected—one percent of GDP—but enough to broaden out supply, particularly in institutions oriented to training top technicians. Three programs stand out in this context:

1) The Comprehensive Program of Institutional Strengthening (PIFI) once again takes up previously developed but insufficiently coordinated forms of support in order to provide extraordinary resources to public institutions based on specific planning processes. In the development of certain universities, besides the economic aid implicit in additional funds given that their regular budgets practically only cover payrolls and elementary operating costs, the

PIFI has introduced a modern logic. In others, unfortunately, changes have only been simulated in an attempt to adapt to "what the authorities want to see." In summary, this program has undoubtedly been a less discretionary way of assigning additional fiscal resources to improve quality.

2) The Promep. Another initiative, launched in 1996, is the Program for Improving Teaching Staff (Promep). Its aim is to increase the number of full-time academics—their ranks have swelled from 18,000 to 26,000 since 2000—and to provide resources so they can improve their educational level: previously, 8 percent of full time professors had doctorates; now the number has increased to 22 percent. These are not small achievements.

Nevertheless, there is a basic question about these two programs: Have more careful institutional planning, an increase in professors' educational level and improved working conditions for some academics effectively translated into a corresponding institutional strengthening, and, what is more important, into substantial improvement of students' learning? The figures, the indicators, are better, but we should evaluate whether the benefit corresponds to the investment. The question is a frank one, and we do not have independent studies with evidence to either support the claim of a profound change or the opposite: a superficial change attrib-

utable to money, stimuli and the recognition that authorities themselves offer to institutions that comply with their canons. Surely, there will be variations by region, institution and discipline, but it is urgent to evaluate these two programs so their continuity can be firmly anchored or they can change, not objectives, but perhaps another fundamental dimension: their methods.

3) Pronabes. The last program is the National Scholarship Program for Higher Education (Pronabes), a strategy conceived by the present administration. In contrast with other programs, it assigns resources to the users of educational services, in the form of scholarships, and not to service providers. According to independent analyses, this program has lowered the drop-out rate of young students who might abandon their studies for economic reasons, increasing their completion rate. An additional factor is that the scholarship, which could initially be conceived as merely based on economic need, little by little turns into a kind of academic distinction because students have to maintain a high grade-point average and be regular in their studies.

We need results that allow us to evaluate these actions and, logically, to see what the assets and liabilities are. Without abandoning the continuity of aims, a critical analysis could perhaps suggest a new generation of policies.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Efforts have been made, then, in higher education and lower levels.⁵ I have

underlined some of the most important ones, but, as much as possible, given the complexity of the matter, I have also pointed to the general political constraints typical of basic education, the illuminated aspects, the intentions and partial results on all levels, as well as the shadows, that uncertainty typical of all human action. I have also pointed to that certain dose of action under pressure or lack of attention to well-founded criticism.

The very complex political situation in 2006 will lead to new scenarios. Let us hope that they are positive and allow for the preparation of a serious agenda for education.⁶ The titles of two well-known songs speak to our situation: on the one hand, we can say that there is “dust in the wind,” quite a bit

of it, and not only on the issue of education, a fundamental part of our future. On the other hand, today, “the answer is blowing in the wind,” that is, things ahead are not very clear. We have to surge ahead without holding on to the mirage of omnipotence and without renouncing the indispensable reform. The road ahead is narrow, yes, but perhaps it is our only way forward. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Inside the official SNTE is the National Educational Workers Coordinating Committee (CNTE), traditionally considered the rallying point for the democratic wing of the teachers' union. [Editor's Note.]

² During part of this presidential term, she was also the general secretary of the PRI.

³ The Ceneval was founded during the administration of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) as a civic association which, among other things, gives standardized admission tests for high school and college, as well as final exams for certain advanced studies.

⁴ The gigantic social inequalities in Mexico have a very clear impact on educational processes and produces segments whose quality is impossible to compare. This difficulty is by no means trivial, and, if it is not dealt with, will continue to be a brake on the country, reducing the possibilities for children and young people to learn.

⁵ For example, programs have been created to better organize and strengthen graduate studies. There has been an attempt to regularize the growth and quality of private institutions destined to absorb the overflow from elite private schools and consolidated public schools, but much remains to be done in this field.

⁶ It is a concern for observers and scholars of education that the president-elect seems to be very close to the leader of the SNTE. Have our hands been tied once again?



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