

BOOKS

INEQUALITIES AND CHALLENGES IN MEXICO'S EDUCATION

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What developmental model has the Mexican educational system followed? Has the Mexican government fulfilled the educational directives proposed in the third article of the Constitution? Will the educational system satisfy the demands of growth and quality required for the next decade? These and other questions are addressed by Juan Prawda in his book *Achievements, inequalities, and challenges in the future of the Mexican educational system*.

With the professional experience gained in executive positions in the educational sector during three presidential administrations, along with the critical passion of a social planner seeking to correct present faults and anticipate future needs, Prawda achieves an analysis of the origins, development and expectations of the Mexican educational system. Aided by statistical tables and cartoons, he ironically observes a worrisome social reality—that the educational model followed by the country for one half of a century is wrung dry and is incapable of offering fresh solutions to old problems. From different perspectives, he examines historical errors, the poor distribution of resources, the backlog in scientific education, the bureaucratic and union complexities contributing to the

fossilization of the system, and he proposes immediate actions to avoid the disaster that is closing in.

Through a rapid historical account, Prawda reveals the operative necessities that gave way, during José Vasconcelos' time as head of the Ministry of Public Education, to a centralization propitiating disproportionate contrasts in educational attention. These contrasts were not just in the difference in the quality and quantity of education between the rural and urban zones, but also in the deficient disposition of resources which, by aiding the improvement of basic primary and secondary education, are used to sustain a costly higher education which does not efficiently fulfill its original purpose. Within this point of view the two-year-old discussion regarding *University of the Masses versus Academic Quality* (1987), helped create a university reform and student movement (CEU: University Student Council), even though these repercussions were ignored by the author. He does comment on other phenomena present in student movements of the last 20 years, such as the lessening importance of higher education as a factor in social mobility and the consequent disillusionment of the middle class whose hopes for upward rise are dashed.

On the basis of the statistics presented, a conclusion is given which contradicts the "good intentions" of the third article of the Constitution, by demonstrating that higher education in crisis-ridden Mexico becomes more elitist every day. Of every 100 children starting primary school in the country, only 55 will finish that level within the given six year lapse. Of these, 47 will continue to secondary school, but only 35 will complete the three-year period and of these, 28 will continue to high school, but only 14 will graduate. Only 13 will continue for a higher degree, and slightly more than 5 will finish their studies, with only three obtaining their diploma within a reasonable period of time. The educational sector, one which suffers greatly, has become obliged to face its commitments with less resources and means, with slender budgets barely covering increasing needs caused by demographic increase and

transformation in the country. The last data in this book regarding the 1987 federal budget show that only 3.6% of the Gross Internal Product was destined to education, a percentage which decreased relative to the 5.5% assigned to this sector in the 1981-1982 period, which is less than the 8% recommended by the UNESCO.

In other chapters in the book, the author deals with problems related to the organization and functioning of the Ministry of Public Education. He also mentions the parallel process of development of the National Education Worker's Union, which, nourished by a disproportionate sectorial increase, has created power ceilings at national and regional levels which inhibit putting urgent changes into effect, such as educational decentralization.

Unfortunately, the author does not state in writing the surprising tilt in power relations inside and outside the union, caused by the fall of the ex-leader Carlos Jongituid Barrios, nor the problems that the general secretary of the SNTE

union, Elba Esther Gordillo, has had with the union dissent represented by the National Coordination of Education Workers in their demands for union democracy and wage increases.

The final and overly ambitious propositions of Juan Prawda revolve around the decentralization of the education system, the ranking of national education priorities (paying more attention to basic student education, which trains them for production and for activities related to scientific development) the use of complementary financing sources for high school and higher education, and, above all, as an indispensable condition for the previous proposition, the strengthening of the democratic life of the country. □

Achievements, inequalities, and challenges in the future of the Mexican educational system by Juan Prawda. Colección Pedagógica Grijalbo, México. 1989.

