

The modernization of primary education in Mexico

The educational process in Mexico

To understand the vital need for educational reform in Mexico, it is first necessary to consider some of the general aspects of the nation's educational systems, past and present.

The educational process has represented a permanent and priority national concern since the creation of the Ministry of Education (SEP, *Secretaría de Educación Pública*) in 1921.

The strategy, during the first years of the SEP's existence, was to multiply the number of schools, attract a broad attendance over the first years of primary education, and coordinate the work of state and municipal authorities; in other words, to design a national public educational system.

According to official information, since 1921 noteworthy progress has been made in school coverage: the average educational level rose from one year per citizen to over six years of schooling; the illiteracy rate fell from 68 percent to 12.4 percent; one out of every three Mexicans attends school, and two out of three children

have access to pre-school education. At the primary level, demand for education is being fulfilled at a level of 90 percent, and four out of every five primary school graduates have access to a secondary education.

A complex network of educational techniques and facilities has been established at all levels. Over 14 million children are enrolled in the primary system, and over four million enrolled at the secondary level.

Under the present Federal Education Act, in a scant nineteen years, the school population rose from 13.7 million pupils to almost 26 million; the number of teachers increased from 419 thousand to a little over 1.1 million, and the number of school buildings more than doubled, from 61 thousand to more than 165 thousand.

Diverse points of view and differing opinions exist regarding the educational levels in force before the present educational reform program. Among the most significant of these is the analysis carried out by the advisor to the Minister of Public Education, Gilberto Guevara Niebla.

Guevara states that when the basis for the development of a modern educational system was established with the creation of the SNTE teachers' union in 1943, and the last constitutional amendments dealing with education (1945), the nation's educational system experienced unquestionable success, and that this success explains, in great measure, Mexico's progress in economic and social fields. It was not until later that the system went into a slow decline.

Mexican schools, continues Guevara, have lost their efficiency in instruction and socialization. According to the latest census figures, illiteracy remains at about 12 percent; but the percentage of the general population of Mexico which lacks the knowledge, skills and abilities needed for full integration into modern society is much, much higher than the percentage of illiteracy. From this point of view, he emphasizes, Mexico is still largely an illiterate nation and at a profound disadvantage in the competition with other nations.

He also reminds us that in the past, Mexico enjoyed a system in which the positions of school Directors and Inspectors were occupied by the most highly qualified pedagogues. This is no longer true. The SEP yielded to pressure from the SNTE union and made the posts of Director and Inspector into seniority-based positions; that is, posts which are no longer awarded on the basis of academic merit, but by simple advancement on a seniority scale.

In the opinion of Luz Arriaga Lemus, of the School of Economics at the UNAM, following the establishment of the global structural analysis model in the teaching of reading and writing at the primary level, accompanied by the abandonment of cursive writing instruction during the Echeverría Administration, the nation's teachers became aware of the inadequacy of

the educational system. These strategies, according to the reform document, focus on course contents and educational materials, as well as on teacher motivation and teacher training.

In addition, the document proposes increasing the number of actual instruction days. But more resources, more actual days of instruction, ideal curricula, better textbooks and highly-motivated teachers can all have minimal effects on educational quality and coverage, if they are not administered through a system which has overcome the obstacles and inefficiencies of centralization and excessive bureaucracy, which now plague the nation's educational system.

The reorganization of the educational system

With the aim of ridding the educational system of centralization and bureaucracy, from now on the state governments will be in charge of administering those educational establishments which the SEP had run, supplying pre-school, primary and secondary education in tune with local preferences, as well as providing for teacher training, including Normal School education, education of native peoples and special education.

The Federal government has transferred ownership of all school facilities and their administrative and technical elements, rights and obligations, real estate and equipment, as well as the corresponding budget allocations, to the state governments.

The Federal government will, at the same time, promote and plan the scope and sequence of the educational system at the national level; formulate educational programs and curricula for the entire Republic on the pre-school, primary, secondary and Normal School levels; authorize and approve educational material proposed for these levels; edit and update free textbooks for use at these levels;

ensure a fair development of education in all of the states, giving special attention to those regions which display significant educational deficits; promote educational services which contribute to the training and on-going advancement of teaching staff; and promote and support educational research leading to educational innovation.

In compliance with Article 130 of the Federal Education Act, the SEP will continue to be in charge of the primary, secondary and teacher-training facilities located in Mexico City.

The state governments will have the responsibility of presenting to the SEP, curriculum proposals for courses with a regional content, and their proper insertion in the overall program. The regional course contents should ensure that pupils acquire a greater knowledge of the history, geography, ecological diversity, customs and traditions of their state.

Reformulation of course contents and materials

The course contents and curricula for primary and secondary education have been in effect for almost twenty years and, during this time, they have been subject to only sporadic and partial reforms; thus, they show certain deficiencies, as pointed out by teachers, parents, members of the scientific community, the SEP, as well as by studies and proposals submitted by the SNTE.

There is a broad consensus to the effect that it would be advisable to concentrate the focus of primary and secondary education on skills deemed to be truly essential—reading, writing and mathematics—which, once they are mastered in a basic but complete manner, equip the pupil to continue learning throughout his entire life and are also those elements which offer mankind a basis for rational thought.

On a second level of importance, every child should acquire a

sufficient knowledge of the natural and social dimensions of the world in which he or she is to live, and of themselves. In this area, the study of health, nutrition, environmental protection and the study of the world of work are important.

It is necessary, moreover, that the pupil begin to learn about the ethical principles and aptitudes which will prepare him or her to participate constructively and creatively in modern society. This presupposes a knowledge of the characteristics of one's society and nation, the range of individual rights and responsibilities, and basic information about the nation's institutions and its political structure.

Education on the primary and secondary level should also strive to attain a cultural level consistent with our civilization, our history, and the national character as founded on the values of honor, respect, confidence and solidarity, all of which are indispensable for achieving peaceful coexistence, democracy and productivity.

These criteria will guide the thorough reform of course contents and educational materials which will result in the complete renovation of curricula and textbooks by the 1993-1994 academic year. The application of this reform program will culminate in 1993.

The application of the program includes training programs in the different states, the distribution of support materials to the children, teachers, directors and parents, and the implantation of follow-up and evaluation mechanisms in the areas of teacher performance and educational performance in the pre-schools.

In the primary grades an Emerging Program of Reformulation of Educational Content and Materials will be implemented, with the following goals:

1. To strengthen, in the first six grades, the instruction and

practice of reading, writing, and oral expression.

2. To reinforce the teaching of mathematics, with emphasis on the development of reasoning and precise calculation skills, as well as deepening knowledge about geometry and focusing on the ability to state problems clearly and solve them.
3. In place of the present area study of social sciences, systematic instruction in the separate subjects of history, geography and civics will be implemented.
4. Special emphasis will be placed on instruction in those subjects which involve the pupils's health and personal care, as well as educating the pupil to protect the environment and natural resources.

As regards secondary education, and in response to a broad consensus expressed by teachers, specialists and parents, starting this school year and beginning with the seventh grade (first year of secondary schooling), teaching separate subjects was reinstated in all of the nation's schools, replacing the area-based plan implemented almost two decades ago.

The teaching of Spanish and mathematics was reinforced through the expansion of both of these subjects to a full five hours per week of classes, instead of the three hours weekly which had been previously allotted them; the systematic study of history was re-instituted, now including world and Mexican history, geography and civics.

Re-evaluation of the teacher's role

The protagonist of the educational transformation of Mexico must be the teacher. One of the main objectives of the educational transformation plan is the re-evaluation of the teacher's role, in the following aspects:

Teacher-training. In each of the Republic's states, a state teacher-training system will be established,

which can organize efforts and experiences at the levels of initial training, in-service training, instructional improvement, advanced studies and research. In the case of initial teacher-training, an educational model will be designed on the basis of a common core area with electives oriented towards instructional practice at the pre-school, primary and secondary levels. There will also be curriculum reform to remedy the enormous overlap and disparity found in the present curriculum, and teachers will now be trained in achieving complete mastery of the basic course contents. The nation's Normal School system will be reformed, including the simplification of prerequisites and a reduction in the number of years of study in the Normal Schools.

In-service teacher-training and advanced studies. The establishment of an Emerging Plan for Teacher-Training has been agreed upon with the goal of strengthening, in the short term, the teachers' mastery of subject areas and thus improving their classroom performance. It will combine extension courses, workshops, collective study sessions and the exchange of opinions and points of view, as well as individual work by the teachers.

Professional salaries. Teachers' salaries have been subject to significant increases, though they remain insufficient to reward and motivate teachers properly. Therefore, the Federal government and the state governments have agreed to continue the effort to raise teacher salaries. On May 15, —Mexico's "Teachers' Day"—1992, the Federal government negotiated an additional raise with the SNTE Union. This increase brought salaries up to three or four times Mexico's daily minimum wage, a figure considered by the union to be within the range of a professional salary.

Housing. With the aim of complementing teachers' salaries with additional benefits which would signify a big improvement in their standard of living, a special teachers' housing program has been established, whereby institutional housing-construction mechanisms will be brought into play.

University pedagogical training. The creation of university teaching degree programs will respond to two instructional needs: to stimulate an increase in the quality of education, and to implement a clearly-defined means of professional, material and social advancement for teachers. A horizontal promotion system has been agreed upon for teaching staff at the primary level. The aim of this plan is to ensure that teachers may achieve higher salaries while holding the same position, according to their level of education.

A new social status for teachers. A quality educational system can only be consolidated on the basis of a new institutional structure which honors the teaching profession. Reciprocally, higher quality education brings more honor to the teachers' vocation. Therefore, the Federal and state governments have agreed to promote special recognition of the work of Mexican teachers, including prizes, honors, awards and distinctions, as well as economic incentives.

Compulsory secondary education

In addition to, and to reinforce the ANMEB reform program, during its official presentation President Carlos Salinas proposed compulsory secondary education, while emphasizing that the free and non-religious character of public education, established in Article 3 of Mexico's Constitution, would not be compromised **M**

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