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Reflections on Education In Mexico, 2021

What has happened in education after more than a year of pandemic in our country has undoubtedly sharpened pre-existing problems and put new challenges on the table.

In many spaces of analysis, we have seen and heard underlined the enormous existing social gaps —already alarming in the past— that have grown, with repercussions that are not even possible to clearly discern. In the short and medium terms, these will become more evident with drop-out rates in all educational levels, most notably at the pre-school and primary stages.

Without trying to minimize this basic framework, what we must deal with right now is to situate ourselves in the concrete and more specific: the teacher and his/her didactic efforts for making sure students learn. With

the prospect of the approaching return to schoolrooms, we must not ignore or vainly pretend that it is possible to ignore the different forms of work that have developed during the emergency. On the contrary, this is the time to reflect, analyze, and make decisions.

I want to present an encouraging vision based on certain circumstances that have changed or been created in the sphere of education.

Many teachers were forced to change their educational practices on all levels, particularly in the in-person or semi-in-person levels. Distance learning often already had an instructional design to guide the educational process.

The main changes involve planning, didactic methodology, the use of resources, evaluations, interaction among peers, teaching work, and links between school and community.

Teaching must be planned. We all know that bureaucratic and administrative pressure means that this basic part of the teaching process, particularly in face-to-face

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mode, is seldom carried out in the way the program intends and is far from being done with the care required. This can lead to improvisation and getting off the track on a day-to-day basis. In the pandemic, teachers have been forced to send their students the activities to be carried out and the topics to be reviewed over a period of time; they have selected in advance the readings, maps, tables, and graphs and have designed their activities in accordance with the context, thinking about what the students can do from home. They have been forced to select the most important concepts, what simply cannot be left out in order to achieve the stated objectives, and have sought out the means to communicate and be able to involve their students in their education, using everything from a family member's cell phone to access social media, email, WhatsApp, to Internet platforms that may be very complete and even sophisticated.

In many cases, didactic planning has once again taken its authentic place for the teacher: flexible, creative, and adapted to the context.

Didactic methodology, that is, the form of carrying out the teaching/learning process, is certainly the aspect that has changed the most. In face-to-face teaching routine, traditional practices center on the teacher's action, even though all curricular documents state time and again that the core focus must be on the student and his/her learning. Given distancing, activities could no longer center on teachers and their words; they have diversified and been reformulated, often using technological and virtual resources that change the sequences, times, and participants. It is true that most of the time, they have been designed for individual work; but it is also true that teachers have looked for collaborative ways of working. In a recent educational experience, a teacher commented that every week, she would put up sheets of paper on the school door indicating the teamwork that her students should do, coordinating among themselves using cell phones with the help of family members to carry it out.

In the first phases of the virtual teaching experience, to feel confident, teachers tried to replicate what was most familiar to them, but many others began looking for resources on line. They wanted to carry out activities with technological support and found that there were some very simple, easily accessible resources, which led them to begin to change their practices and diversify their methodology.

The resources have been extremely varied. Using what has become known as "the three 'Rs'" has been fostered: re-using, recycling, and reducing. They have used materials found around the house as resources: any notebook, newspaper, and magazine; tin cans; yarn; fabric remnants, etc. They couldn't ask students to go to out to stationary stores or malls, which were mostly closed or had restricted working hours. Once again, the enormous storehouse of the Internet was used, as well as platforms and sites offering free access to material like books, talks, videos, films, artistic materials, teachers' courses, educational discussions, and book fairs.

Evaluations have once again been put on the agenda as an important point. This topic is always tough to deal with because of its complexity. It has had to expand to go beyond mere grading and certification, to look again at the day-to-day, what can be done, the evidence that can be taken into account that is often the product of learning not only by the student but also incorporating family cooperation. Therefore, the validity of a specific exam-type exercise has been brought into question; the suggestions have been to apply continual evaluation through process observation, self-evaluation, and co-evaluation.¹

Often unconsciously or indirectly, metacognition is being promoted as an essential part of the distance evaluation process.² It fosters the students themselves being the ones to reflexively assess and review their own work, their cognitive strengths and weaknesses, the abilities they're developing, and the skills that are being neglected. It is by no means easy to do this kind of accompaniment; however, given the multiple obstacles involved in virtual learning, teachers have had to gradually formulate questions about how the children perceive their own learning, what they have understood, and what remains to be reviewed: in short, a metacognitive process.

For almost a decade, pedagogues have attempted—without much success—to get teachers to not work in isolation. The idea has been for them to organize with their peers so that, through collegiate exchange, they could achieve more enriched, accompanied work. In our country at least, the meetings held before COVID-19 on the primary level, were mostly dedicated to reviewing administrative issues and deadlines, not academic or methodological exchange that can contribute so much to planning; however, some steps were beginning to be made. That is why we can think that this is perhaps one of the

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spheres most affected by the pandemic: the spaces for academic exchange were lost, which are so necessary for consolidating different interdisciplinary proposals, different visions of a same topic or project, or simply for having the opportunity to be listened to by another colleague facing similar problems with their classes and the students' learning. Remote work forced teachers to return to isolated, individual work.

Not only have teachers been affected by this lack of socialization, but also the students have shown on all levels the need for contact, the exchange of seeing and feeling each other. They have missed their playgrounds, the physical schoolroom filled with stories, comments, laughter, and sometimes also tears. They want to be able to talk about things that could at first seem superficial, but are the essence of learning with others about life, and without any doubt are significant and beloved. They want to go back to school, to the university, to be able to share, to simply be there and be part of the other with the others.

Different mental health experts have pointed out the social and emotional impact that this episode of isolation, fear, insecurity, mourning, and pain will have. School cannot avoid being part of that, and educators will have to take up this point as an essential part of their work.

Everything seems to point to the fact that students will soon have access to educational facilities. What is missing now is to determine how that can happen without running health and contagion risks that lead us back to an emergency. To do that, we already have protocols designed with the basic measures: desks at the appropriate distance, cleaning materials, obligatory use of facemasks, and countless other measures that are being detailed more every day. However, each institution will have to define in pedagogical—and above all didactic—terms how they return so they can ensure that students learn. This is where we must be very careful. After the experience we have gone through, we must give ourselves time to think, to evaluate (in the best sense of the term), to

assess what has been achieved and what should be reformulated and taken up out of all the synchronized and out-of-sync practices that we have experimented with.

It is neither possible nor desirable to try to go back to teaching as though the clock had stopped for more than a year, or to try to just add in all the experiences without prior analysis of the effect they have had, or use exactly the same process of virtual teaching in a classroom situation.

If we go back to the principle that it is the student who should be at the center of education, then we will have to begin by reviewing all those who have been left on the sidelines, those who have become more vulnerable because of family circumstances and the changes around them. And we will have to put forward scenarios that can make inclusive integration possible to achieve the socialization we so ardently seek and look for strategies for participation and reincorporation.

Surely, with a return to the classroom, diagnostics will be established in accordance with the study plans to be able to identify existing formal cognitive shortfalls. However, we must take into account that those curricula were not designed or adjusted for remote learning. We should also question them; we should re-signify them and open them up so they can include everything that has been learned, the skills built that have made it possible to achieve a fundamental premise of education, problem-solving ability, which brings with it another basic principle: self-organization.

The challenge is unprecedented. We will have both students in the classroom and others who continue to do distance learning because they or a family member are part of an at-risk population. The invitation is to combine and alternate systems of in-person classroom activities and online learning. Through didactic planning done with complete awareness and in accordance with individual and group needs, this will have to integrate cognitive and emotional aspects, as well as procedures to reestablish and strengthen social, emotional, and learning links. ■■■

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1 Co-evaluation is understood as the feedback the students provide for each other.

2 John Flavell coined the term “metacognition,” which refers to becoming aware of one’s own knowledge process.