

Mexican Education: A Mere Simulation



Like many countries trying to wedge their way into economic prosperity Mexico has affirmed an emphasis on education but in practice has negated its importance. Recently passed constitutional reforms relegate educators to temporary employment controlled by the federal government and private investors who have little or no interest in universal coverage or academic excellence. A huge portion of federal money designed for education goes to administrative personnel and is not subject to audit.

Demands for improved education have fallen into a void because economic philosophy based on supply and demand not does recognized non-consumer (i.e. non-marketable) demands. The purpose of the supply side is to provide, thereby achieving financial gain. When the demand is educating the nation's children the government, being a third party not a producer, shifts the responsibility to the private sector. To profit financially private sector suppliers need to be recompensed for providing education, making education a product that those on the demand side must pay for. As with automobiles, computers and beer those who can't afford the supply sides' prices must do without the product, i.e. receive no education.

Like most world governments Mexico is constitutionally committed to providing schools and teachers to its populace—an archaic concept that does not fit twenty-first century economics. Money spent on education becomes an unrecoverable expenditure. To mitigate the amount of loss Mexico's federal government year after year has cut its budget for public education. The 2013 constitutional reforms centralized control of teacher salaries, placements, firings and promotions, opened the way for hiring non-trained teachers from the private sector to replace unionized teachers and imposed

mandatory teacher evaluations. Under these new definitions no longer are teachers considered professionals but become salaried (and sometimes paid-by-piecework) government employees.

Supply and demand economics rewards the most proficient suppliers: In Mexico, as in the United States and Europe, one's "worth" is defined by his or her financial status, a top-to-bottom scale that puts CEOs, sports stars, entertainment celebrities in the highest brackets and immigrant workers, pensioners and ambulatory vendors in the lowest. Economic status and social status are not visibly different one from the other: The clothes one wears, the car one drives, the neighborhood one lives in define one's place in society.

The beginning salary for teachers in Mexico's rural and central city areas is approximately \$8,000 pesos a month (\$600 U.S.) depending on the location of the schools. The beginning salary for policemen is \$5,000 (\$375 U.S.), again depending upon location. State and federal Congressmen garner \$150,000 a month (\$12,500 U.S.) plus benefits that exceeded 1 million pesos for federal Congressmen in 2014, jumping them into higher economic and social brackets.

Fifteen-year-old and sixteen-year-old school dropouts recruited by highly organized business conglomerates called "drug cartels" receive \$800 U.S. cash every month without deductions, an amount twice that of police and more than that of teachers. As they become proficient in their profession the cartel recruits climb economically and socially. The most proficient become immensely wealthy and hobnob with politicians and entrepreneurs. By contrast the most proficient teachers seek alternate ways to earn money when they retire.

By reducing the overall amount paid to educators the 2013 reforms enabled administrators to replace top-level employees—in this case experienced teachers—with lesser-paid new hires. The reforms also authorized the shifting of functions like providing meals, school maintenance and improvements, transportation and school supplies to the private (i.e. supply side) sector. This not only redefined the importance socially and economically of the teachers but of the schools as well.

In 2014 over 18,000 of Mexico's schools lacked electricity, 20,000 did not have bathrooms and over 82,000 had no drainage. Six million of Mexico's 26 million who attend schools do so in structures designed for other purposes than schools including

old buses, derailed train cars and circus tents. Many of the bathrooms in schools that have them no longer function. Other schools lack roofs and walls, have neither textbooks nor libraries, do not offer breakfast or lunch programs and have no playgrounds or athletic facilities. Many urban and rural schools are located in unguarded neighborhoods where merely walking to school imperils one's life.

By contrast schools in wealthy suburban districts equip gymnasiums and science laboratories, offer scholarships, organize field trips and attract distinguished educators. A UNESCO study reported that children from the wealthiest 25 percent of the population tested 25-30 percent higher than those from the lowest 25 percent and the dropout rates were highest in impoverished southern states where 17-22 year-olds averaged a mere 5.5-6.5 years of schooling. During the first decade of the twenty-first century illiteracy in Mexico increased by one percentage point. Mexico Primero, a citizens' initiative, concluded in 2013 that "59 percent of Mexico's schools are a simulation," not really educative institutions but poorly equipped way stations for children who otherwise would be idle or part of Latin America's poorest paid workforce.

Part of the simulation is the multi-billion peso textbook industry channeled through the federal bureaucracy and the governing party-controlled central teachers union, a depository for monies authorized for education but for which there is little or no accounting. With each new federal administration new textbooks are written and distributed, textbooks that reflect the political whims of those in power. Grammar lessons incorporate patriotic slogans, biology texts replace scientific investigation with Catholic Church doctrines, history text revisions redefine the Spanish conquest, the submission to the United States and the bloody 1910-1926 revolutions.

"What difference does it make? We wind up on the streets anyway," a third-year university student dropout named Jorge de Jesús asked me. Despite having what he described as "some—a majority—of very dedicated teachers" his education proved meaningless. If one can't use one's education to get a job, earn a living, it loses value, becomes worthless. Although Jorge de Jesús is working as a chemical products assembler he doesn't earn enough to rent a place of his own, to get married or replace the motor scooter that he wrecked.

"I'm too cowardly to hook up with drug dealers," he scoffs. "And too honest to be a politician."

Even before passage of the reforms the dropout rate in Mexico's schools was horrendous. The Secretary of Public Education reported in 2014 that over a million students abandoned their studies during the previous school year, an average of over 5,000 a day. Many of junior and senior highschool age left to work or seek work, the majority in the so-called "informal" sector, i.e. as non-salaried day workers, laborers, ambulatory vendors, etc. Many others slid into the already swollen ranks of the "*ninīs*"—those who *ni trabajan, ni estudian* (neither working nor studying).

According to the OECD (the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) Mexico has the highest rate of 15-29-year-olds who neither study nor are employed in Latin America and third highest (behind Turkey and Israel) in the world. Their numbers increased dramatically as the United States government strangled the "safety valve"—undocumented employment north of the border, which had provided income opportunities for previous generations. The lack of meaningful employment has nurtured recruitment by criminal groups, contributing to increasing discontent with social values and morality.

Despite the "simulation" teachers ranked higher on "in whom do you have the most confidence" polls than any other profession, including doctors, lawyers and judges. (Legislators ranked lowest, police second lowest.) But the overall effectiveness of the education these teachers provide falls short of that achieved in other developing nations. Those who should be most involved in education—parents, teachers, and students—have been shoved to the sidelines by political and financial manipulations.

Mexico's system of financing education begins with the federal government but is managed by individual state bureaucracies and is rife with loopholes. The money is funneled through the Secretary of Education to the various states, each of which has a centralized department of education. Theoretically distribution of funds is regulated and subject to audit, but state audits often are cursory if not actually criminal. Education funds wind up in officeholders' campaign chests, enrich education department officials and flocks of *aviadores* ("aviators," persons who collect salaries for no-show positions within the bureaucracy) and reward districts within the state that elected municipal presidents from the same political party as the state governor while excluding those that elected opposition party presidents.

State heads of education are political appointees whose

backgrounds and experience may or may not have anything to do with education. Although the cabinet level Secretary of Education and the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE) were intended to have separate responsibilities and functions, the Secretary of Education representing the government and SNTE the teachers, the federal government co-opted the union (as it did with other major unions) to create what National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) investigators describe as "a two-headed monster with a gargantuan appetite" able to digest without accounting for millions of pesos in educational funding.

"As far as SNTE is concerned education should be obedient, disciplined, and organized to serve those in power. Plans, programs, courses aren't important, what is important is that there's peace, that the teachers don't criticize, don't think, don't organize," Pedro Echeverría V. insists in his blog. A United Nations evaluator connected Mexico's dropout rate among primary and junior high school students with teachers' inadequate levels of ability and training, which he described as "primitive, irregular and inconsistent."

The dropout among qualified teachers also is very high, especially among those with less than five years experience. "Salaries are so low that many grab the first non-teaching opportunity that comes up," a Oaxaca private school teacher explained. Public school teachers pay union dues; those in rural areas often commute miles between their homes and the schools in which they teach; urban and rural schools in low income areas lack even basic supplies—notebooks, workbooks, calculators—that teachers have to provide. Even married teachers whose spouses work take on second jobs in order to make ends meet.

Although teachers and members of the communities in which they work often have very close ties, hiring, the individual state sections of the national union control transfers and placements. Accusations of corruption are widespread, not only the political diversion of education monies by state and local functionaries but in the selling of *plazas* (teacher placements in individual schools) by the state unions. Until the passage of the 2013 constitutional reforms, teachers through their unions had permanent contracts but unions had to renegotiate the funding of these contracts with the state government every year, a more or less automatic process in the majority of states whose teachers were represented by the SNTE.

But in 1979 a number of state sections of SNTE, primarily from Mexico's poverty-encrusted southern states, which have

large *indígena* populations, created the National Coordinating Committee of Educational Workers (CNTE), a caucus within el SNTE. Unlike el SNTE, la CNTE adopted—at least in theory—a more horizontal structuring based on assembly approval of statutes and elected leaders. Over the years la CNTE won control of some SNTE local unions.

CNTE—correctly in the opinion of many educators—viewed the so-called educational reforms as a continuation of the federal government's repression of independent labor unions. Led by Oaxaca's Section 22, la CNTE teachers took over Mexico City's Plaza de la Revolución in a massive demonstration that paralyzed much of the city's central business district and triggered confrontations with teargas firing police units. The "great losers in the conflict," Antonio Limón-López insists, were Mexico's President Peña Nieto who miscalculated the extent of CNTE's protests and the government-controlled SNTE "incapable of fighting for the legitimate interests of its members."

Not that CNTE's methods of protesting were popular. Blockading highways, taking over toll booths and disrupting commercial businesses created traffic jams, obstructed commerce and angered parents. In the words of a Mexico City middle-range bureaucrat they made "a manure pit" out of the Plaza de la Revolución and other places that they occupied. The CNTE protests also upset Peña Nieto's government's plan to trailer the educational changes through the House of Deputies and Senate behind more controversial measures, particularly those involving taxes and the television and telephone monopolies.

Media reportage, often sensationalized, publicized CNTE's challenges and mass demonstrations. Front page photos and primetime television videos flashed angry faces, Robocop-dressed police and tent city encampments. Protests aroused previously servile union sections to challenge state legislatures' approval of the other proposed reforms. They also aroused the indignation of commuters, working parents and property and business owners. A no-win situation resulted: Teachers were maligned for their protests and not being in their classrooms and the government was accused of being disorganized and weak.

The conflicts further revealed the debilities of SNTE, which wound up being a passive observer of the conflicts. A powerful mover and shaker of money and politics under its general secretary Esther Elba Gordillo, el SNTE sank in national importance after new elected President Peña Nieto's government arrested her for money laundering, organized crime and

diverting union funds for her own extravagances. According to many analysts Gordillo's real crime had to do with party loyalty since Gordillo bolted the PRI to support opposition party president Felipe Calderón in 2006. In her absence SNTE shrank into obscurity, a mere chattel of the federal government.

Changes to Mexico's constitution require approval by the legislatures of at least two-thirds of the thirty-one states. Since the congresses of most states are controlled by the PRI and obedient to PRI (i.e. federal government) dictates the constitutional changes gained approval but the CNTE unions in the south filed legal actions against them and tried to force their own state governments to approve alternative changes more concerned with educating and less with labor issues.

Not only did CNTE's rebellion upset the federal government's planned program of constitutional reforms it encouraged other groups and organizations to use similar tactics to protest changes that would give the federal government greater control of the media and to privatize many functions of the state-controlled oil monopoly. Peña Nieto's popularity, already damaged by assertions of fraud committed by PRI operatives, nosedived as public opposition to the privatizations, media control and increased taxation forced delays, financial expenditures and court actions. They also revived memories of student strikes in 1968 and 1999 that culminated in brutal government repression of students, teachers and bystanders.

Many political analysts credit the 1968 takeover of UNAM and the Tlalcoloco massacre during which hundreds of demonstrators were killed, wounded and arrested with exposing Mexico's authoritarian political system and forcing the government to adopt more liberalized national policies. But the power the student strikers generated and the public support they gained triggered a negative reaction to higher education and to education in general within the PRI.

No longer did the government appoint distinguished literary and scientific personalities to ambassadorships and cabinet posts. Funding for all except scientific and technical education decreased. Pressured to reduce emphasis on the humanities, state and national universities did so. In the eyes of the PRI—and of the PAN governments from 2000-2012—higher education was geared towards producing technicians, not intellectuals. The federal government shunted aside university-generated analyses of and plans for dealing with criminality, ecology and the economy and paved the way for increased private elitist school and university

attendance.

Throughout three centuries of Spanish domination and the first century of independence Mexico lacked a national system of public education. In 1900 literacy barely exceeded 9 percent of the population; the Catholic Church funded the majority of schools that existed, although in the major cities some government-established primary, secondary and high schools existed. Families that could afford to do so sent their sons to be educated in Europe, primarily in Spain but also in France, Germany and other countries. The creation of a public education system in the 1920s sparked a drive towards greater literacy although the majority of students left school before completing six years of study. As late as 1946 only one out of ten public school teachers were university graduates.

Greater focus on education during the next two decades, notably under President Adolfo López Mateos, triggered school construction and the creation of normal schools. Earlier in his bureaucratic career López Mateos had sponsored free distribution of educational books and pamphlets, many of which were translations of Russian didactic texts. As president he inaugurated the distribution of free textbooks to the country's primary and secondary schools.

By 1962, according to Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM)-Xochimilco professor Carlos Ornelas, Mexico's education system surpassed those of Brazil, Taiwan and Korea, three countries that like Mexico had begun intensive programs of basic education. Thirty years later Mexico trailed all three countries, not only in education and levels of scholarship but also in health, percentages of poverty and the distribution of wealth. While those countries were prospering Mexico was sliding backwards towards the nineteenth century.

Reducing primary, secondary and high school educators to poorly paid state worker status with few benefits and little government support is a primary reason for the bottoming out of Mexico's educational system. In Finland, the nation that scores highest on OCDE education evaluations, teachers are considered to fulfill one of the most important positions in society.

Aspiring teachers in Finland spent three years as teacher assistants before finishing their university educations and have to have a master's degree in order to qualify for a teaching position. School attendance through the age sixteen is free and obligatory and rural and urban schools have the same standards, curriculum and infrastructure. Granted,

Finland is smaller than Mexico and has a more homogeneous population; nevertheless, that a system based on highly educated, well-paid teachers produces well-educated, accomplished citizens is evident.

But educated, accomplished citizens who are not subservient, who probe, ask questions, demand accountability are not the type of citizens that an authoritative government can manipulate. They resist being a product like potatoes, beer and automobiles to be marketed so that speculators can profit financially. Products that fail to conform to the system are worthless to the system and have to be discarded—or eliminated—so that the system continues to move smoothly. Teachers should be packagers that turn out all-alike replicas who vote the way they should, acquire what they need to know from television and view conformity as a virtue. Packagers that try to do something different—including improve the quality of the product—bollix the brand name conformity.

As a football coach once told me: “Don’t think, you’re hurting the team!”

*Robert Joe Stout is a freelance journalist, novelist and poet in Oaxaca, Mexico. His latest work has appeared in *Garbanzo*, *America*, *Fox Cry Review* and *Weber Studies* among many other magazines and journals.