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Educational Goals: Manna or tortillas?

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As education throughout the world has moved from vocational training for a specific trade or elite culture for the privileged few in a society, to compulsory education encompassing the masses, curricular goals have entered into conflict. Mexico’s educational goals are no exception. Whether to educate broadly in the liberal arts tradition or train future employees for a particular workplace is a difficult question to resolve. In an effort at compromise, curricula is designed with the idea of encompassing both: preparing students for the workplace as well as broadening their culture. Nevertheless, the boundaries must be clear. The purposes of vocational education and the liberal arts are so different that each focus must be recognized for what it can contribute and what it cannot.

In modern times there are opposing views about the practice of education. There is no general agreement about what the young should learn either in relation to virtue or in relation to the best life; nor is it clear whether their education ought to be directed more towards the intellect than towards the character of the soul. And it is not certain whether training should be directed at things useful in life, or at those conducive to virtue, or at non-essentials. And there is no agreement as to what in fact does tend towards virtue. Men do not all prize most highly the same virtue, so naturally they differ also about the proper training for it.

Aristotle

History reminds us that we keep committing the same mistakes—injustices, brutalities, and wars, which make us wonder if we dare call the linear march in time “progress.” However, history can also show how cultural values have improved, how the status quo was so different that we begin to feel morally and intellectually superior—that is until we realize that a hundred years from now the society of our great-grandchildren will also shake their heads at our lack of insight and sensitivity. Indeed, the history of education shows how we have struggled in and out of the light, in a sometimes desperate search for what is right.
This paper examines educational goals in Mexico in contrast with the rest of the world in general. First, a brief historical perspective traces the process of increasing the access of education from a privileged few until universally compulsory State education became the desired, if not the fulfilled, objective. Then it analyzes the challenges of establishing an educational mission or missions to satisfy the diverse population requirements in a globalized economy.

During the eighteenth century, Mexican education was a type of "enlightened despotism." The ideals of the Enlightenment such as progress, culture and better citizens through education were sought, but not without maintaining loyalty to Spain (justified by divine right, of course). Such royal ties obviously tightened the link between politics and education, making the Crown the only possible agent of change or modernization at that time (Weinberg, 1984, p. 78). Matters were made worse because none of the European monarchies could fathom the social reality and needs of their colonies across the ocean, especially those relating to education. Indeed, most attempts to better education if not frustrated by Spain were frustrated locally. When some Mexican convents extended free education to all races, regardless of legitimacy of birth, they were opposed locally by the teachers' guilds because of unfair competition against those who would charge for schooling (p.83). Thus, free primary education to the masses was hampered, and preparatory education still required proof of pure European lineage from prospective students. The whole atmosphere, in spite of the name of the period, was one of educational darkness, especially for the universities, which were constrained by tradition and lack of curricular relevance for the changing society. Enlightened ideas had to radiate through newspapers, scientific expeditions and discoveries instead of from educational institutions.

However, Mexico was not alone in such educational deficiencies. Before the nineteenth century, throughout most of the world, it was normal for only the elite male to be educated. Servants and women (theoretically we can place them in different social categories, even if their functions were quite similar) were not even considered. Besides limited access, the function and content of education were also elitist, inculcating the values of the hegemony. Tradition prevailed, and what
had been transmitted in previous generations continued to be transmitted after World War II.

Furthermore, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there were significant differences in educational expectations for social classes and for urban and rural areas. Children from upper classes (primarily male) could eventually hope to pass to the university, but children from lower classes could only expect to join the labor market. For rural areas in some countries, it was even worse: children often had to work after only a few years of schooling. Thus, in developing countries, illiteracy was the norm rather than the exception (UNESCO). Then, after World War II, there were radical transformations in societies throughout the world. According to UNESCO, these changes, which affected science and technology, economy and politics, demography and social structures...also greatly influenced the evolution of education systems which have, themselves, developed much faster...but not fast enough to keep in pace.

As education and economic systems strained to adjust to the twentieth century, the instability eventually caused what was called in the 1960's, "the world crisis in education." According to UNESCO's analysis, in order for economies to prosper and compete in a politically stable world, what is needed is an emphasis on science and technology:

The traditional hierarchy of disciplines has been turned upside down, the branches of science and technology superseding those of the classics. Science and technology are considered the keys to growth and competitiveness; their enhancement at the different levels of education systems has rapidly become a major issue for all countries...

International commissions in this organization were established to try to help countries cope with this phenomenon, and the conclusion was "that education in our societies, must be global and must be lifelong." Transmission of content destined to be quickly outmoded cannot be relevant, and the burden for educating society cannot rest solely on the school. Martin Carnoy (1997), in "The Great Work
Dilemma: Education, Employment and Wages in the New Global Economy,” agrees that flexibility is the key to tomorrow’s education. Globalization will pressure in such a way that specific skills are no longer valid for schools to teach, and indeed, it should be businesses in a carefully regulated economy that take on the responsibility of educating future workers. In the same way, the Faure Commission in UNESCO questioned leaving the burden on educational institutions per se, insisting that, “all institutions, whatever their field of competence (economic, social, cultural or informational) can be used for educational purposes and thereby help to build a self-aware learning society.” So what to teach must be revised, as well as when and where, though few countries are modifying these elements:

The organization of education and basic training must...lose its encyclopaedic character. However, even if it is commonly acknowledged that the school is not the only place to acquire knowledge and that the school years are not the only time to learn, few countries have taken this fresh approach to education.

According to Jacques Delors, in the introduction to the “Report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century,” if countries met this challenge, the extended benefits would be great:

This could be a way of avoiding the invidious choice between selection by ability, which increases the number of academic failures, and the risks of exclusion, and the same education for all which can inhibit talent.

Thus, education has progressed from being a privilege to becoming a right and obligation of the state and society for all. Understandably, once education became obligatory and universal it became almost impossible to determine a goal appropriate for everyone. Aristotle’s comment, then, as to what should be taught is just as relevant today. In the information age, there are two prevailing extremes. Some favor absolute pragmatism, vocational education, technical instruction: tortillas to satisfy basic hunger. The other side favors humanistic education: manna to nourish a spiritually starved people in a dehumanized techno-society. If the status quo continues, Marxist critics
point out, capitalistic societies can only perpetuate the hegemony of the rich and powerful. Chubb and Moe (1990) declare that parents and educators already know what is best for their communities. If they are just left alone, unbridled by centralistic bureaucracy, quality schools will spring up in a free market. If the educational aim were narrowed to reach specific vocational goals to help a student find a decent paying job upon graduation from high school, liberal arts critics must shake their heads in disapproval because education should reach the whole person, not just train a few of his or her skills.

The mission of educational systems and the goals desired by parents, teachers, administrators and governments should be similar. If we live in the same society and share the same problems, how can our goals be so different? If we seek to reproduce the socio-economic groups within our society, then we should teach what will ensure that reproduction. If our goal is to form ideal citizens for each nation, then we need to inculcate the values that will make this reality. If we are trying to create persons who will readily find a job, then we should be directing our efforts to another path. It sounds simple, but consideration of the different proposals show complexity and conflicts of interest—mainly with respect to the one being educated.

If we look at the liberal arts programs described in typical college handbooks, they seek to immerse students in the best of the ideas and aesthetic values of traditional Western culture. According to David Carr (1996), however, one of the problems in liberal education is that its academic orientation may be difficult and distasteful to those students who lack such an academic orientation. And should students risk spending years studying the best and the highest ideas of our culture if they won’t be able to find a job afterwards? For this reason, critics propose ensuring marketable job skills by giving vocational education.

However, many have been opposed to a narrow conception of vocational education. Dewey was one because it could “perpetuate social divisions... for both the employers and the employees would be intellectually limited.” He wanted vocational education instead to transform society and believed that “the right vocation was the key to human happiness.” However, he wanted children to be introduced to vocations indirectly. For Dewey, the key was problem-

Opposing such attempts to merge and establish unrealistic similarities between the vocational with the academic, David Carr believes that the differences between liberal arts and vocational subjects should be clearly defined. Only then can the curriculum address those differences. Distinctions need to be made between the following concepts: academic/vocational; education/training; theory/practice; and intrinsic/instrumental. Each of the first concepts would pertain to typical liberal arts subjects, while the second ones relate to vocational education. By recognizing that each concept is valid within educational systems, and ensuring that the curriculum gives its due to each aspect, a relevant, coherent and well-rounded education can be offered to students. Carr believes that the curriculum needs to be shaped in the light of which subjects are broadly educational and which are practical and instrumentally oriented, without trying to eliminate either. For instance, history and literature "which have genuine intrinsic values from an educational point of view but practically negligible utility or instrumental value [make a] crucial contribution to the education of civilized sensibilities." Brian Crittenden also cautions that "liberal education must at some point detach itself from the constraints of relevance to this or that practical interest."

Another important clarification that Carr makes is that training usually is based on individual motivation while liberal education is based on our "moral and cultural kinship with others." Thus to address the needs of the individual as well as society's need for culturally aware individuals, both types of education are required. Indeed, Durkheim (1887) shared such a concern:

> Our society must regain awareness of its organic unity. The individual must develop a sense for this social mass which envelops and penetrates him; he must sense it always near and active.

It seems likely that in order to preserve our society's heritage in the broadest sense, education will have to preserve the liberal arts tradition and at the same time include vocational training. Learning to learn
and problem-solving skills can be seen as the best insurance for being able to compete in a global society. Surely nothing is gained by trying to whitewash either vocational or liberal arts by pretending they can both address the same needs. The distinction needs to be kept in mind, not in the sense of better or worse, but as mutually interdependent. Resolving this dilemma remains one of the greatest challenges for countries trying to establish an educational system that will prepare young people for the rigors of a global economy.

References