

# Teachers in Mexico:

## from resisting neoliberal reforms to building alternatives

José David Alarid Dieguez\*

### Summary

The following paper presents and analyzes alternative education proposals that those teachers who have been in active resistance for many years have put into practice. There are a number of educational projects that gather ideas for inclusive education, sensitive to the needs of a majority of the population and appropriate to their contexts. Often, the concept of an emancipatory education, grounded in Freirean precepts, has been explicitly seen as the seed of an alternative project to oppose what the international organizations have imposed on a large part of the world to standardize educational outcomes, encouraging students to acquire only the “basic” competencies to suit a precarious labor

market and to accept that the current world order is the only one possible. Their buzzword is “educational quality”, which is never accurately defined, and their tool is standardized assessment. This process must be seen as a fight to give meaning to education between the hegemonic powers and the counter hegemonic projects that seek to rescue and revalue the role of teachers. An analysis is made of the complex context of these alternative projects, as well as of their feasibility, the ideas that support them and the social actors that promote them, mainly teacher, but not exclusively.

Key words: Resistance, alternative projects, counter-hegemony.

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\* UPN, the Ajusco Campus, Mexico. E-mail: montgalg@hotmail.com



## The context

In Mexico, as in many parts of the world, a series of educational reforms based on neoliberal ideas has been implemented to regulate teaching work. These reforms seek to synchronize the work of teachers with the visions of market deregulation. From their perspective, only the market, or the quasi-markets, can find the “optimum” way for teachers to contribute to a well-functioning social system. Amongst other things, and in many different ways, the collective organization of workers has been attacked, forcing teachers to individually face new rules imposed on their working conditions, including their professional development possibilities, through different tactics such as a results-based payment scheme. On the one hand, a salary restriction policy has been implemented to keep their income at a very low level. But on the other, if teachers wish to earn more, they are obliged to “show” that they “deserve” something better

by obtaining higher results in whatever the authorities decide, including the standardized tests that allegedly measure their professional capacity.

## Standardized assessment

In their zeal to standardize teaching work and its results, multinational organizations – such as the OECD, the IMF and the World Bank- have directed the reformers to establish policies to measure the performance of teachers which are actually used to control their working life. In the case of Mexico, in order to achieve their aim, a whole apparatus has been constructed with a punitive, not an instructional, orientation. Its core is a series of measurements of teachers’ “efficacy”, which are applied from the moment they are hired, and continually measure their “performance”. If teachers do not achieve the scores unilaterally established by the authority, they will be sanctioned, labelled as “not

suitable” or perhaps even fired, without the employer -the Mexican government- being obliged to pay any type of compensation. Likewise, school achievement and students’ performance are measured by standardized assessments. There are the international ones: the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) being the standard-bearer. But there are also the national ones, in the case of Mexico, the Evaluación Nacional de Logro Académico en Centros Escolares (ENLACE), now substituted by PLANEA. The formally autonomous and pricey National Institute for Educational Evaluation INEE, which last year alone received a budget of around 1.250 million Mexican pesos (according to information from the Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit, 2018), was in charge of designing the strategy for the educational system’s standardized assessment<sup>1</sup>. The truth is, contrary to what had been promised by the reform’s sympathizers, the Mexican experience has not shown the expected results. In spite of the large investment in the elaboration, application, dissemination and promotion of the assessment results, there is no perceptible evidence of student progress after the strategy was implemented. As a matter of fact, different studies show the null impact of the strategy, as in Marquez who, based on data analysis, concludes: “after more than a decade of large scale assessment -through a big investment and a significant amount of resources- something that is not clear and is very controversial is whether there has been any usefulness for the national education system and society as a whole.” (2017, p. 6).

Even the then-Secretary of Public Education acknowledged the lack of improvement in the results of PISA 2015 and warned not to expect anything different in 2018 since he thought a longer period of time was required, one of at least 10 years. He insisted this was “the right path” without offering any explanation of why that was the case.

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1. Since the institution lacks all credibility, the new Administration is planning to end it and substitute it with another one that is less identified with an openly punitive orientation.

The problem is that this failed strategy, due to its very objectives and parameters, has had an enormous social and educational cost. According to B. Bernstein, it is possible to say that the assessment systems not only measure “educational” results, but that they also divert a great deal of students’ and teachers’ time into preparing for the assessments. There is by law a single curriculum design (in Mexico it starts with elementary education) which lies completely in the hands of the federal government.

Given this situation, a great deal of teacher training is devoted first to gaining entrance into the system and later, to staying in it. The contents of the assessments determine what is focused on. That is to say, there is no conceptual analysis of the educational problems they will face in their real and diverse classrooms, or in different social contexts. The whole emphasis is on knowing how to answer the test questions designed by the “experts”. The students’ learning is measured based on their scores within the parameters of international results. Teachers are forced to spend a great deal of their time on training students how to answer standardized assessments, a phenomenon known as “teaching to the exam.” The possibility of having teachers doing work that does suit the needs and features of their students is highly limited. The relevance of contents is not open to feedback, since teachers are not considered to be central players in the process. Their sole task is to follow orders and if not, to be sanctioned.

As a result, the benefits of teaching are lost, especially those that are not measurable but that are pedagogically more relevant and which only happen in interaction with students. Therefore, the complex interaction between teachers and students is at stake, as well as their interaction with other stakeholders because it has an impact beyond the institutional context and in the shared creation of the meaning and expectations of the role of a teacher. In other words, the role of a teacher is framed by social and cultural characteristics and the surrounding environment, but it involves teachers and students asymmetrically. Limits are placed on their



professionalism that have strong repercussions in their subjectivity and actions and thus, affect their sense of belonging. For all of these reasons, varied and intense forms of resistance have taken place.

### **Alternative projects as a form of resistance**

The most visible type of resistance is manifested through mobilizations, strikes, etc. But another type is the implementation of alternative education projects that emphasize a better response to the needs of the least favored sector of the population - public elementary schools. These diverse and heterogeneous projects, with different concepts and possibilities, tend to reflect the anti-hegemonic view of teachers in the resistance -as well as that of other organized sectors of society- who seek another type of learning, one that is free from the commodifying view that has prevailed in educational reforms for the last 30 years in this country. The teachers' resistance organization that has had the strongest presence and has lasted the longest, the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación CNTE, has organized alternative education events for many years, out of which proposals and specific projects have emerged. Some of them have explicitly established the perspective of an emancipating education, clearly

influenced by P. Freire's ideas -as well as those of other critical pedagogy experts-as steps towards an alternative to that of the hegemonic block led by international organizations and imposed on our countries.

Alternative projects have emerged from a range of actors, from individual teachers and schools up to entire democratic union locals. Projects have achieved different degrees of consolidation and implementation, and they have manifested in diverse ways. For instance, in Mexico City, there is the emblematic case of the "Centaurus del Norte" elementary school, where the director, a distinguished member of CNTE, has promoted a "community" education project, where the participation of parents is essential to achieve a "truly inclusive" education. Union sections have also proposed projects with a regional perspective to tailor education to the interests of the majority. Such is the case of the Oaxacan Strategic Transformation Program, the "Altimiranista Education" project by Section XIV in Guerrero, or the Michoacan project by Section XVIII.

We can see that the above-mentioned projects are part of the debate between the hegemonic powers and the counter-hegemonic projects that seek to rescue public education and revalue it as a social right, not a commodity. Revaluing the role of teachers is key for that purpose.



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