

Compromised freedom or dialogue in education

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At the beginning of June, a brief prologue was published titled, “Autumn is dissipating. Latin America, education and the future.” The text hinted at a shared concern about the Latin American educational panorama (Rama, 2016). Two weeks later—on June 19, in Nochixtlan, Oaxaca, Mexico—one of the concerns of that prologue manifested itself: there was a violent repression in response to the teachers who were exercising their right to protest in the streets of the state of Oaxaca. The protests were ignited by several aspects of the current educational reform in Mexico. The repression led to the loss of human lives and was documented by different international media, such as *The Guardian* and the Mexican newspaper, *La Jornada*. The oppression revives the memory of the acts committed by the Latin American dictatorial regimes. Nochixtlan warns us of a possible risk: that of compromising the future of education with violence. Violence is not only physical, it has multiple and sophisticated forms, many of which compromise dignity and liberty. In this violent response towards the Mexican teachers lies an even greater risk, the possibility of destroying the wealth of plurality, dialogue and the possibility of transforming societies through education.

This response is also built upon negation, not only in the sense of dialectical movement, but as an inconsistency that compromises one of the greatest treasures of education, which is freedom. This compromised freedom is, at the same time, a reflection of an enormous risk for the future of education in Mexico.

I want to cite part of the aforementioned prologue. One of its ideas supposes that if education is the reflection of a society, and if we seek to improve education, then the path to achieve this cannot be through violence or isolation, because both reveal a system whose parts negate understanding and the dialogical construction of the transformation of Mexican education. What happened in Nochixtlan reflects a profound crisis in the ways of trying to accomplish this educational transformation, what Paz called “authoritarian solutions that wear out authority, exasperate the people and provoke outbursts” (Paz, 1985, p. 12). Let’s not forget that a gradual change is possible, without bringing a halt to the evolution and dynamism necessary to improve the educational system.

We are facing a time in which academics dedicated to educational research—which in essence aims to improve education—and research journals focused on educational topics—such as *Educational Innovation*—cannot be indifferent before the current scenario. One of the possible tasks is to give reasons when faced with nonsense, scientific evidence faced with fits of rage, to provide knowledge to generate the conditions that allow the gradual evolution of educational change, dismissing purely administrative decisions and notions. Transforming an educational system is a collective task, and thus cannot fall upon a single person, especially in a country where plurality, heterogeneity, multiculturalism and multilingualism comprise part of its wealth. Researchers and specialized journals constitute only a part of the collective task. The other part, which is vital, is made up by those who inhabit the classrooms: the teachers and students. It is not possible to transform an educational system without listening to them. Whoever designs educational policy also participates in this collective task, and must therefore consider it as such because every section will be vital in the dialogue that constructs the mechanisms of transformation. The opposite is the unilateral decision, a kind of imposition. And this path, inevitably, generates violence. Octavio Paz left us relevant words for this moment in an essay that many will remember, “Final Hour (1929-1985)”. Paz’s words, written in response to a political and historical situation, now shed light on the horizon of this great educational concern:

How can we succeed in converting Mexico into a true modern democracy? I do not ask for (nor do I foresee) a rapid change. I wish (and hope) for a gradual change, an evolution. To halt this evolution would be disastrous and would expose the country to grave risks. Authoritarian solutions wear out authority, exasperate the people and provoke outbursts. (Paz, 1985, p. 12)

It is clear that diverse educational sectors in Mexico are aware of the educational transformation that the country requires. In this awareness lies a conclusive truth: educational transformation is a collective construction, neither unilateral nor authoritarian, as Paz expresses. One of the spokes of the collective task is dialogue, allowing the collaborative construction to give way to a gradual transformation that evolves and nourishes itself, without imposing. Otherwise, freedom will be compromised and the future of education as well. Below I cite the text from the prologue, “Autumn is dissipating” (Martínez Ruiz, 2016), from *Latin American University Mutations* (Rama, 2016, pp. 11-12).

Autumn is dissipating. Latin America, education and the future

Latin America is many Latin Americas; such an affirmation is based on the recognition of a plural collectivity, on linguistic and historical tension. Latin America coexists with diverse times, not as an irremediable conflict, but as a return to the endless tension that underlies this diversity. Our relationships with memory, the past and the existence of this present time can guide us towards how and where we must direct the future of an education that is suitable for the region, without losing sight of its plurality, which is both wealth and identity amidst the rhythm of exchange with the rest of the world. The wealth of this plurality should not be confused with social, economic and educational inequality, a cutting abyss that does not come to an end and is worsening as I write these lines.

Our perception of the democratic exercises in Latin America and the latent memory of dictatorial regimes warns us of the possible risk of the imposition of a homogeneous way of thinking—with corporate criteria, incisive and with no hint of wisdom—in superior education. We have a history created by the conflict between the homogenizing tendency—that stimulates the existence of the consumer who always wants the same thing—and the defense of social, creative and free diversity, as well as human development. Consequently, the analysis of Latin American education is not a mere description, it cannot be. There is a critical presence, a moment which is history, a path paved by the past, but also by possibility and fraternity. The construction of the best educational systems in the region demands us to learn from errors; otherwise we will only bequeath to future generations a place with enormous inequalities, where tensions and the plurality that enriches us will turn against them.

There is an analogy that is relevant to this process, which I cite from the work of Octavio Paz: “Architecture is the reflection of societies. But it is a reflection that presents enigmatic images that we must decode” (1988, p. 465). I would say that the education of every country is the reflection of its society. Our societies are plural, in the widest and most constructive sense of the term, and our educational systems as well. The latter, as a reflection, reveal not just enigmas, but a contradictory reality with irrefutable clarity: fear and the longing for freedom, scarcity and youth, inequality and hunger for democracy, natural wealth and a barefooted childhood that awaits us. The enigmatic reality that “we must decode” is standing before us, in the vivid eyes of a child who, instead of inhabiting classrooms, lives in a time with no future; in the dreams of a youth who is not nourished, but gnawed away by despair. What are we bequeathing to the Latin American children and youth without an education that develops the best in them?

In diverse analyses of the Latin American history of the last 50 years, we find moments in which examples of democracy interact with echoes of dictatorships; scars that coexist with hurtful memories. But they make one thing clear: that the region itself is calling for renovation, for a movement towards change. This change seeks something well deserved, freedom in its societies and its education. However, in this change we cannot forget the risk of dismantling democratic institutions. Latin American education identifies its social value, no longer as a given but as a dialogical value in dynamism, cultivated by the exchange with the world and the advanced, but more human, use of technology.

The Latin American task is not unique, but multiple. It is not difficult to see that in this multiplicity lie a collective task and longing that unite us: the search for democracy and freedom. A collective task inhabited by possibility and hope. This hope also warns us of a great contemporary risk, that of becoming “instruments” of our technological instruments (Paz, 1996, p. 18), of our mobile devices, or rather, of the intentional possibility of not becoming these instruments. In the very heart of this intentional desire of not being an instrument we find the exercise of freedom.¹

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