

Introduction

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The Free Textbooks and the formation of citizens: a brushstroke of the past and the present

In the months previous to the preparation of this issue of *Diálogos sobre Educación. Temas actuales en investigación educativa* we witnessed yet another controversy about Mexico's Free Textbooks. From May to September 2023 political organizations, parents associations, entrepreneurial groups, teachers, labor unions, and a number of scholars made different statements about the design and the contents of these didactic materials.

The first organization to voice its opinions was the Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia (UNPF), a parental association that has traditionally opposed public education models. In May of that year, the UNPF started a new controversy against the contents of the textbooks. With the argument that these materials were not on a par with the current plans and programs of study, UNPF leaders filed a lawsuit in federal courts to stop the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), Mexico's highest educational agency, from distributing these books in basic education schools.

The lawsuit was accepted by a federal court, which ordered SEP to comply with the definitive suspension of printing the books. The ruling stipulated as its juridical grounding that "the socialization process was not respected, since public institutions, academies, members of civil society and parents associations were not informed" of the design and contents of these materials, "at least regarding the books for the first year of primary school and of secondary school".

This dispute gained strength in August, when opposition deputies to Congress accused the Secretary of Public Education Leticia Ramírez Amaya and SEP's Director of Materials Marx Arriaga of making the new textbooks without consulting specialists in their design and writing. They were accused of "injecting ideological garbage" through these educational materials (*El Informador*, August 2 2023).

This controversy was also joined by the Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana (COPARMEX), an entrepreneurial organization that questioned the design of the contents of the Free Textbooks, because "it lacked transparency, since SEP has not divulged who participated in it and how the process of making them was conducted" (*El Informador*, August 4 2023). Not to be left behind, Marko Cortés, national party leader of Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), used this controversy to attack the federal government, saying that these materials were just "propaganda pamphlets, [that sought to make] schools temples to worship President López Obrador" (*Ibid.*).

These actions found an echo in Guadalajara: on August 4 2023, the coordinator of Jalisco's Council of Industrial Chambers (CCIJ), César Castro, declared to be in favor of stopping the distribution of these educational materials, as had been announced by the political authorities in the states of Chihuahua and Guanajuato (*El Informador*, August 5 2023).

Some civil organizations, such as Foro Plural, headed by Salvador Cosío, son of former governor and member of the PRI Guillermo Cosío Vidaurri, also asked Enrique Alfaro, Governor of Jalisco, not to allow the distribution of the textbooks, with the argument that they "contain pernicious elements due to errors in maintaining scientific rigor and ideological biases that attempt against the cognitive development, the mental health, the freedom of civic awareness of our children and youths in Jalisco" (*El Informador*, August 7 2023).

The controversy was also joined by teachers in Jalisco's educational system, who pointed out that the textbooks were not indispensable, since they are not the only tool used to guide their teaching of children. They argued that the absence of these materials, to the contrary, could encourage teachers to use information to formulate exercises that were more adequate for the problems of each educational community (*El Informador*, August 8 2023).

In accordance with the declarations of these teachers, the Secretary of the Federated Autonomous Labor Unions (SAFE) Miguel Leonardo Cisneros, published a message saying that they would continue to support Proyecto Educativo 2040, "Recrea, Educar para la Vida," "because it is a project that arose from the joint work of specialists, teachers, and families, to maintain success in the formation of our students" (*El Informador*, August 8 2023).

The University of Guadalajara also participated in this polemic. That August, the university's authorities intervened through a review of the textbooks that produced more grounded insights that allowed the university's Rector General Ricardo Villanueva Lomelí to issue a statement in which he "denounced the fake news and the campaign of disinformation about the Free Textbooks, pronounced himself for their distribution, and proposed to draft guidebooks so that the teachers have a didactic guide at hand to apply the new educational model" (*El Informador*, August 31 2023). These arguments, it bears mentioning, were echoed by President López Obrador in his morning press conference the next day, to say that "the campaign against the Free Textbooks has already lasted for several weeks. Since they do not have solid arguments, they have made up a lot of lies that have been spread further by the media, the social networks, and instant messaging applications" (*Ibid.*).

This controversy had repercussions on Jalisco's basic education system since the governor of the state Enrique Alfaro, supported by the ruling in favor of the UNPF, decided to oppose the distribution of the Free Textbooks. Thus, the 2023-2024 school year began in Jalisco without these didactic materials. This had a negative effect on the material conditions of teaching since in many school, especially those attended by children and teenagers from low income families, these books are the main resource used by the teachers to accompany their students' learning.

This opposition to the use of the new Free Textbooks has been a recurrent attitude of the groups that oppose the project of the public school, especially after the secularization of the teaching in public schools. This behavior leads us to wonder: Do educational changes in teaching take place outside ideological positions and ways of conceiving the development of society and the formation of citizens? Must the Free Textbooks remain on the sidelines of social change processes and formative views defended by groups in government?

In order to address these questions, it is advisable to specify first that educational systems are not ethereal bodies but expressions of each moment in history; that is, the learning contents are constituted from the knowledge, values, beliefs, traditions, and skills that the ruling groups regard as necessary to recreate and give continuity to the structures and forms of organization that give meaning to social life. This starting point is key since it helps to understand that the configuration of any educational system responds to socio-cultural, ideological, religious, and technical requirements according to the particularities of each historical moment. For instance, throughout the Colonial period and an important part of the nineteenth century, specifically until the restoration of the Republic, the Catholic Church monopolized education in Mexico. Its influence over the lives of people expressed itself in the predominant contents of teaching. Thus, in the teaching of reading and writing – the forerunner of primary school – it was a priority that children learn Father Ripalda’s catechism and many of the principles dictated by this religious creed. Through these teachings, students internalized the idea that God established obedience to Pope and King, as it happened in Colonial times. When Mexico became independent, subordination to the Spanish Crown was no longer taught but the teaching of the Catholic doctrine remained present in reading and writing schools and continued until the 1860s, and only began to change after the Republic was restored.

In this long period there was a formation of the conscience of citizens – whether during the Colonial period or the first decades of Mexico’s independence – strongly influenced by the principles preached by the Catholic Church, which are not unrelated to the interests of ruling groups. These principles constituted the main ideological orientation that prevailed in educational spaces.

This helps to clarify that any educational system, whichever the time in history or the regional landscape, has as one of its functions to form citizens according to the values and beliefs that the ruling groups consider convenient to reproduce the structures and relationships that regulate social life. In other words, every educational system has ideological contents linked to the interests of the sectors that govern and direct society.

As for the second question, it is important to underscore that the changes in the contents of Mexico’s Free Textbooks are made not only in accordance to the views of the ruling groups but also associated to the developments and breakthroughs in scientific disciplines, in exact sciences, in nature, and in social life. An example of new knowledge being added is the trans-

versal axis of gender, which involves a previously unknown field of knowledge in the formation of children and youths. Its incorporation to teaching allows us to not only make visible the traditional transmission of values and beliefs about masculinity and femininity by the teachers, but also make explicit and order their intervention according to their student's age level.

It becomes evident then that the introduction of this type of knowledge, as that of many others, although responding to the ideal of citizen that the ruling groups wish to form, does also respond to an important social need: the formation of new citizens with masculinities, femininities and divergences that are more inclusive and respectful of differences, which is far from being accepted by traditional groups that still build their view of gender upon a binary image of masculine and feminine.

These ideas are just a brief introduction to the complexities entailed in the use of the new textbooks for the formation of citizens, in which one cannot leave out the role of the individuals who appropriate and give meaning to their contents in their daily task of teaching: teachers and students.

Let us now take a look at the contents that make up the thematic axis of Issue No. 30 of *Diálogos sobre Educación*.

First, three essays that allude directly to the Free Textbooks. In the first one, "Reacciones de los docentes mexicanos ante las prohibiciones y biblioclastia de los nuevos Libros de Texto Gratuitos (LTG) de México en 2023: Un estudio cualitativo descriptivo", authors Eric Silberberg, Armida Liliana Patrón Reyes, Pedro Chagoyán García and Eric Manuel Benjamín Sánchez Baragán look into the effects of the prohibition of the Free Textbooks in the classrooms of primary, secondary and *telesecundaria* schools in Guanajuato y Puebla.

In the second text, "La representación de los pueblos indígenas en los nuevos libros de texto gratuito", Dafne Rodríguez González and Nicolás Arcos López reflect on the representations of indigenous peoples that appear in these textbooks, in order to show how the cultural multiplicity is made visible and how interculturality is addressed.

In the third article, "Análisis de los libros de texto de nivel secundaria en el marco de la Nueva Escuela Mexicana. El caso de los saberes y el pensamiento científico" authors Héctor Manuel Manzanilla, Zaira Navarrete Cazales and Paola Andrea López Hernández review the Free Textbooks for secondary school, specifically the materials designed for the formative field of Scientific Knowledge and Thinking in the third grade. They examine the contextualization of the contents offered in these books and how they support the teachers' work.

To these texts are added two other articles that allude to the experiences of teachers after the implementation of the educational proposal of the New Mexican School (NEM). First, the text "El arranque de la Nueva Escuela Mexicana: las experiencias iniciales de los profesores de la secundaria general núm. 40 de Guadalajara", in which Felicitas Rodríguez Aguilar documents the difficulties faced by teachers to implement the teaching model based on projects, within

a context beginning with the absence of the textbooks. In the second, “Las educadoras y sus ideas en torno al concepto de inclusión: el caso de las profesoras del jardín de niños Francisco Gabilondo Soler”, Liliana Margarita Gaspar Moreno examines how a group of preschool teachers appropriated the concept of inclusión during the training they received to assimilate the foundations of the curricular proposal of the New Mexican School.

In *Debate*, Luciano Oropeza Sandoval presents the analytical essay “Los profesores ante la Nueva School Mexicana: una mirada desde la experimentation del magisterio jalisciense” about the ways or mechanisms of appropriation of the NEM proposal in the state of Jalisco. With a socio-historical approach and relying on research conducted by basic education teachers and researchers of the University of Guadalajara, Oropeza Sandoval analyzes how teachers have modeled their own understanding of the theoretical and methodological contents formulated in the new curricular framework of the Mexican school through a number of actions proposed by the federal government to be put into practice with students in Jalisco.

In the section *Otros artículos* we publish five papers from the field of studies on education but unrelated to this Issue’s monographic axis. The first one, “Lectura placentera y alfabetización académica temprana con docentes de educación básica”, by Antonia Olivia Jarvio Fernández and Geovani Martín Velasco Sánchez, describes the *intervention* with primary education teachers in the state of Veracruz, Mexico, through an online course-workshop aimed at fostering reading habits and offering teacher theoretical and methodological elements for media literacy in the classroom, added to other sources to analyze its impact. The authors report the changes and positive impact that this intervention had in the teachers’ training and pedagogical practices.

Magaly Hernández Oregón participates with the article “La práctica profesional en la formación normalista: un acercamiento a las concepciones construidas por el personal formador de docentes”, which shows in a sort of a kaleidoscopic way the views that teacher trainers have modeled about professional practices, seeking to understand the constructs they share with their students in the process of teacher training.

The following article, “Autoeficacia para autorregular el estudio, salud mental y variables sociodemográficas en estudiantes ecuatorianos durante Covid-19” by Fabiola Sáenz Delgado, Javier Mella-Norambuena, Verónica León-Ron, Yaranay López-Angulo and Francisco Javier Sandoval Henríquez, explores the links between efficacy in the self-regulation of studying with mental health variables and socio-demographic conditions of students in a moment in history, the Covid-19 pandemic, when teachers and students suffered different disorders which, individually, had an impact on higher education as a particular formative process.

Verónica Elsa López-Alonso, Xóchitl López-Aguilar, Laura Evelia Torres-Velázquez, Assol Cortés-Moreno and Jorge Guerra-García present the fourth article in this section, “Autoevaluación y evaluación de habilidades de investigación en alumnado de psicología”. Based on a questionnaire applied to 82 students about research skills in contrast with their knowledge of

methodology and statistics, the data show that the students perceive themselves as confident in their research skills. However, the researchers' analysis suggests they should delve into some fields of knowledge in order to have a better academic formation.

Finally, the article "El pensamiento crítico hegemónico es insuficiente. Un llamado a la educación mediante el caso del terraplanismo" by Gerardo Morales Jasso, Diego Marcel Benítez Ramírez, Óscar Eduardo Galarza Negrete and Mariana Buendía Oliva expresses how the process of critical formation in education requires understanding philosophy as well as learning and discussing specific knowledge that may be confronted with scientific knowledge. The authors address Flat Earth ideas as a symptom of a broader phenomenon that points to regular failures in pedagogical, educational, and scientific communities.

In the section *Paisajes nítidos*, Lucila Sánchez García traces part of her research journey. Her piece, "¿Qué pasa cuando no hay libros de texto?" is a sort of written and photographic essay based on her post-doctoral research "Tácticas y estrategias en los procesos de enseñanza aprendizaje de la materia de lengua indígena de educación primaria", which she is conducting at the University of Guadalajara and whose aim is to understand "how students learn to write in their mother tongue without the support of Free Textbooks or an alphabet developed, structured and established for the Zapotec of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca in the variant of San Baltazar Guelavila" (Sánchez: 2.).

Issue No. 30 of *Diálogos sobre Educación* closes with Laura Catalina Díaz Robles's review "Voces que se cuelan a través del tapabocas", from the book *Las voces ocultas de la pandemia. Efectos de la pandemia en la educación en contextos rurales del occidente de México*, coordinated by Enrique Martínez Curiel, Ramón Goyas Mejía and Rodolfo Morán Quiroz and published this year by the University of Guadalajara.