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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Country That Stopped Reading

By DAVID TOSCANA MARCH 5, 2013

EARLIER this week, I spotted, among the job listings in the newspaper Reforma, an ad from a restaurant in Mexico City looking to hire dishwashers. The requirement: a secondary school diploma.

Years ago, school was not for everyone. Classrooms were places for discipline, study. Teachers were respected figures. Parents actually gave them permission to punish their children by slapping them or tugging their ears. But at least in those days, schools aimed to offer a more dignified life.

Nowadays more children attend school than ever before, but they learn much less. They learn almost nothing. The proportion of the Mexican population that is literate is going up, but in absolute numbers, there are more illiterate people in Mexico now than there were 12 years ago. Even if baseline literacy, the ability to read a street sign or news bulletin, is rising, the practice of reading an actual book is not. Once a reasonably well-educated country, Mexico took the penultimate spot, out of 108 countries, in a Unesco assessment of reading habits a few years ago.

One cannot help but ask the Mexican educational system, “How is it

possible that I hand over a child for six hours every day, five days a week, and you give me back someone who is basically illiterate?”

Despite recent gains in industrial development and increasing numbers of engineering graduates, Mexico is floundering socially, politically and economically because so many of its citizens do not read. Upon taking office in December, our new president, Enrique Peña Nieto, immediately announced a program to improve education. This is typical. All presidents do this upon taking office.

The first step in his plan to improve education? Put the leader of the teachers' union, Elba Esther Gordillo, in jail — which he did last week. Ms. Gordillo, who has led the 1.5 million-member union for 23 years, is suspected of embezzling about \$200 million.

She ought to be behind bars, but education reform with a focus on teachers instead of students is nothing new. For many years now, the job of the education secretary has been not to educate Mexicans but to deal with the teachers and their labor issues. Nobody in Mexico organizes as many strikes as the teachers' union. And, sadly, many teachers, who often buy or inherit their jobs, are lacking in education themselves.

During a strike in 2008 in Oaxaca, I remember walking through the temporary campground in search of a teacher reading a book. Among tens of thousands, I found not one. I did find people listening to disco-decibel music, watching television, playing cards or dominoes, vegetating. I saw some gossip magazines, too.

So I shouldn't have been surprised by the response when I spoke at a recent event for promoting reading for an audience of 300 or so 14- and 15-year-olds. “Who likes to read?” I asked. Only one hand went up in the auditorium. I picked out five of the ignorant majority and asked them to tell me why they didn't like reading. The result was predictable: they stuttered, grumbled, grew impatient. None was able to articulate a sentence, express an

idea.

Frustrated, I told the audience to just leave the auditorium and go look for a book to read. One of their teachers walked up to me, very concerned. “We still have 40 minutes left,” he said. He asked the kids to sit down again, and began to tell them a fable about a plant that couldn’t decide if it wanted to be a flower or a head of cabbage.

“Sir,” I whispered, “that story is for kindergartners.”

In 2002, President Vicente Fox began a national reading plan; he chose as a spokesman Jorge Campos, a popular soccer player, ordered millions of books printed and built an immense library. Unfortunately, teachers were not properly trained and children were not given time for reading in school. The plan focused on the book instead of the reader. I have seen warehouses filled with hundreds of thousands of forgotten books, intended for schools and libraries, simply waiting for the dust and humidity to render them garbage.

A few years back, I spoke with the education secretary of my home state, Nuevo León, about reading in schools. He looked at me, not understanding what I wanted. “In school, children are taught to read,” he said. “Yes,” I replied, “but they don’t read.” I explained the difference between knowing how to read and actually reading, between deciphering street signs and accessing the literary canon. He wondered what the point of the students’ reading “Don Quixote” was. He said we needed to teach them to read the newspaper.

When my daughter was 15, her literature teacher banished all fiction from her classroom. “We’re going to read history and biology textbooks,” she said, “because that way you’ll read and learn at the same time.” In our schools, children are being taught what is easy to teach rather than what they need to learn. It is for this reason that in Mexico — and many other countries — the humanities have been pushed aside.

We have turned schools into factories that churn out employees. With no

intellectual challenges, students can advance from one level to the next as long as they attend class and surrender to their teachers. In this light it is natural that in secondary school we are training chauffeurs, waiters and dishwashers.

This is not just about better funding. Mexico spends more than 5 percent of its gross domestic product on education — about the same percentage as the United States. And it's not about pedagogical theories and new techniques that look for shortcuts. The educational machine does not need fine-tuning; it needs a complete change of direction. It needs to make students read, read and read.

But perhaps the Mexican government is not ready for its people to be truly educated. We know that books give people ambitions, expectations, a sense of dignity. If tomorrow we were to wake up as educated as the Finnish people, the streets would be filled with indignant citizens and our frightened government would be asking itself where these people got more than a dishwasher's training.

David Toscana is the author of the novel "The Last Reader." This essay was translated by Kristina Cordero from the Spanish.

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