

Los Talleres: A CONAFE Post-primary Center (Mexico 1996-2003)

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Zooming-In: Life in Los Talleres

It is a cloudy morning of the year 2002 in *Los Talleres*, a middle-school in a rural community located in the mountainous region of Estado de México, a few hundred kilometers away from the capital city of Toluca. A group of about twenty-five students ages 12 to 18, two young instructors ages 17 and 20, and a few adults are gathered inside the school, a spacious, single-room building built in the community six years ago. The school is equipped with two computers, a TV screen, a video player, and a small library which includes conventional middle-school textbooks but also original oeuvres and videos of science, literature, history and geography, encyclopedias and dictionaries, as well as some manuals of architecture, farming, and traditional medicine, among others. While some of the books have been selected and sent by the National Council for the Promotion of Education (CONAFE), a branch of the Federal Government that promotes basic education in rural communities, others have been acquired to respond to the expressed interest of students and adults from the community. The two young instructors live in the community. Although most of the students attend *Los Talleres* from 9 am to 2 pm, the school stays open in the afternoon for those interested in continuing their study projects or simply reading books, watching videos, or using a computer.

There are currently 30 students enrolled in this school, 16 women and 14 men, ages ranging from 11 to 53. Three of the five students who are not in the school today are helping their parents to harvest corn, whereas the other two have gone to the market of the Municipality to sell some of the mushrooms they have been producing with some of their peers for a few years, since they took a workshop on mushroom production originally offered to the community in *Los Talleres* a few years ago. As will be discussed in more detail below, students here choose their own topics of study and follow personal lines of inquiry at their own pace. This flexible structure allows students to be absent from the school when they need to help their parents or serve the community with other chores. When they come back, they simply continue their study projects.

This cloudy morning, as is now routine in *Los Talleres*, students are working individually, in pairs or small groups, each with a topic of their choice. While some students may take a few hours to complete their units of study, others take weeks, depending on the length of the topic and the comfort of the student in using the skills of independent learning. Each student is paired with a tutor in the group—one of the two instructors or another student—who has previously gained mastery of the selected topic. A flipchart sheet hanging on the wall indicates the topics available in the group and the names of those who have mastered the topics. Sometimes the tutor for a particular student is assigned by an instructor, but other times students simply refer to the flipchart sheet to identify who can help them as their tutor.

Topics include, among others, math problems, short stories, poems, readings in English, texts about science, history and geography. Most topics have been selected from the official middle-school curriculum offered in conventional Mexican public schools, but they include also locally relevant themes identified and selected by students and adults in the community, such as immigration, sustainable farming, traditional medicine, and architecture. Some of the adults in the center are learning how to read and write, whereas others spend a few hours every day reading books of their interest. At any given moment, some students read, while others write down information they consider relevant or reflections on their learning process in their notebooks. Others prepare public presentations of their learning, and yet others alternate between studying and acting as tutors to other students. Every now and then someone stands up to search for a book or a dictionary from the bookshelves in the room, or to use a computer. The two young instructors walk around to observe and comment on the work of students. Whenever they have a chance, the instructors themselves sit down to study topics of their own choice. There is a constant buzz created by the voices of tutors and students talking about their work, but everyone seems to be highly focused.

Where a tutor and a student are working together both sit next to each other and talk about the text being studied, the math problem being solved or the work being produced. The tutor asks the student questions aimed at better understanding how the student is thinking about the particular topic or problem on which she/he is working. When the student has a question, the tutor avoids giving direct answers and instead seeks for questions or clues to help the student find the answer by herself/himself. Both student and tutor take note of what and how the student is learning. Students are expected to make their learning and their process of learning visible to their peers, the instructors, and the community, by creating written reports of what and how they learned, making a public presentation to the group, and finally, by becoming tutors to other students interested in learning the topics that they have now mastered. The notes taken by the student and their tutor during the inquiry process, the written report of what and how they learned, and the materials used for the public presentation, become part of the portfolio of each student, which is used to assess the student's progress.

In *Los Talleres*, Fridays have become days for public presentations, where students who have completed topics that week present major takeaways on what they learned and how they have learned it. These presentations have become a signature event in the community. Parents and community members attend the presentations and actively participate as an audience, asking questions to the presenters. After attending these presentations, some adults decided to enroll as students in the school, some to complete their primary education, others to complete middle-school, and yet others simply to explore topics of their interest. The presentations are followed by a community celebration in which adults and students bring food to share, play music or initiate a volleyball or soccer game.

Soon after it was built in 1996, *Los Talleres* became a vibrant hub for community life. Adults often visit the center to study or to attend presentations by

the students, but also to host meetings to discuss collective problems and figure out solutions. The young instructors are often invited to these meetings, having become trusted advocates of the community within the Municipal government. Through their close connection with the community, instructors in *Los Talleres* are aware of the collective needs and encourage their students to undertake study projects that benefit the entire community, including, among others, gardening, local initiatives to promote community health, sustainable farming, architecture, carpentry, etcetera. When students achieve mastery in these topics, they are included in the available catalogue of the school, which in turn attracts some adults who every now and then stop by the center. To stimulate adults' attendance, the school also offers a variety of workshops ranging from arts and crafts, sustainable farming, and first aid to human rights, English, and advanced math. The workshops are delivered by itinerant advisors, experts in a particular field who visit the community for a day or two to deliver a workshop in exchange for a modest monetary stipend, room and board.

The activities in *Los Talleres* evidence a rich and unique pedagogical experience in which independent learning and tutoring become crucial elements of an educational model tailored to the learning needs of students and adults in the community. This pedagogical experience, however, is not unique to this school. Indeed, *Los Talleres* is only one of the approximately 350 schools known as post-primary centers that were opened in rural and urban marginalized communities across 27 Mexican States between 1996 and 2003. As in *Los Talleres*, these centers attempted to address the specific needs of students and adults in the communities they served by encouraging independent learning through tutorial dialogue.

. . . . [At this point approximately seven-and-a-half pages on The Mexican Educational System, CONAFE, and the Post-primary Project have been deleted to limit the reading to five pages. The complete chapter can be found as *Book Chapter in Pedagogies and Curriculums to (Re)Imagine Public Education: Tales of Hope and Resistance* on Rincón-Gallardo's website <https://rincongallardosantiago.academia.edu/research#books>]

In Conversation

Rodríguez: One of things that makes the Post-primary Project interesting to me is the fact that it developed a very unique student-centered approach for students and communities, in this case poor rural communities in Mexico, that we traditionally disregard as not able to engage in academic projects independently. What do you think have been the particular features of the program that allowed for this unique perspective?

Rincón-Gallardo: As a member of the national leadership team of the Post-primary Project between 1999 and 2003, I will highlight two key features of the Post-primary that help explain its unique perspective of trust in the innate ability of all students to learn independently and its commitment to make this perspective a reality in rural schools across Mexico. The first one is the story and leadership of Gabriel Cámara, which shaped in fundamental ways how the Post-primary Project was conceived and carried on. Having been a "bad" student himself in elementary school and most of middle-school, Gabriel Cámara discovered a passion for learning during a Summer

vacation, when a good friend in a higher grade suggested that they spent some days studying Euclidean geometry—without any pressure of time, and as a project between friends. As Gabriel recalls in one of his books (Cámara 2008), his experience of meaningful learning in a relationship of friendship radically transformed his view of himself as a learner and his later engagement with school. From a young age, he made the commitment to figure out how to encourage similar experiences of powerful learning for students in schools. Through his later connection and collaboration with radical school critics such as Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire, Cámara refined the ideas that, slowly but steadily, he developed since his youth.

A second key feature that enabled the materialization of independent learning through tutorial dialogue as the educational practice advanced by the post-primary centers was the deliberate decision of the CONAFE's leadership team to keep a strong link between design and execution, whereby the leaders of the project committed to demonstrate that the ideas advanced through the project could be materialized in the concrete practice in post-primary centers. The constant presence of project leaders in post-primary centers and their ongoing communication with leaders of the project at all levels gave them first-hand knowledge of what was happening on the ground, which in turn was used as information to refine and adapt the program strategy in ongoing cycles of learning.

Rodríguez: Thinking of the difficulties of public education in rural contexts such as Mexico, what do you think are the main reflections we can take from the Post-primary Project to (re)imagine schools in these contexts?

Rincón-Gallardo: I think the Post-primary Project offers three key lessons to re-imagine public education, in Mexico and abroad.

The first lesson is *envisioning and interacting with the margins as a space of possibility, rather than a space of need*. It was in the margins of the public educational system—small, scattered communities—that the Post-primary Project found a fertile ground for radical innovation. Instead of simply reproducing conventional middle schools in rural communities, the Post-primary had the audacity to reimagine public education for youth and adults in rural communities as a collective enterprise where multiple opportunities were created to promote meaningful learning encounters between students interested in particular topics and tutors willing and able to provide support and guidance. Rather than imposing a rigid structure of conventional schooling in far-off communities, meaningful learning was placed at the core of the endeavor.

The second lesson is *to focus the effort on a simple goal-independent learning through tutorial relationships of dialogue—and reconfigure instructional practice accordingly*. The Post-primary Project was successful at keeping a relentless focus on developing the ability to learn independently among students and educators. With this simple goal in mind, different approaches were tested, keeping those strategies that proved successful in attaining this goal and discarding those that didn't. More than encouraging the implementation of a particular method or technique, the work of Post-primary leaders was driven by the search and the creation of conditions that

could enhance independent learning. Tutorial relationships of dialogue became a key mechanism to encourage independent learning skills due to their demonstrated effectiveness to achieve this goal.

The third key lesson offered by the Post-primary to public education is *making learning through tutorial relationships a collective endeavor, not only in classrooms but across the educational system*. Post-primary Project challenged conventional views that separate teaching and learning as activities to be carried on by two different groups of people with clearly differentiated access to power: teachers on the top in charge of "teaching" and students below responsible for following instructions. Instead, the Post-primary tells a story of the boundaries of teaching and learning becoming blurred, in such away that anyone can teach and everyone is expected to learn, provided that the student is interested in a particular topic and the tutor has the capacity to help him master it. In the Post-primary Project, everyone was expected to develop the skill to learn independently and to serve as tutor to others, not only teachers and students, but also the leaders of the Post-primary at the national and State-levels. Who was to be a tutor was determined by the demonstrated mastery of a given topic, not by formal position within the classroom or the institutional structure of CONAFE. This way the Post-primary Project challenged the dominant view of educational policy that separates policy and practice in a top-down fashion, with policy-makers at the top in charge of establishing mandates and teachers at the bottom as implementers of policy mandates.

The Post-primary Project radically redefined, in a way that is grounded in concrete experience, the relationships at the core of the educational endeavor: the relationship between teachers and students in the presence of content, and the relationship between educational policy and pedagogy. This experience invites us to imagine public educational system where the ability to learn independently is continuously cultivated through relationships of dialogue between someone interested in learning and someone with the capacity to support the journey. Furthermore, the Post-primary Project invites us to imagine public education as a system where the teacher becomes a learner and the learner becomes a teacher, but also where educational policy learns from practice and practice reshapes policy in ongoing cycles of learning.

Reference

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