

LOOKING FOR INTEGRAL EDUCATION FOR ALL: THE CULTURE GOODS CAN'T BE CONFINED TO CLIQUES

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Introduction

Brazil is a country with enormous social inequalities. Activities and life standards of First World coexist with absolute poverty. We are the eighth economy of the world and nevertheless we are badly classified in all of ONU social indicators. For example, Brazil it is in 125th place in the health assistance according to WHO¹. Regarding education, there are also great discrepancies. We introduce some specific data. The Brazilian teaching consists of 3 levels:

Basic education: 8 years

Intermediate education: 3 years

Higher education: accomplished in the Colleges and Universities, with varied duration depending on the field of study.

Statistics collected in 2000 by the Ministry of Education² indicate 165,223 public schools, with only just 8% offering the Intermediate Education. There is a population of 32.5 million students at the Basic Education and 7 million at the Intermediate level. The proportion of those which reach Intermediate Education level is growing, but using these values, only 21% of the students at the Basic

Education would arrive to the Intermediate level. Those figures show that many students don't finish even the Basic Education.

Only about 7% Brazilian youths attend higher institutions. Only 65% of public schools have electric power and 80% do not have libraries (most of the time, there isn't any accessible library to the students or teachers in those schools). There are microcomputer in 17% of the schools (in 60% of the cases only for administrative use) and only 23% of those have Internet access.

Teachers' educational background is also very deficient. There are many teachers who do not have the minimum demanded by the law. 5% of the school teachers completed by themselves the Basic Education level and 1,6% have not. 12% of the Intermediate Education teachers do not have Higher Education courses. This condition evidently reflects on poor teaching quality.

We are surely far away from reaching an Education for all including «*both essential learning tools, such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving,*

¹ www.who.int.

² www.mec.gov.br.

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and the basic learning content (knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning.»³.

In this context, we have good Universities. They perform significant research work in several fields, with researchers publishing in some of the best international periodicals and with good citation index.

Besides the traditional Teaching and Research, Extension activities, directed to integration with different aspects of the society, are growing in Brazilian Universities. It is in this context that, since 1994, I am particularly involved in activities related to teachers' inservice education.

Influence of Blessed Josemaria doctrine

I would like to comment the influence that had, on my decision of dedicating myself especially to this area, the meditation of the doctrine of Blessed Josemaria Escrivá. Really, I stopped doing research in the specific area where I got my degree, directing it to matters related with the teachers' education.

When Blessed Josemaria referred to the university he said: *«The ideal I would propose is, above all, one of work well done and of adequate intellectual preparation during their college years. Given this basis, there are thousands of places in the world which need a helping*

hand, which await someone who is willing to work personally with effort and sacrifice. A university should not form men who will egoistically consume the benefits they have achieved through their studies. Rather it should prepare students for a life of generous help of their neighbor, of Christian charity»⁴.

If this thought is always valid, moreover in a context like the one I described for my country. Blessed Josemaria mentions *«the impatience, anxiety and uneasiness of people whose naturally christian soul stimulates them to fight the personal and social injustice which the human heart can create... The good things of the earth, monopolized by a handful of people; the culture of the world, confined to cliques. And, on the outside, hunger for bread and education. Human lives –holy, because they come from God– treated as mere things, as statistics. I understand and share this impatience. It stirs me to look at Christ, who is continually inviting us to put his new commandment of love into practice»⁵.*

I felt myself particularly called to avoid that *«the culture goods»* were *«confined to cliques»*. The University has a fundamental role in the sharing of these goods. I thought an activity that has a multiplier effect is the teachers' education, both initial and inservice.

This was an area that by several circumstances was accessible for me. When I started to work on some projects of teachers' education, I realized the lack of professionals that were dedicated to that, because the demand was enormous. I nowadays develop at the same time several projects, which I will shortly describe.

³ World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), Jomtien, Thailand, 1990.

⁴ *Conversations*, n.º 75.

⁵ *Christ is passing by*, n.º 111.

Some Concrete Activities

a) Sustainable Environmental Education

Together with a colleague of the Ecology Department, I promoted in the last years activities for teachers enabling them to insert Environmental Education in all teaching levels and in all areas, according to principles delineated in Tbilisi's conference (1978) and improved with the sustainability concept.

The course was offered as a distance education course with printed material. Eighty people has completed this work. It is nowadays being offered also via Internet [<http://www.unbvirtual.unb.br>]. We published about it a paper at SITE 2001, 12^o International Congress from Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education, Orlando, Florida, USA. This paper, titled «Sustainable Environmental Education for Brazilian Teachers», received the mention of «Best Use of Distance Education».

b) Education and Science on-line

Other initiative has been the creation of the site «Education and Science on-line» [<http://www.unbvirtual.unb.br/ciencias>], an Extension project that involves students of Brasília University and K12 teachers. It allows teacher's update in science and education subjects and also experiences' change among teachers.

c) Training Courses on the National Curricular Parameters (PCN) and on other themes

We have recently had a teaching reform in Brazil. It adopted as guidelines, UNESCO's indications, which determined four Educational mainstreams:

learn to know, learn to do, learn to live with the others and learn to be. The teaching centered, also, more on abilities and competencies development than on information.

Moral and religious matters have also their place. One of the most important UNESCO documents on Education says that «*there is the age-old tension between the spiritual and the material. Although not always overtly felt or expressed, there is a thirst for ideals and values which we shall term "moral ideals and values" to avoid offending anyone. Education has the noble task of stimulating in everyone, in accordance with their traditions and convictions, and with full regard for pluralism, an elevation of thought and mind reaching out to the universal and a measure of self-transcendence. The survival of humanity –and the Commission does not say this lightly– hinges on this*».⁶

The teachers are unprepared for this new stance and we are promoting inservice courses to enable them to do so.

Particular Aspects

The PCN, following UNESCO's guidelines, represent an important step for the understanding of Education as a person's integral education. Particularly in the scientific area there is a tendency to a technicist vision that must be modified.

I realize, however, that most educators feel great difficulties to assume this task. Many of them never questioned themselves about fundamental principles of ethics, of person integral vision. It isn't easy, also, to conjugate school education with the one that is given by family. According to the established

⁶ Report of The International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, 1995.

curriculum, it is necessary to combine apparently irreconcilable aspects, such as the education in values and the cultural pluralism.

At these moments, I always guide myself by a very clear direction, gave to us by Blessed Josemaria: to distinguish between conscience freedom and consciences freedom. Many times this principle helped me and helped my students (teachers for their sake), to discover points of balance and to know how to act in concrete situations!

Some examples:

Several aspects of student education must be treated not as a discipline, but as «transversal themes», by all schools. Those themes are, therefore, responsibility of all teachers. In practice, this can often mean that they won't be approached by anyone. This is a matter that we comment in the different courses taught to teachers.

Among transversal themes, we give a great highlight to Environmental Education, an area in which we have already work for some time and that has been having larger highlight each day. But transversal themes include also ethics, cultural pluralism, work and consumption and others.

The way to treat boarding of these themes can't be done purely by conceptual development, but implies necessarily values and attitudes development. At this point there is frequently a contradiction: there is consensus among teachers that values and attitudes, development (in subjects like ethics, environment, cultural pluralism) are an important part of education. However, very few teachers admit the

existence of objective values, which transcend time and place circumstances.

A question imposes for itself: «if there aren't objective values, if they aren't the same for all students, how could we teach them?» Moreover, we could ask if education makes any sense...

In this context, it is necessary to analyze the truth search matter, also regarding values. The most frequent tendency is to fall into subjectivism, particularly in the religious matter.

Blessed Josemaria books taught me, in this matter, to have profound respect to the conscience of each one, for example with these words: «*Throughout my years as a priest, whenever I have spoken, or rather shouted, about my love for personal freedom*»⁷; or «*the legitimate hunger for truth must be respected. Man has a grave obligation to seek God, to know him and to worship him, but no one on earth is permitted to impose on his neighbor the practice of a faith he lacks; just as no one can claim the right to harm those who have received the faith from God*»⁸.

On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize the existence of an objective truth, that all need to seek. The appeal to the Church authority (other aspect in which so much insisted us Blessed Josemaria) shows the necessity of having «*a comprehension attitude and a reciprocal knowledge relationship and of mutual enrichment, in the obedience to the truth and in the respect to freedom*»⁹.

I seek to follow these criteria in the relationships with my students and also to help them to do it with their students. For this to be effective, it is necessary that

⁷ *Friends of Good*, n.º 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Declaration Dominus Iesus*, n.º 2.

they arrive by themselves to the conclusion of how to act. They usually thank criteria they receive in this matter.

We give also particular attention to Bioethics. At the site «Education and Science on-line» we have a section on it that is consulted and commented by the teachers. We work a lot with matters linked to Biotechnology, which deserve great highlight in society. The teachers comment that their students demand this subject frequently, both in conceptual and ethical points of view. I discuss with them matters like Genome project, cloning, transgenics, *in vitro* fecundation.

I would like to conclude with some more words from Blessed Josemaría: «*There is no opposition between serving God and serving men; between the exercise of our civic rights and duties, and our religious ones; between the commitment to build up and improve the earthly city, and the conviction that we are passing through this world on the way to our heavenly fatherland*»¹⁰.

Perspectives

Distance education is growing a lot in Brazil. With UniRede's beginning¹¹ we can foresee great

expansion of course offers, particularly via Internet. Teachers' qualification is one of the greatest proposed goals.

Education Department has nowadays a program, in connection with Telecommunication Services Universalization Fund («Fust») legislation¹², that seeks computer science laboratories installation, connected to Internet, in all schools of Intermediate Education in Brazil. Televisions and antennas are being also installed in a large number of schools.

We can notice, by statistics presented at the Introduction, that nowadays many schools don't have electric power. About five thousand of schools will receive simultaneously electricity installation, television, video, antennas, computer science laboratory, phone and Internet.

We expect enormous demand for teachers' qualification by distance education. To take part in this process seems to me a great challenge, to be faced with work and hope. Educational vision transmitted by the courses will depend a lot on people who works in them. I am very happy to count, for my own orientation, with the teachings of Blessed Josemaría.

¹⁰ *Friends of God*, n.º 165.

¹¹ UniRede is a consortium of 63 public Universities in Brazil. See www.unirede.br.

¹² Law 9998, August 17, 2000.