Chapter 12

Bridging the Gap between Policy and Implementation:
Preschool Education in Mexico, Latin America and Spain

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ABSTRACT

The last decade brought major change to the Mexican educational system as sweeping reforms across all levels were implemented. In particular the early years of education became the focus of legislation to increase quality, open access, and improve curriculum. Mexico captured international attention when it became the first country to make it obligatory for the State to provide pre-school education services for children 3 to 6 years of age and required parents to see that their children attend a public or private pre-school. This chapter explores the gap between policy and implementation of early childhood and technology reform. This sweeping reform is one of the first international attempts to support early childhood education at this level.

INTRODUCTION

It is not enough for the teacher to love the child. She must first love and understand the universe. She must prepare herself, and truly work at it. -Maria Montessori

During the last decades Mexico brought international focus to the educational systems as the Law of Mandatory Pre-schooling made Mexico the only country in the world with mandatory education for 3-year olds. The reform policies were influenced by the changing economic policies as Mexico surged forward in development of technology related industries. As Mexico continued to move

toward a more technological state it was vital that the schools keep up by preparing the children of Mexico for global economy.

Preschool education has existed in Mexico for over 120 years, but it has been the last lustrum that Mexico became an educational research laboratory to study policy and implementation. *The Law of Mandatory Pre-schooling* (2002) made Mexico the only country in the world with mandatory education for all young children and demanded sweeping reform of preschool education. This chapter discusses this reform in Mexico from the perspective of practitioners and citizens, their views of what has happened to this important attempt to provide young children educational opportunity. It also includes current information about the use of technology in Mexico, Spain and the Latin American Countries (LACs).

The first section examines the issues when *top down reform* (decisions about policy made by politicians or governing agencies) is implemented. This section includes a description of the Mexican preschool system, its composition and structure, this chapter explores the purposes of the overall reform, its new curriculum and challenges. It reviews the philosophy, competencies, and some of the peripheral tasks that are being implemented as support to the reform, such as training program for educators, new school programs, and community efforts I will discuss how technology has evolved in the light of the new reforms and how policy and implementation often clash in reality. It will discuss the gap between policy and implementation of reform efforts in an attempt to help teachers better realizes the importance of their role in political decisions

The second section of this chapter includes results of a survey concerning the use of technology in Spanish speaking countries administered in 2010 with Spanish-speaking educators from Mexico, Latin American countries and Spain through the Latin American branch of the World Association of Early Childhood Educators (AMEI-WAECE). The countries are considered a repre-sentative sample of Spanish speaking groups in the field of early childhood education.

The Importance of Early Childhood

First I want to explain how I, a nuclear physicist, have developed such passionate interest in and support for the field of early childhood education. My involvement in young children's education started in a rather unusual way, as explained in the opening Montessori epigraph, I indeed learned to love and understand the universe first. My background includes B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Physics as well as over two decades of research in research centers and universities in North America, Europe and South America. But it was not until the mid-nineties that I realized what the cornerstone of a good scientific education is. And let me be precise as a scientist and define "good education" as one that is gradual, painless, solid, and lasting; one that caters to the natural curiosity of the children and becomes a permanent part of their way of thinking. A "good education" is needed as we integrate technology into the lives of young children. Technology is here and will continue to influence all aspects of learning for children. We are the ones who must provide the support and access, the burning interest and inquiry for technology. The following vignette is one that is true and one I believe can be applied to technology and young children.

Early Influences on Conceptual Understanding

Dr. Judith Rosenthal, while studying the impact science programs for non-English speakers in the US, interviewed me as a product of the Inte-rAmerican Science Program of the University of Texas at El Paso. As it is rare to find a Hispanic physicist and even more to find one with a Ph.D. degree, (Rosenthal, 1996) Dr. Rosenthal began dissecting my past to better understand what influenced my career choice. The first key influ-

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