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# CAN RESEARCH CONTRIBUTE

to transform public education from an inside-out perspective?

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## A life journey



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*“A mature human being: has a heart as firm as a stone and as resistant as the trunk of a tree. Shows wisdom in his eyes by owning a skillful and compassionate hearth”.<sup>1</sup>*

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### Presentation

The first time I had to speak in front of a really large audience I had just graduated from high school. I was asked to give a farewell speech on behalf of my generation. I was terrified. I did not have the slightest idea of how to proceed

in order to express something that reflected, in my own words, my feelings in a situation both formal and ceremonial. I asked my father for assistance, who as a medical doctor had a vast experience delivering speeches at conferences in his field. He invited me to take a seat in his favorite chair in the study, and put a book in my hands, which I have with me again now, called "Nahuatl Poetry", a version collected by Angel Maria Garibay (1965), and said: “Have a look at it; I am sure you will find some inspiration there. We will talk later.”

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<sup>1</sup> Text collected by Bernardino De Sahagún, *Matritense Codex of the Royal Academy*

I was fascinated by what this book revealed to me. Besides offering me a thousand possibilities to solve my predicament, I started to enter the realms of the ancient Mexican civilizations and their understanding of education, which emphasizes wisdom and comprehension. They focused educational action on moral development rather than reducing it to intellectual or instrumental aspects.

Over years I gradually began to understand that this vision of the ancient Mexicans was much deeper yet: 'Owning a face and a heart' is the ultimate feature that characterizes a truly mature human being, namely their moral practices, not to the mere adherence to certain principles or values. Or, as we would put it, a fully formed citizen who practices planetary ethics. But, a truly mature human being is not only the 'owner of a face and a heart', but also possesses 'a wise face' and 'a heart as strong as a stone'. (León Portilla, 1980, p. 192-193) This is a highly advanced notion if we consider that at the beginning of the 21st century the debate on what the development of the moral personality should contemplate, remains intense, and so does the debate on what role education should play in that process.

**“The vision of the ancient Mexicans has represented both horizon and compass during my journey”**

If I try to look back since I started my formal occupation as an educational researcher, I could affirm that the vision of the ancient Mexicans has represented both horizon and compass during my journey.

The elements presented below, after a biographical note, attempt to represent a sketch of my journey of a career spanning three decades – from 1985 to 2015-organized in five periods, each of which, although they overlap, can be said to represent a different step or stage in this great horizon of meaning: Learn how to shape and contribute to shaping, working with and for others, a wise face and a strong heart, through a mutual effort of recognition, of demand for commitment to authenticity, and growth.

## Biographical note

I grew up in a family proud of its identity and the life of their ancestors. Its inheritance was certainly not economic, but mainly cultural and moral. The history of professionals in the family goes back over two generations. My paternal grandfather Manuel I. Fierro, a native of the State of Durango in Northern Mexico, was an attorney and had a relevant participation in the years following the Mexican Revolution as General Attorney of the Federal District. His honesty and moral authority was remarkable; values that my father



Grandparents Gertrudis and Manuel

lived by until his last day. My Grandmother, Gertrudis González, was a great companion for him and a sweet, charming and solicitous. My maternal grandfather, Morris Evans, originally from Easton, Pennsylvania, was a mining engineer; he was always remembered by my mother as a prudent man, well educated, very beloved and always concerned about the needs of individuals and families he worked with. He never

became rich. He met my Nicaraguan grandmother Emma Castellón in Central America. His career led them to live in Panama, Peru and Costa Rica, where they settled for being a country with a recognized educational quality and a peaceful social life.

My grandmother Emma was a pretty, distinguished and friendly woman; she was demanding as mother and much loved because she helped and advised people. She became a widow at a very early age and decided to send her children to study their university careers at the UNAM in Mexico, which is why she moved to Mexico City shortly afterwards with my mother Mary Emma (born in 29), who was barely fifteen years old back then.



Grandmother Emma with her kids

My parents met being professionals already at the Cardiology Hospital in Mexico City where my mother worked as a laboratory chemist and my father, Manuel Ignacio (1925-2003), as a gastroenterologist.

I am the fourth of five siblings born over a period of six years: Maria, Manuel, Mauricio and Laura. I was born in 1961. The three minor ones were born 11 and 12 months apart respectively. As the fourth kid it was not exactly easy for me to find the attention required. Now I know that I transformed the need for visibility and recognition in a personal way of working with other people. We were a fun gang, mischievous and quarrelsome, too. We grew up in a culturally nurturing environment in Mexico City. My

parents, besides their professional careers, cultivated various interests related to the study of anthropology, the love of the music, literature, pre-Hispanic and Mesoamerican colonial art, in the case of my father; my mother, a passionate reader, among others, of Egyptian culture, studied painting and pyrography, practiced sewing and knitting, cooking and gardening. Both instilled in us a high sense of discipline for study and work; the contemplation of nature and care towards all living beings; the soft spot for animals, especially cats. And above all, they taught us to treat all people with the same respect and appreciation, especially if they occupy a more modest economic or social position.



Mary Evans and Manuel Fierro



Fierro Evans Family

My sisters and I studied elementary, secondary and high school at the French school El Pedregal. In addition to being academically demanding, the school was led by a congregation of nuns of San José de Lyon, who were very committed to projects of promotion and popular education in different parts of the country. When we finished high school, it could be said that we had already received a strong education in social work. Ana Beatriz Enríquez was a teacher as well as an extraordinary leader on that process.



I met Flavio at the CEE. He was the most handsome and coveted bachelor. Having studies in Economics and Sociology, his interests revolved around the social and productive development of rural areas, the appropriate technologies and later on around solidarity based economy. We worked together on the project "Post disaster emergency shelter " after the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, publishing weekly brochures containing reflections for people in temporary accommodation who had just lost their loved ones; their homes and belongings.



Cecilia and Flavio

Years later, in 1987, we got married. Flavio Rojo: Cuban mother and Mexican father. I have had the privilege of being his life companion for 28 years, while at the same time sharing many professional projects. Flavio has been my most important advisor, counselor, friend, and colleague. He has also been a supportive and loving husband and

father. We have three sons and daughters: Leonardo, 25 years, María Jose, 23, and Ana Gabriela, 20. Their careers are as different from each other as their personalities: Leonardo studied Communication, has a Master's Degree in Marketing and works as a manager of Radio Disney in Colima. Maria Jose is a dental resident. Ana Gabriela is a fifth semester student of International Relations. Our children have been our inspiration, our concrete and foremost

focus of attention, the rawest call for

congruence, and above all, the opportunity of enjoying each other, of sharing and growing together.



Rojo Fierro Family

## First period: The faces of the poor and their fraternal solidarity, as a formative experience. (1976-1987)

In general terms, my work as a researcher has focused on the analysis of teaching practices; the training of principals and teachers; ethical management and *Convivencia* at school, as well as on the study of the innovative management of classrooms and schools in the context of improvement of learning processes and democratic coexistence even in vulnerable environments.

The first period, marked by cheerfulness, confidence and optimism, is actually a time of formation dedicated to social and educational projects organized first by the school, then by the university and later on at the beginning of my professional life. Extracurricular activities led me, since elementary school, to get to know places of extreme urban poverty, such as the brick factory area of Saint Ursula. Later on I frequented the area of la Laguna, in Coahuila, built around two parishes.

Of those years I have kept alive the memory of the faces of Ezequiel, Doña Coco and Gelos, their daughter, farmers from the communal farm land of Dolores en la Laguna, as a fundamental link to the wisdom of the poor, and the solidary and fraternal work which flourished in these dry lands of Northern Mexico. Those places we frequented in the 1980s and walked around in

with such confidence, feeling safe on what we considered communal farm land of hope and community work, are nowadays impassable territory due to the violence brought about by organized crime.



Ejido Dolores, Torreón



**“This work with the garbage scavengers represented a powerful experience for me, since it revealed a different face from that of rural poverty”**

Before entering the studies in Pedagogy, I was offered a scholarship for the career of Bachelor of Religious

Sciences by the Iberoamerican University in Mexico City, so I had the great opportunity to study both careers in 1979 and 1985, obtaining the Degree in Education in 1986 and the intern status in Religious Sciences in 1985. During the years of my career, I participated with a group of students from various universities under the leadership of Luis González Morfín, in a work experience in the landfills of Santa Fé, including from adult literacy and health promotion programs. This work with the garbage scavengers represented a powerful experience for me, since it revealed a different face from that of rural poverty, which is social decomposition and daily violence enabled by the misery belts of big cities.



Michoacán, Mexico



Oaxaca, Mexico

There I became acquainted with death as an everyday experience of families whose small children were the main victims of diseases caused by malnutrition and poverty. However, right there in the adult literacy group I was in charge of, I witnessed fundamental changes in the lives of men and women who, thanks to a community that accompanied them and shared their concerns, they gained the strength to reduce and even to break the circle of violence reigning in their homes.



Ipoderac, Puebla

The experience gathered at the landfills was the fundamental engine for an experience that was a turning point in my life. One year working for Ipoderac (The Institute of Social Rehabilitation in Atlixco, Puebla) with abandoned children and street children in a shelter located on a farm was my first employment as a teacher (1983-84) in terms of taking care of children with poor academic performance as well as in terms of design, development and evaluation of the Creativity and Artistic Expression Workshop, on which I wrote my bachelor's thesis.



Christmas party at Ipoderac



The last day before leaving the Center, I wrote a few notes. Here I rewrite part of those lines:



*“...The children are very alone...Touching these children, meet each in a gaze, with their smiles and tears, is much more than facing an educational challenge. Touching these children, each one of them, Partida, Rangel, Pablo, Marcos, Miguel, Jaime... it means touching the reality of a world in which some don't fit, and whom didn't choose to come. Touching them is touching injustice, which goes much further than the parents that couldn't welcome them: they themselves didn't have a place that taught them to welcome their own. They are immersed in a society that generates chains of injustice... they are the last rung of the ladder, the most fragile one of the chain”.*  
(6th of July, 1984, notes of Boarding house diary)

*Today, almost three decades into my career in education, I realize that Ipoderac represents a kind of mythical time in my life; a true turning point. That period left a distinctive footprint on the rest of my life. The children will remain a part of with me forever in so many ways. In this place I discovered my calling for a research that seeks to understand what people experience and produce when they are immersed in educational situations. I also realized that there were other ways to collaborate in education other than being directly involved as a social promoter... And much to my regret, I sensed that maybe my involvement was going to take a different direction. Over the years, my intuition was confirmed.” (...)*

*In different research projects I have focused on training teachers to become reflective professional educators, which assumes that only individuals who analyze their practices are able to formulate questions and understandings to better face the challenges.*

*In the course of these years, the concerns and discoveries shared by teachers have guided me in terms of defining the subjects and the purpose of my research. I have shared spaces for professional dialogue with them that have highlighted the enthusiasm, the ability to collaborate, the commitment and the decision to focus on their own activities despite the inertia of the public educational system such as high resistance to enhance quality of teaching practices, and the enormous difficulties they face every day. It has been a huge enrichment for me to learn firsthand about innovative experiences supported by the teachers themselves in different parts of the country.*

*My fundamental objective has been to enable teachers to actually deep observe and get to know their students. This aspect is present in almost all my work, my doctoral thesis and afterwards stems largely from that time spent on the farm. This is because I am convinced that once a teacher has really looked into a boy's or a girl's eyes, then the same thing happens to them as to Serrat: they can only move forward, because they will have missed their way back"...* (Fierro, C, 2012, pp. 57-58) <https://goo.gl/OkP4v3>



A few months after returning to Mexico City, someone told me about an open position at the Center for Educational Studies; they were looking for someone to work on a project involving problems of educational lags, children and rural communities in La Laguna. The three "key" words were there.

Founded by Pablo Latapí (1963), the CEE was the first Center for Educational Research in Mexico. Later on I was in charge of the project (1986-1987) dedicated to the Preparation of Manuals for self-directed education of young people in marginal urban areas (CEE – Youth Center 5th. V). This project was important since it involved an effort of written communication oriented towards popular education. The texts we wrote were addressed to leaders of youth groups and were used successfully, and many years later I learned that after successive reissues



Manuals for self-directed education of young people

they had been taken on for co-publishing by the Cuauhtemoc Delegation in Mexico City. This project marks an important discovery: *writing as an extremely powerful instrument to extend educational action beyond direct involvement.*

## **Second period: the charm of teaching practice and school life.**

### **Promoting the personal transformation of people (1986-1993)**

This second period is marked by the first foray into the professional space of teachers and their institutional context. A look of awe in the first place, towards the richness and complexity of the work of teachers; a look of discovery of their world realities revealed by their accounts of everyday school life; and also a naïve look, based on the trust that professional didactic methods could change the course of teachers' career paths.

My first important project as a research associate working with teachers was under the direction of Prof. Sylvia Schmelkes: Rural Education Linked to Productive Activities,





Rural school in Guanajuato, Mexico

carried out by the CEE and the Ministry of Education of Tabasco (1985-1986); I acted as trainer of the project's operating team. This project was fundamental in the first place because I was able to work alongside someone with the experience and strength that Sylvia possessed already back then in 1985. <http://goo.gl/fA3UeF>

But there were two additional fundamental reasons: Together we experienced a process of strong resistance from the teaching staff to the project, which was about to cause its cancellation. **It was the first time that I understood the difference between "the teacher" as an individual subject and the teaching community as a collective.**

**“An important discovery: writing as an extremely powerful instrument to extend educational action beyond direct involvement”**

The second relevant experience was the fact that in this project we produced Cue Cards to Support Teaching Staff in Rural Environments, based on ideas and previous work experiences, mostly on activities designed by the docents. During a visit to a rural area in the entity, already in the 1990s I learned, to my utmost surprise, that at the end of the project, the cue cards were still being copied and used by the teachers of their own accord. I confirmed something that great analysts had written before:

**teachers, just as they mediatize or discarded proposals that are of no use to them, they retain and use everything that will support their activities** as our cards did.

The coordination of two teacher-related projects: "Education of the Teaching Community" (1986-1987) and "Comprehensive Training for In-service Teachers" for the National Board of Literacy and Educational Outreach (1988-89) allowed us to venture into the field of teacher training, thanks to the commission of carrying out a diagnosis of teachers' training needs, involving 500 teachers in schools of unitarian or incomplete organization in four regions of the country. Out of these projects a first informational text emerges: "Beyond the classroom", published in collaboration with Bertha Fortoul. This text made us commit to the analysis of teaching practices for many more years to come, since it was sent to all schools in the country in 1990 as part of the first actions of Teacher Training prior to the signing of the National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education in 1992, a year that represented the beginnings of the Mexican Education Reform in the 1990s.



Training for teachers

The book *Transforming Teaching Practice*. A proposal based on action research (Paidós, 1989) represents a renewed version of the text *Beyond the classroom* ten years after its publication. The latter is the result of a study conducted with teachers over a period of

three years in both urban and rural areas, discussing aspects involved in teaching and pursuing reflections on and designing possible ways of improving their work. It had two editions and various reprints, with a circulation of more than 20,000 copies. **It was sent to all teacher-training schools in the country by the Ministry of Public Education.** The book *Transforming Teaching Practice* has had several reprints by the same publisher, and despite being a book published 16 years ago, it is still a part of Paidós' text collection. Three years in a row it was the third best selling educational book in the largest bookstore in Mexico (Gandhi [www.gandhi.com.mx](http://www.gandhi.com.mx))



Over the 10 years between the two texts, we kept in touch with groups of teachers from public and private, urban and rural, preschool, elementary and secondary schools, which

enabled us to render the proposal more consistent, develop the theoretical basis, be a little more explicit on a few steps and make the last stages more solid.

**Some characteristics of the training process proposed in the book are:**

- **Recognize the teacher as a subject, as a being capable of transforming what happens in their classroom and in their institution**
- **Come to terms with the multi-relational and multidimensional condition of teaching**
- **Consider that the collegial work is the privileged space for teacher training since it favors recognition, the revaluation of the teaching practice, the conceptual exchange and the motivation for the transformation of practices**
- **Articulate in simple terms the dimensions of the teaching practice to be analyzed and the specific exercises to carry it out, based on guiding questions.**

Its natural audience is teachers in service, centrally in basic education and therefore their trainers, be they directors, supervisors, staff belonging to Teacher Centers teaching staff in trainings, diploma programs and postgraduate study. Initial teacher training is an additional field of application. The book has been and continues to be part of the basic bibliography in various study plans and programs of bachelor degrees in education that constitute teacher training or degrees in educational intervention at the UPN. In both cases, the two elements incorporated from the teaching proposal are: the analysis model of the teaching practice or the six dimensions of practice as it is colloquially known: Personal, institutional, Social, Pedagogical and Values) and the first instance of the training program: analyzing our teaching practice.

<https://goo.gl/PYTrAQ> Presentación del Modelo Dimensiones por maestros

<https://goo.gl/VXg3ew> Otro ejemplo de presentación del modelo por maestros

<http://goo.gl/307JnK> Blog retoma Dimensiones

<http://goo.gl/32l2dm> Página del Programa Valoras, Chile

<http://goo.gl/RNTVF3> Biblioteca Nacional de Maestros Argentina





### Third period: dealing with the complexity of school change in a highly conflictive social and institutional environment (1989-1999)

This third period represents the opportunity of a more in-depth contact with the Mexican public school and the work of teachers in their immediate institutional context - the school - as well as the weight of the administrative apparatus. Even though the candor and confidence in the power of education for social transformation had not yet disappeared, **this third period represents some sort of forced landing on known, yet completely new territory.** Political, Trade Union, and bureaucracy appear as variables of great importance in the life of schools.

Two major projects and collaborations out of the institutional apparatus of the Ministry of Public Education make up this period. As a senior researcher in the CEE I coordinated the Specialty Program in Educational Research and Teaching, for teachers in rural schools in the State of Guanajuato as part of the project Community Rural Education (1989-1991).



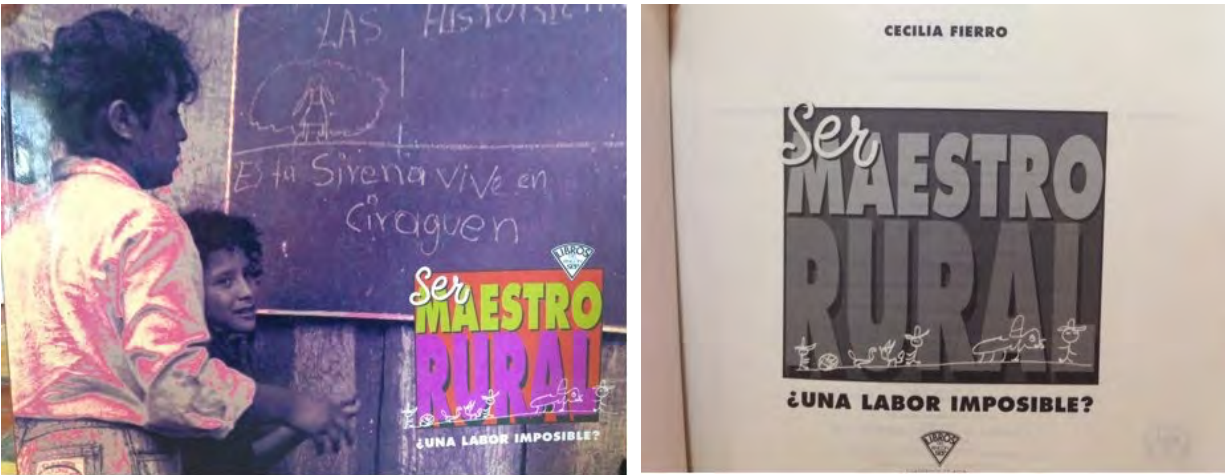
This project was a collaboration with the Ministry of Education of Guanajuato and supported by the Canadian foundation IDRC. Seven researchers moved to the State of Guanajuato to work in schools and towns of high economic and educational

marginalization of three municipalities: Purísima, San Francisco del Rincón and Manuel Doblado. My task was to **design and conduct an easy-to-use training process for a teaching practice in rural areas that would reassess the capacities of children and improve their willingness to collaborate with parents.**

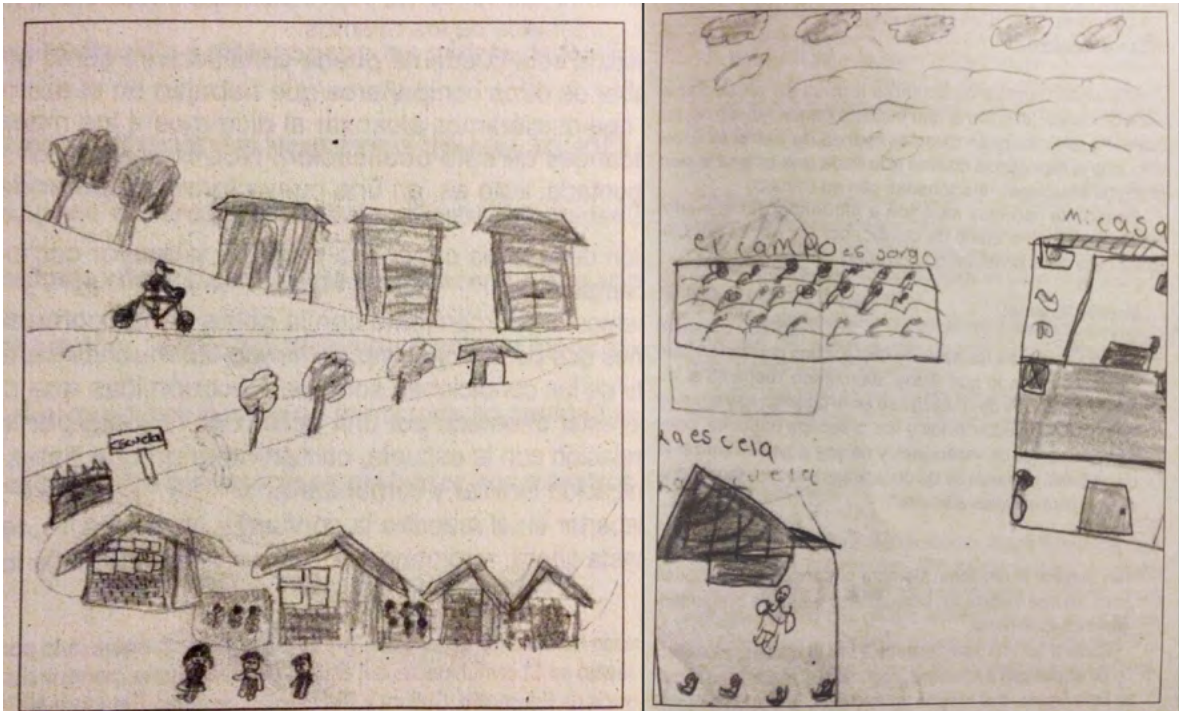
The most comprehensive project was an extraordinary, complex and intensive experience in the field; it was about learning what team work meant thanks to the outstanding general manager of the project, Prof. Sonia Lavín, renowned Chilean researcher. **The project in its various modules offered us the possibility of appreciating the difficulty of summoning teachers to analyze their teaching practices, who worked in scattered, isolated locations far away from their own families; in schools of unitarian ad incomplete organization. It also revealed the great difficulty of working together with parents** in an environment of increasing emigration to the United States of America in search of employment and of thinning out of rural communities through the departure of youth and adult population.

At the end of the project we, the CEE researchers, received an invitation from the Educational Publications Unit of the Ministry of Public Education to join the "Classroom Notebooks" collection that had recently started with a series dedicated to rural schools across the country.





When my first born son Leonardo was one and a half years old, in the middle of a few sunny days at the beach shared with dear friends, I revised the texts in which teachers participating in the Speciality Program shared their experiences, reflections and testimonies of rural teaching. Based on these texts I wrote the book **"To be a rural**



**teacher: mission impossible?" (1991, Ministry of Public Education), which achieved a circulation of 42,500 copies in its first edition and 14,500 in a second one.**

The impact of this text was significant for rural teachers. It's success was due to the opportunity to see their own thoughts about situations that appear as strong obstacles to their work, reflected in the words of others. In turn, the experiences and proposals shared



by the 45 teachers from Guanajuato, who collaborated and whose names appear in the publication, were cause for reflection and for inviting fellow teachers to open up to a different way of thinking that would not stigmatize rural children as doomed to failure or to

**“Inviting fellow teachers to open up to a different way of thinking that would not stigmatize rural children as doomed to failure or to low academic performance.”**

low academic performance. Many invitations to participate in workshops, conferences and school visits derived from this book, which allowed me to get to know school regions far away from urban centers: **I was trying to give voice to the anonymous effort of so many Mexican teachers committed to their work.**

In 1992, my second daughter, María Jose, was born. Prof. Martha Acevedo, then Director of the Educational Publications Unit of the Ministry of Public Education invited me to carry out, in collaboration with the CEE, a research on the operation of the Technical School Board, which would lead to a new book, this time for urban teachers about collaborative work in school. I did this research based on 18 months of following up on the work of technical school boards of twelve schools of different organization and located in urban and marginal urban areas. I wrote the book: **"The Technical Board: an encounter of teachers" (Ministry of Public Education, 1994)**. This book was sent to all urban schools across the country, **achieving a circulation of 86,000 copies in its first edition**. Two years later I would write my master's thesis with data stemming from this research in order to obtain my degree in 1996.

Once again the mirroring of school practices offered many schools and teachers in the country a review of the way in which work activities are organized at schools. The anecdote, the ridiculous, the pathetic, the solemn, everything involved in school life is reflected in simple words expressed by the teachers themselves.

<https://goo.gl/ue5dSB>

<http://goo.gl/Kd3pqL>

After the remarkable interest showed by teachers and while listening to many testimonials, it got clear that my personal gift to offer as a researcher was the ability to deeply connect to teacher's needs and to interpret their reality while offering them their own words with a wider and clearer perspective.

From 1995 onwards, the year my daughter Ana Gabriela was born, and after these three books, I collaborated in various national training projects and monitored programs in the State of Guanajuato on behalf of the Educational Publication Unit of the Ministry of Public Education (1992-1995) and other instances. Many places of training, thesis counseling, seminars and visits to urban schools of different entities in the country were related to this publication.

At this point it becomes increasingly more challenging for me to balance motherhood and my professional life, a conflict that has been present in my life ever since 1990. Today I can safely say that there is no solution to this conflict. It is only possible to find a fragile balance on a day to day basis. And every morning the circumstances, the priorities and the possibilities for maneuvering will be different. If I were born again, I would hug my children with the same emotion. I would keep fighting -even more- for the time I spent with them doing homework, hours of singing songs and storytelling. I would again reject all officer positions that protected my days with them when they were children. But, unless I stopped being who I am, I would not be able to get rid of that condition, that kind of spell, which has almost forcibly pushed me out into the field....

#### **Fourth period. Delving into the heart of the teaching and managerial practices. (2000-2006)**

The following years were guided by two investigations concerning the ethical dimension of teaching practices (2000-2003) and school management staff (2003-2006). At this point



Teachers during training

the empirical work and a theoretical perspective began to consolidate, resulting in a more personal view of school life. This is when illusion and enthusiasm of "changing the face and the heart" start crumbling and give rise to a painful recognition of the **underlying moral order** of problems of teaching practices, school life and the Mexican educational system: **why we act the way we do**.

Several years before I had already started collaborating in a part-time position at the Iberoamerican University (UIA) in Leon coordinating the Master's Degree program in Educational Research and Development (1994-1996), and afterwards the area of Research and Postgraduate Studies (1997-1999). This was where the idea of an ethnographic research with the purpose of "looking at" the values contained in the everyday performance of teachers came up, and **we built, based on classroom records, three ways of approaching them: the normative behavior, the emotional behavior and the pedagogical behavior of teachers**. This work was published in co-authorship with Patricia Carbajal under the name: *A look at the teaching practice based on values*. (Gedisa, 2003). <https://goo.gl/vUY9Ru> At that time I was obviously not aware of the fact that the topics I was researching were actually related to life experiences at school in primary.

<http://goo.gl/5kiCD4>      <http://goo.gl/zY00w5>      <http://goo.gl/JRiYwJ>

It was an extremely ambitious project and its financial support came from several smaller allocations from various areas of the university itself. We included 26 classrooms in the project, focusing on five of them during a school year and a half. 206 school records and 184 classroom records made up the empirical material of this research.

Don Pablo Latapí, who was always particularly interested in this topic, was kind enough to write a book presentation and an article about it for the journal *Educational Profiles*. <http://goo.gl/vO7oW2>

The investigation revealed a troubling reality in the classroom. We found that the issues of teaching practice, equity and values were reflected especially in the treatment of the students. We frequently observed that those students with academic lags or who have already repeated school cycles, were often recriminated, neglected, taunted or unjustly punished by their teachers. Through this work we were able to demonstrate the specific mechanisms by which teachers, unaware of this, create or emphasize the condition of discrimination of the most underprivileged students.



The concept of "vehicle" was coined in this research referring to the means by which teachers share values in a concrete or abstract manner. This category offered us the

**“The vehicles as well as emotional expressions appear as "the hidden face" of values practiced by teachers.”**

possibility of naming and consequently analyzing a field of action hardly addressed by literature dealing with values and that often goes unnoticed by teachers. The vehicles as well as emotional expressions appear as "the hidden face" of values practiced by teachers.

In the same way, the research showed the importance of a pedagogical leadership oriented towards fostering reflection on the part of the students; based on curricular contents or situations of everyday life, teachers can generate countless opportunities for the moral development of their students. These are not only important for school life, but also offer the possibility of stimulating self-thinking and engaging in society in a more equitable way. Reflection itself is a powerful tool for personal and social life, both from the academic and the values perspective:



*"To teach students values is in essence an issue rooted at the heart of the teaching practice; of the way in which the everyday work of teachers is organized with their students. It certainly includes curricular and cross-cutting aspects, but the teaching of values will always be above all of it, including it in any case, provided that curricular proposals about values and orientations of teaching practices point in the same direction. A project of the school's ethical management includes the moral climate that reigns in the classroom and on the playground; during festivals and breaks, the kinds of written and natural languages. The orientation of the normative, affective and educational behavior of teachers is at the very heart of everything, as are the subjects of values training. (Fierro, 2003, p. 31)."*



This research sparked much interest in various academic media and media related to teacher training. It showed, nearly a decade before the discussion on violence at school would come up in Mexico, the existence of serious problems that deeply compromised the quality of life shared in the classrooms.

And that was how, after all those years of visiting schools and participating in teacher meetings, I was literally confronted by the topic of moral conflicts that teachers face every day in their work. I began to collect the questions that were posed to me and contained some moral questioning and in a couple of years I had already gathered a considerable number of issues.

I was admitted to the doctoral program at the Department of Educational Research (DIE-CINVESTAV) of the National Polytechnic Institute. For Mexico, this institution of excellence represents the cradle of qualitative research, and ethnographic research in public schools. Founded in 1961, only a decade after the CEE, it represented a counterpoint to this first research center, whose specialty was the quantitative studies of the educational system based on educational sociology and economics, with renowned

personalities such as Pablo Latapí, Carlos Muñoz Izquierdo and Sylvia Schmelkes. The DIE, however, specialized in qualitative research.



I applied to the DIE with an unconventional topic. I wanted to carry out research on Moral Conflicts in the *Exercise of the Directive Function at the Basic Educational Level*, and had the immense fortune of being assigned Dr. Ruth Paradise Loring as my thesis counselor.

It was a qualitative research conducted with 249 school management staff members who worked in eight regions of the State of Guanajuato, dealing with conflicts faced in their everyday professional practice, from a moral perspective and with a narrative and socio-cultural approach. The purpose of this approach to the moral conflicts faced by directors at the basic educational level in the exercise of their functions was to recognize, from the way in which they describe and analyze them, patterns of relationships and cultural processes involved both in its generation and its resolution. The resulting report revealed

some aspects of the underlying moral order in everyday school life, taking into account the institutional context in which it is inscribed.

My dad died halfway through my doctorate, in 2003. He did not live to see the completion of the study.

I would summarize the main finding of the research with the identification and description of the "invisibility of the student" as an inadvertent phenomenon at schools and of the Mexican educational system. The origin of the hypothesis sustaining the existence of a process of invisibilization of the student, arose from a basic question during the analysis of the narratives: Why doesn't the student's face appear in the disintegration of elements and involved people that are referred to by principals when analyzing conflict situations, when the student is right there in front of them, day after day at school? (Fierro, 2007)

**“Invisibility of the student” as an inadvertent phenomenon at schools and of the Mexican educational system.**

This phenomenon was associated with three kinds of situations: the priority given to the administrative aspects of the school, to the detriment of the pedagogical work; the orientation towards political and union issues of the teaching career in Mexico, which is at the basis of the access itself to the position.

We were able to confirm again and again how this authority is structurally weakened both by the network of commitments that directors have to safeguard and by the failure to place themselves as academic leaders of their schools. The middle management structure will be an additional element that decisively undermines the director's authority, since decisions are taken at higher instances, which are implicated according to political and labor interests unrelated to educational aspects.

Thirdly, the weak professional tissue among peers aggravates this situation, by not providing a collective space from which to accommodate genuine searches for academic improvement. The collective does work, but for issues that involve the correlation of forces and internal pacts. Pedagogical education is presented as a topic, perhaps harmless, but it fails to stand for its deliberation and attention.



At the end of this work, its dissemination among principals and teachers elicited a painful silence. Publication in Mexico was this time unattractive to commercial publishers and I was asked to transform it into a rather didactic text, which I refused to do. In 2013 (Fierro and Paradise, 2013) we published a chapter together revealing the central idea of my thesis in a book about school management staff. This work was awarded by Emerald Publishing.



<https://goo.gl/iDQFeg> <https://goo.gl/Uxfp7T>

The words of Pedro Páramo offered the best image to reflect the problems of the face and the heart of our schools, according to what I was able to perceive from the accounts of school management staff:

“

"One has believed sometimes, in the middle of this road without banks, there would be nothing afterwards; that you could not find anything on the other side, at the end of this plain full of cracks and dry creeks. But yes, there is something. There is a village. You can hear the dogs barking and the smell of smoke lingers in the air, and you can savor the smell of people as if there were hope."

Juan Rulfo (The Burning Plain).

”

## Fifth period: Delving down to the root cause and finding hope

(2007-2015)

After that research I was literally speechless and breathless. I understood why pedagogical activism dedicated to strengthen schools proved ineffective if there was no willingness to change on the part of teachers and management staff, the minimum institutional conditions, both political and administrative, in order not to smother their efforts. In addition, of course, an appropriate pedagogical support is necessary. I

**“I understood the reason behind failing efforts to transform schools.”**

understood the reason behind failing efforts to transform schools. The failure of so many efforts of reform whose small advances and achievements I had documented years ago. The hardened face of schools and the meaning of the saying: **"Out of sight, out of mind"**. I felt pessimistic about research contribution to improve schools. But two circumstances changed the course of things.

First: A totally unexpected invitation. A couple of months before my final exam in 2006, a young and enthusiastic new rector arrived at the UIA. Master Gerardo Valenzuela asked me to collaborate as a General Academic Director at the UIA in Leon. He convinced me, or I rather felt I had to give back something to the university in return for all the freedom and confidence received. It was a highly interesting, educational, intense, experience to be able to view university life as a whole, the diversity of professional cultures of architects, economists, administrators, lawyers, sociologists, etc.; the richness and diversity of the tasks of the various academic units. And at the same time, the possibility of working on shared projects to strengthen the teaching practices, research, dissemination, and the internationalization of the university. I tried to put into practice what I had learned about management, innovation, and teacher training. How different is to do research about innovation than doing it! An excellent academic, participative, critical and committed community endorsed several initiatives of this period (2006-2010).

This year coincided with my entry into the National System of Researchers, an institute regulated by the Council of Sciences and Technology in Mexico and which bestows the "National Researcher" award to those who according to a system of peer evaluation, meet the requirements for exercising as professional researchers. **I was evaluated as a level 1 National Researcher.** This involves assuming commitments related to the

handling of public funds, the leading of research groups, the training of undergraduate and graduate students; and participating in events and international conferences, among others. <https://goo.gl/wtq4eZ>

The second circumstance that represented an immense support during that time was the formal creation of the **Latin American Network of School Convivencia (RLCE) in 2008, as an international space for diffusion, training, exchange and Latin American dialogue about improving the quality of life shared in schools.** Such exchanges, visits,

stays and shared activities had already started years ago, but that year we formalized it. The Ibero-American University of León, together with the ITESO in Guadalajara, the University of Costa Rica and the Catholic University in Chile, were founding members. I work as a President of the RLCE until 2013. Currently the network's management team has integrated other institutions such as the Autonomous University of Baja California and the Autonomous University of Querétaro, Mexico; the University of Temuco and the Catholic University of Valparaíso in Chile.



RLCE. Santiago, Chile

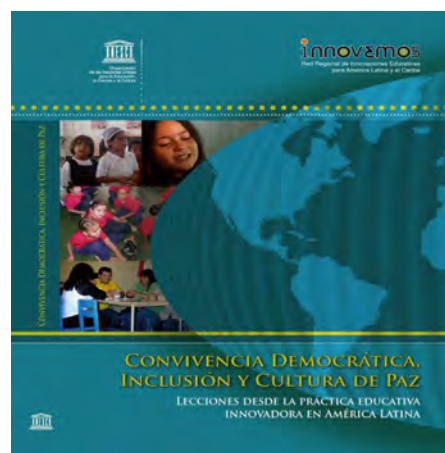
The first joint action as a network was to apply for funds from the UNESCO Innovation Network for the project **"Build responsibility in school management. Innovative experiences in Mexico, Costa Rica and Chile"** (Fierro and Mena, 2008). The project consisted in the realization of seven case studies of schools that had transformed by choice their internal forms of organization, in order to better respond to the needs of students, improve their performance and/or their response to situations of violence. The network performed transversal readings of experiences from different angles. One of the cases developed as well as these analyses are published in a book by UNESCO Santiago. <http://goo.gl/UowmuN>



From this moment on, the team of researchers in Leon became part of a network out of which we generated research, seminars, training events, a Latin American diploma program for teachers, coordinated by the Ibero-American University in Leon, and other actions.

Afterwards we applied to the Council of Sciences and Technology and the Ministry of Public Education with a new project: **"Schools that build contexts for learning and democratic convivencia"** (Fierro and Fortoul, 2012). The intention of this research was to recover innovative experiences developed in public schools at the basic level in Latin America. The overall purpose of the project was to understand what management practices are characteristic of schools that have managed to make concerted efforts to build favorable environments for learning and

democratic coexistence. The central concept, around which the study is built, is that of "responsible practices", which intends to reveal the core meaning and collective action that sustain the innovative actions undertaken as well as the network practices to which they give rise. The analysis of classroom and school management from the double perspective of learning and coexistence management turned out to be the most important theoretical and methodological challenge for this research.



<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/>

The project adopted as an operating model the program used by UNESCO Santiago in the past decade, through competitive grants. The call was launched from the platform **www.convivenciaescolar.net** of the Latin-American Network of School Convivencia and received 39 proposals from eight Latin American countries: Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Peru, Colombia, Chile, Argentina and Spain. In the Mexican Republic, proposals were submitted by twelve entities: Michoacán, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Tamaulipas, San Luis



Guanajuato (CONCyTEG) we conducted the project *Tools for self-diagnosis (link) and intervention in schools based on indicators of democratic, inclusive and non-violent convivencia* (2011-2013). This project involved the Latin American network, and in Mexico, we are working with colleagues from the Institute for Research and Educational Development of the Autonomous University of Baja California and dialoguing with colleagues from ITESO, Guadalajara.



This project was particularly relevant because of the current condition of the political and educational life in Mexico. Firstly, it contributes to the advancement of knowledge in an area of study that has developed in a very unbalanced manner: the fact of drawing too much attention to the phenomenon and the evaluation of violence and neglecting the evaluation of school convivencia, which is precisely the aspect that serves the central questions relating to prevention.

The products of the project as a whole contributed to the national education agenda in a time of change in government policies in the field of school safety management based on tested and validated indicators and the first developed instruments, such as the instrument of large-scale evaluation of coexistence for high school students. The same can be said of the

instrument for evaluating the school climate at the higher educational level. For its part, *the Guide for self-diagnosis of coexistence in school* is an original instrument of internal assessment and has been elaborated for mass use, which allows schools to carry out self-assessments based on categories marked by experts as central in terms of school coexistence. This guide has already been copyrighted.

At the academic level, the project provides information part of which has been spread in specialized journals on topics related to





educational and psychological assessment. The coordination of the thematic issue volume 6, number 2 (November 2013), of the *Ibero-American Journal of Educational Evaluation*, dedicated to the evaluation and analysis of the dynamics, effects and results of school coexistence: [http://www.rinace.net/riee/riee\\_proximos\\_numeros.html](http://www.rinace.net/riee/riee_proximos_numeros.html), represented an opportunity of contribution at international level while at the same time broadcasting the voices of characters belonging to the top international level to the Spanish-speaking world.

The international conferences, of which the most significant is the V Ibero-American Congress of School Violence, held in Santiago de Chile (2013) have represented another area of dissemination. In addition, this research contributed expertise to two fields of educational research in the country, organized by the Mexican Council for Educational Research: *Convivencia*, discipline and violence in schools and the process of formation, which is where many of the proposals and ideas generated here, will lead. Both fields refer to problems that intensely affect school education in the country and the constitution of more participatory and democratic Mexican citizens.

The importance of the technical contribution of the project was revealed by the requests for advice, collaboration and/or the training received by various agencies: the Safe School program of the Ministry of Public Education, the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education, the Ministry of Education of Guanajuato and Jalisco. We have here an example of a lecture related to school coexistence and violence prevention: <https://goo.gl/f5yVSY>. And also a workshop in which principals and teachers are invited as experts to evaluate the “Guía de autodiagnóstico de la convivencia escolar” in the state of Nuevo León (2013). <https://goo.gl/G6QskG>

Out of the RLCE we started a publishing project, which I coordinate in Mexico along with Miguel Bazdresch. It is the Coexistence Collection of the series *somosmaestr@s*. This collection has already issued five titles, three of which have been chosen to form part of the libraries of the Safe School program, starting this year by initiative of the Ministry of Public Education. Together with two colleagues from the Ibero-American University in Leon (Fierro, Carbajal and Martinez-Parente) I wrote the book: ***Eyes that see. Cases to reflect on convivencia at school***, in 2010. This book has already been co-edited twice for schools in the Federal District and forms part of the three books chosen for distribution in the country.



A task performed in those same years (2011-2013) was the collaboration in the development of the States of Knowledge that the Mexican Council for Educational Research carries out every ten years.

I participated in the area XVII: problems of discipline, coexistence and violence in schools. I coordinated the chapter: *Coexistence in Schools. An emerging issue of educational research in Mexico.*

Finally, since 2012 I have been working together with my colleague and friend, Bertha Fortoul PhD, on the project: "*Methodological Proposal of Teacher Intervention for Learning and Coexistence in Vulnerable Contexts*", developed with the support of the Mexican Council of Science and Technology. This project intends to build a theoretical model of teaching practice based primarily on an interactionist model. It deals with analyzing the way in which exchanges, situated in practical contexts, between teachers and students take place that result both in the construction of disciplinary as well as experiential knowledge. This model arises at the same time as the basis for a program of

continuous teacher training which allows them to understand the logic and the principles implicit in the way they interact daily with their students, to signify them and from there to undertake improvement actions in favor of assimilating curricular contents, as well as those contents related to their socio-emotional and ethics education. We are currently in the process of writing together a book addressed to teachers based on the results of thoroughly analyzing the practices of ten teachers working in environments of poverty and / or violence in different entities such as Baja California, Chihuahua (Tarahumara mountains), Puebla, Oaxaca, Federal District, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí and Peru. <https://goo.gl/PvHU63>

The Ibero-American University in Leon has been, for nearly two decades, a special space for the creation, training and expansion of a **network of academics interested in research, training and equity in basic education**. We have configured a working dynamic around a circuit of: *research projects – external services and consulting - proposals and training programs for agents - actions of spreading texts for teachers - generation of new questions and research projects - restart the process*. In the course of fifteen years we have developed a considerable number of national and state consulting services, we have participated in international comparative studies; we have designed and executed various training programs, both diploma studies and postgraduate programs and made publications associated with them ([www.leon.uia.mx](http://www.leon.uia.mx)). In recent years our faculty of Management, Inclusion and Convivencia in Educational Institutions has been operating as a small local, inter-institutional and international network thanks to the links that we have created together with other Mexican and Latin American institutions. <http://goo.gl/iLjNRv>



Since last year I was honored with the appointment of a Member of the Technical Council of Evaluation of the Education Offer of the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education. ([www.inee.edu.mx](http://www.inee.edu.mx)) <https://goo.gl/gohZyB>



## The future

Looking ahead, faced with the hopelessness that prevails in large sectors of society as well as in the Mexican teaching community, because of the social and economical circumstances, it is impossible to think that the prevailing situation can change without a profound educational transformation in order to promote social cohesion and more equity. Giving support to teacher's effort's in order to reflect and transform their practices remains the heart of that hope. Today more than thirty years ago. In that sense, the Nahuatl Philosophy still's beeing actual and relevant: "a wise face and a strong heart" were aspirations of the ancient Mexicans for education that could today provide many responses to the problems of violence and quality of education in my country. They are words that remain as horizon and compass.





## Letters from teacher's trainers and students

### - Cecilia Herlinda Reyes (Oaxaca, Mexico)

Spanish version: <https://goo.gl/pSu0LO>

English version: <https://goo.gl/hzfaZn>

Cecilia Herlinda's resume: <https://goo.gl/YqNtvF>

### - Adriana Torres Frutis (Michoacán, Mexico)

Spanish version: <https://goo.gl/m1zyuS>

English version: <https://goo.gl/PdDbYT>

### - Socorro Ramírez (San Luis Potosí, Mexico)

Spanish version: <https://goo.gl/1XKogv>

English version: <https://goo.gl/r4yV2h>

### - Margarita Godínez (Guanajuato, Mexico)

Spanish version: <https://goo.gl/GG7E29>

English version: <https://goo.gl/jkwy7F>

### - Dalid Cervantes Tapia (San Luis Potosí, Mexico)

Spanish version: <https://goo.gl/jjtKbS>

English version: <https://goo.gl/Jw2ule>

### - René Espinosa (San Luis Potosí, Mexico)

Spanish version: <https://goo.gl/7DWcTj>

### - Students from a Normal School (Irapuato, Mexico)

English version: <https://goo.gl/6DDGeU>

## Letters from academics, editors, and public officials

### - Sylvia Schmelkes, Goberny Board President of the Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación

English version: <https://goo.gl/QMup5x>

### - Elisa Bonilla, Director of the SM Foundation

Spanish version: <https://goo.gl/l3uaoC>

English version: <https://goo.gl/P5rL4X>

**- Miguel Bazdresch, Emeritus Researcher at ITESO University of Guadalajara**

English version: <https://goo.gl/5OFQYF>

Spanish version: <https://goo.gl/3XrXyp>

**- Isidora Mena, President of the Red Latinoamericana de Convivencia Escolar**

Spanish version: Part 1 <https://goo.gl/Ti6VDp> Part 2 <https://goo.gl/IGZgbO>

English version: <https://goo.gl/4JFsK5>

Isidora Mena's resume: <https://goo.gl/fbwq99>

**Cecilia Fierro Evans' resume**

Spanish version: <https://goo.gl/00JN67>

English version: <https://goo.gl/0jKq0L>

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