

Transforming the Educational System: A Multidimensional Challenge

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At the close of 2022, I had the chance to spend a few weeks working at a school in the rural El Hatillo area, just a 20-minute drive from Plaza Bolívar in this municipality. I was involved in a project aimed at revitalizing a recreational area. As I traveled along the narrow roads leading to the school, I couldn't help but observe the scarcity of electricity poles, the overgrown weeds, the pothole-riddled road, and the people walking or waiting at makeshift bus stops, which clearly highlighted the limited public transport available.

Upon arriving at the school each day, I observed numerous students walking considerable distances, with some having to trek anywhere from 20 to 60 minutes to get to school. The teachers shared two startling facts. The first is that students refuse to take lifts, except when boarding pickup vehicles, due to the prevalent kidnappings in the area. The second aspect is the distressing normalcy of youth suicide in rural regions, which, disturbingly, varies [in method] depending on one's location. For instance, hanging is more common in Turgua, whereas cutting one's veins is a prevalent self-harm method in Sisipa. It's a stark reality that children often accept as a matter of course without comprehending its gravity.

I also noticed that many students chose to stay even after their classes were over for the day. As the principal explained, the rationale behind this was that the school was the sole place where they had access to “recreational spaces” or could enjoy their time with friends. Additionally, the school provided a reliable food source, although the distribution was inconsistent, and the food supply often only lasted a week. According to teachers, they were expected to stretch the ingredients they received to cover two weeks’ worth of meals. Despite the challenges, teachers managed to ensure that nearly 800 students in the school had something to eat. Moreover, they had to juggle the school schedule, as in a game of Tetris, to accommodate students who needed to work to support their families while pursuing their high school diplomas, which could potentially open up more job opportunities for them.

While working with the 5th graders, I learned that 25% lacked the basic skills of reading, writing, or multiplication. This unfortunate situation directly resulted from having no teachers for their grades for one year and enduring two years of remote education without access to the necessary digital resources to complete their coursework. Essentially, I was working with children who were academically at the level of 1st graders.

Despite the obstacles, I encountered boys and girls who, irrespective of the barriers and constraints, were eager to learn and actively engage in their education. These students didn’t hesitate to admit their limitations and seek assistance because they recognized the immense value of participating in their learning journey and its significance for their school.

It was truly surprising for me that they all responded with a unanimous sentiment when I asked why a recreational space was important for the school: *“so that the children have a place to*

play.” This strong sense of community deeply moved and greatly inspired me. I was further shocked to witness 4th and 5th-grade students actively participating in the park’s voting process. When I asked them why they were getting involved, they all replied with a common purpose: “Because I want the younger ones to have a space I didn’t have.”

This prompted me to ponder: Why did 10-year-old students view younger boys and girls as a separate group from themselves? To me, it reflected a youth compelled to assume the role of caretaker for the younger ones, forsaking their childhood and forced to mature prematurely. The 4th and 5th graders expressed sentiments like: *“I may not be able to do much for myself, but perhaps I can do something for them”* or *“They deserve to have the future and opportunities that I didn’t.”* These testimonies raised a crucial question in my mind: Do these young individuals believe that they are already beyond help, that investing in them is futile, and that their own chances have already slipped away?

According to a study by the Venezuela Youth Observatory (2022), the patterns and lifestyles of young people have undergone a complete transformation due to the precariousness of life, the absence of fundamental freedoms, and the pervasive political violence¹. Consequently, young Venezuelans are not in a transitional phase toward adulthood; instead, they are abruptly shouldering the responsibilities of post-juvenile adulthood due to the impoverishment and mass migration in their surroundings².

1 Showny Azar, Verónica Chopite, y Observatorio Venezolano de Juventudes (OBJUVE). “Cátedra del Sentido - Relatos de las juventudes en la Venezuela autoritaria”, 12 de diciembre de 2022. <https://es.slideshare.net/ObservatoriodeJuvent/ctedra-del-sentido-relatos-de-las-juventudes-en-la-venezuela-autoritaria>.

2 *idem*.

This has led to the emergence of multiple generations unable to establish identities and engage in the typical experiences of youth, hindering their overall development in a healthy environment.

We often place significant emphasis on younger children, but who is paying attention to the youth who still have opportunities but may not recognize them because they believe those chances are already lost?

This school reflects the challenges faced by numerous public and rural educational institutions across our nation. According to the Educational Diagnosis of Venezuela (DEV) study from the Center for Educational Innovation (CIED) at the Catholic University Andrés Bello, the elementary and high school student population was 6.5 million in 2021, compared to the 7.1 million enrolled in the system in 2018. That is, the number of students decreased by 15% in the last three years, meaning approximately 1.21 million children and adolescents have left the classrooms (roughly 400,000 per year)³. It's estimated that one in three Venezuelan children aged 3 to 5 and one in two adolescents aged 12 to 16 are currently excluded from the public school system⁴. High school graduation rates have plummeted to historically low levels, with only 2 out of every ten students successfully completing high school⁵.

Similarly, the National Living Conditions Survey (ENCOVI 2018) reveals that **roughly 50% of enrolled students do not attend**

3 "Más de un millón de venezolanos dejó de estudiar desde 2018, según informe." *SWI swissinfo.ch*, November 10, 2021. https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/venezuela-educaci%C3%B3n_m%C3%A1s-de-un-mill%C3%B3n-de-venezolanos-dej%C3%B3-de-estudiar-desde-2018--seg%C3%BAn-informe/47101146

4 *idem*.

5 *idem*.

school regularly⁶. The primary factors behind this alarming trend include the absence of running water, insufficient food at home, lack of electricity, absence of meals at school, and inadequate transportation options for getting to and from school. Anecdotal evidence further suggests that many children, especially the younger ones, receive fewer calories than necessary, leading parents to withhold them from school.

Regarding teachers and administrative staff, the federal teachers unions estimate that out of approximately 455,000 state-employed teachers (80% women and 20% men), over **160,000 teachers have exited the system or emigrated from Venezuela in the past five years**⁷. Presently, teacher income falls well below the global poverty line, with salaries equating to a mere \$15 to \$20 per month. Teachers' school attendance is adversely impacted by the same factors that influence student attendance.

The state of Venezuelan school infrastructure also provides clear signs of decay, with disruptions in the national electrical system, water supply, and telecommunications infrastructure. This has led to educational institutions **lacking the essential services required for students**: 62% lack proper lighting, 60% do not have functional bathrooms with running water, 70% are

6 "Encovi 2018, Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida", 2018. <https://www.proyectoencovi.com/encovi-2018-encuesta-nacional-de-condiciones-de-vida-copy>

7 "Más de un millón de venezolanos dejó de estudiar desde 2018, según informe". SWI swissinfo.ch, 10 de noviembre de 2021. https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/venezuela-educaci%C3%B3n_m%C3%A1s-de-un-mill%C3%B3n-de-venezolanos-dej%C3%B3-de-estudiar-desde-2018--seg%C3%BAn-informe/47101146

without an internet connection, and there are widespread issues in waste disposal⁸.

Lastly, despite the lack of a national tool or methodology within the public education system to assess student learning and academic advancement, the PISA tests conducted in the state of Miranda in 2009 had already revealed alarming statistics: 1 in 3 students couldn't read, and 6 out of 10 lacked fundamental math skills (OECD, 2010⁹). Extrapolating these findings to the entire country over the past 13 years positions Venezuelan students at levels **significantly below the regional average**.

Universidad Católica Andrés Bello's School of Education has recently released its latest report on the outcomes of the Online Knowledge Evaluation System (SECEL for its Spanish acronym), which assesses the actual learning levels of secondary education students in the country. This report was based on over 16,000 tests, with 51.69% focusing on mathematics and 48.31% on verbal ability. These tests were administered to an equivalent number of students from more than 50 educational institutions in Caracas and 17 different states across the country, ranging from the 4th grade of primary school to the 5th year of high school¹⁰. Of the participants, 84.73% were enrolled in private institutions, while 15.27% attended public-subsidized schools. The findings confirm

8 "Encovi 2018, Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida", 2018. <https://www.proyectoencovi.com/encovi-2018-encuesta-nacional-de-condiciones-de-vida-copy>

9 Centro de Reflexión y Planificación Educativa, "Evaluadas Escuelas de Miranda", 10 de enero de 2012. <http://www.cerpe.org.ve/noticias-lector-principal/items/95.html>.

10 "Resultados SECEL 2022: Rendimiento de los estudiantes de bachillerato sigue deteriorándose", Investigación UCAB. 17 de noviembre de 2022. <https://investigacion.ucab.edu.ve/2022/11/17/resultados-secel-2022-rendimiento-de-los-estudiantes-de-bachillerato-sigue-deteriorandose/>

a reality that specialists and educators have long been discussing: students within the Venezuelan educational system lack the necessary knowledge in mathematics and verbal ability, and their proficiency in these areas diminishes as they progress through high school¹¹. The learning gap is more pronounced between students in private schools and those in public schools. The researchers emphasized that the weaknesses identified predate the COVID-19 pandemic, although the pandemic did impact student learning due to the challenges of distance education. In light of these findings, they stressed the urgent need for educational management teams to implement support policies enabling teachers to perform their duties more effectively.

In mathematics, a staggering 67.70% of students (equivalent to nearly 7 out of 10) did not meet the required standards. Students from private institutions achieved an average score of 9.80 out of 20, while students from public-subsidized institutions obtained an average score of 7.87 out of 20. In the domain of verbal ability, 60.98% of students fell short, with 6 out of 10 not attaining the minimum knowledge in this subject. The average overall score among students from private schools was 10.48 out of 20, whereas students from public schools received an average score of 8.20 out of 20 points.

As per a 2020 report by the United Nations, the pandemic has triggered the most substantial educational disruption in recent history. This disruption impacted **over 1.6 billion students worldwide**¹². The COVID-19 crisis has widened the preexisting educational disparities between urban and rural populations.

11 *idem*.

12 United Nations. "Policy Brief: Education During COVID-19 and Beyond". United Nations Sustainable Development Group Agosto 2020. <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-education-during-covid-19-and-beyond>

The pandemic has also worsened issues like internet accessibility, food and essential services availability, and unemployment, which primarily affect vulnerable communities and their capacity to pursue their education. Furthermore, **the UN estimates that around 24 million students may abandon their education** or face challenges attending school in the upcoming academic year¹³.

It can be assumed that the failures identified above have only worsened due to the pandemic. With that in mind, I propose the following actions to improve our current educational system, based on the proposal presented as Plan País in 2019, in which I was able to participate:

1. **Design and implement an academic diagnostic test:** As mentioned, it has been over a decade since the implementation of an international test like PISA to assess the academic performance of our students. Unfortunately, the pandemic has had a detrimental impact on learning and knowledge transfer, likely exacerbating existing knowledge gaps. Students living in rural areas have limited access to the internet and telecommunications services, so their access to quality education has been irregular at best, if not completely absent, further widening the educational divide between them and their urban and private school counterparts. This is why conducting a diagnostic test is crucial to assess the current knowledge base of our student population. Based on the results, we can design and implement a national curriculum focusing on **essential subjects like literacy, mathematics, science, and citizenship**. The curriculum should adhere to international standards and provide educational materials for

¹³ *idem*.

teachers and students in all public schools. It should also employ the **“teaching at the right level” (TARL) model**, which could potentially reduce dropout rates. Additionally, the program could encompass teacher training and the provision of printed and virtual guides, along with pedagogical support materials for all primary and secondary education students.

- 2. Implementation of the Programa de Alimentación Escolar (PAE, or school feeding program):** As outlined in the diagnosis, a primary factor preventing children from attending school is the lack of access to food at school and in their homes. To address this issue, we must establish a school meal program that ensures all 7.3 million students in our educational system receive a daily meal with an optimal caloric intake. The initiative is already in motion through a plan in collaboration with the World Food Program (WFP), which aims to provide 1,500,000 meals daily by 2023. It's essential to include teachers in this program, especially while the economy is stabilizing and can gradually improve their salaries. The program should be introduced progressively, prioritizing localities identified as the most excluded, vulnerable, and impoverished in the country. There are two compelling reasons why a school feeding program is of utmost importance: firstly, there is a clear link between nutrition and school attendance, as well as improved academic performance; secondly, it can provide substantial assistance to economically disadvantaged households. In addition to the meal plan, I would recommend supplying **vitamins, antiparasitic treatments, and conducting quarterly anthropometric measurements**. These measures will ensure that our student population develops both cognitively and physically

by their age. This approach is vital as iron deficiency and intestinal parasites have also been identified as factors affecting nutrition and, consequently, academic performance.

3. **Recovery of school infrastructure with a focus on basic services and connectivity:** The COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled various areas needing improvement within our educational systems, with telecommunications, internet access, infrastructure, transportation, and basic services ranking among the most critical. These five factors are pivotal in determining student success, as having access to them can make the difference between thriving and struggling academically. Consequently, we must ensure that all educational institutions operate at total capacity for when in-person teaching is set to resume. This entails providing reliable, high-speed internet connections, a consistent electricity supply, access to clean water, and dependable transportation, with a particular emphasis on students in rural areas. A strategy akin to the one proposed for the PAE should be employed to reduce the growing educational gap between students in rural and urban areas, which the pandemic has exacerbated. Furthermore, I want to emphasize the significance of constructing libraries adjacent to each school to offer academic support outside regular hours. Libraries are renowned for their multifaceted impact on society, serving as a model for community development. The advantages of having libraries are numerous, including reducing children's unsupervised time on the streets, which can correlate with lower crime and violence rates, enhancing academic performance, and generating economic benefits for households. Parents can work full-time without the need

to pay for private services or take on part-time employment to look after their children, thanks to the resources offered by these libraries.

- 4 Highlight and accentuate the role of the family in education:** One of the silver linings of the pandemic has been the increased recognition by parents or legal guardians of the tremendous efforts teachers put in every day. Furthermore, I believe that it has reignited the understanding that education starts at home and that school serves as a reinforcement, with both environments intertwined. Without their synergy, the educational process won't yield the desired results. According to a 2020 OECD report, various forms of support from families and teachers, including emotional backing from parents and enthusiasm from teachers, play a crucial role in shaping positive attitudes toward learning¹⁴. Hence, we should harness this momentum to further enhance family involvement in education. To that end, we should develop collaborative strategies that enable teachers and parents to work in tandem to support students both at school and at home. Crafting activities in collaboration with parents under the guidance of teachers and providing pedagogical training to parents every month, tailored to their children's age, are measures that can expand the educational efforts carried out in schools. Simultaneously, they can amplify the impact of education on children while

14 Fabio Manza and Federica Meluzzi. "Strengthening Online Learning When Schools Are Closed: The Role of Families and Teachers in Supporting Students during the COVID-19 Crisis." OECD. 24 de septiembre de 2020. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/strengthening-online-learning-when-schools-are-closed-the-role-of-families-and-teachers-in-supporting-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis-c4ecba6c/#contact-d4e1969>

fostering a stronger and unifying bond within family homes.

5. **Provide support in menstrual hygiene to students and teachers:** According to a study by AVESA, a staggering 9 out of 10 women lack the financial means to afford menstrual hygiene products such as sanitary pads, tampons, or menstrual cups.¹⁵ Furthermore, they often lack access to clean water, making it challenging to maintain proper hygiene during menstruation. This dire situation can result in female students missing anywhere from 27 to 45 days of school, leading to the automatic loss of the entire school year as per the law. Consequently, it gives rise to a noticeable educational gap between girls and boys. The government should take responsibility for ensuring access to menstrual hygiene products for students. It could even implement programs that provide menstrual cups to the entire female student population. This approach would help ensure that our girls can continue their education without interruptions.

The proposals outlined aim to initiate a crucial discussion on how we can reenvision and revitalize the Venezuelan educational system. Education is a noble cause and a captivating aspiration. However, not everyone who supports it comprehends the intricate dimensions of the educational landscape, as evident in the five proposals presented. Realizing profound changes in an education system typically requires an investment spanning 15 to 20 years.

15 “Higiene menstrual, salud sexual y demanda de anticoncepción: Situación diferenciada de las mujeres en la emergencia humanitaria en Venezuela”, AVESA. 19 de agosto de 2020. <https://avesa.blog/2020/08/19/higiene-menstrual-salud-sexual-y-demanda-de-anticoncepcion-situacion-diferenciada-de-las-mujeres-en-la-emergencia-humanitaria-en-venezuela/>

Our responsibility is to forge a consensus on educational system reforms that garner support from all sectors and maintain a consistent commitment to achieving the desired outcomes. We must contemplate transforming our educational institutions into safe spaces where our children and young people can enjoy their childhood, dream of a brighter future, and believe in their potential to aspire to greater heights. Additionally, we face the challenge of devising an educational system while considering the realms of employment and economic opportunities for students who have, as victims of the complex humanitarian crisis, experienced setbacks in their cognitive and physical development, severely limiting their prospects.

The fundamental question is: who among us is prepared to commit to a 20-year investment in the transformation of the educational system and the steadfast follow-through on the necessary educational reforms? At this point, the only certainty I can attest to, echoing the wisdom of one of my closest friends, is that we must all play our part within our respective spheres and transition from the realm of uncertain hope to that of resolute certainty.