

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: David Toscana (born in 1961) is widely considered to be an important new voice in Mexican literature. The passage below is adapted from an editorial that originally appeared in *The New York Times* on March 6, 2013, as translated from the Spanish by Kristina Cordero.

THE COUNTRY THAT STOPPED READING

Earlier this week, I spotted, among the job listings in the newspaper *Reforma*, an ad from a restaurant in Mexico City looking to hire dishwashers. The requirement: a secondary school diploma.

Years ago, school was not for everyone. Classrooms were places for discipline, study. Teachers were respected figures. Parents actually gave them permission to punish their children by slapping them or tugging their ears. But at least in those days, schools aimed to offer a more dignified life.

Nowadays, more children attend school than ever before, but they learn much less. They learn almost nothing. The proportion of the Mexican population that is literate is going up, but in absolute numbers, there are more illiterate people in Mexico now than there were 12 years ago. Even if baseline literacy, the ability to read a street sign or news bulletin, is rising, the practice of reading an actual book is not. Once a reasonably well-educated country, Mexico took the penultimate spot, out of 108 countries, in a Unesco assessment of reading habits a few years ago.

One cannot help but ask the Mexican educational system, “How is it possible that I hand over a child for six hours every day, five days a week, and you give me back someone who is basically illiterate?”

During a [teachers’] strike in 2008 in Oaxaca, I remember walking through the temporary campground in search of a teacher reading a book. Among tens of thousands, I found not one. I did find people listening to disco-decibel music, watching television, playing cards or dominoes, vegetating. I saw some gossip magazines, too.

So I shouldn’t have been surprised by the response when I spoke at a recent event for promoting reading for an audience of 300 or so 14- and 15-years olds. “Who likes to read?” I asked. Only one hand went up in the auditorium. I picked out five of the ignorant majority and asked them to tell me why they didn’t like reading. The result was predictable: they stuttered, grumbled, grew impatient. None was able to articulate a sentence, express an idea.

In 2002, President Vicente Fox began a national reading plan; he chose as a spokesman Jorge Campos, a popular soccer player, ordered millions of books printed and built an immense library. Unfortunately, teachers were not properly trained and children were not given time for reading in school. The plan focused on the book instead of the reader. I have seen warehouses filled with hundreds of thousands of forgotten books, intended for schools and libraries, simply waiting for the dust and humidity to render them garbage.

A few years back, I spoke with the education secretary of my home state, Nuevo Leon, about reading in schools. He looked at me, not understanding what I wanted. “In school, children are taught to read, he said. “Yes,” I replied, “but they don’t read.” I explained the difference between knowing how to read and actually reading, between deciphering street signs and accessing the literary canon. He wondered what the point of the students’ reading *Don Quixote* was. He said we needed to teach them to read the newspaper.

When my daughter was 15, her literature teacher banished all fiction from her classroom. “We’re going to read history and biology textbooks,” she said, “because that way you’ll read and learn at the same time.” In our schools, children are being taught what is easy to teach rather than what they need to learn. It is for this reason that in Mexico—and many other countries—the humanities have been pushed aside.

We have turned schools into factories that churn out employees. With no intellectual challenges, students can advance from one level to the next as long as they attend class and surrender to their teachers. In this light it is natural that in secondary school we are training chauffeurs, waiters and dishwashers.

This is not just about better funding. Mexico spends more than 5 percent of its gross domestic product on education—about the same percentage as the United States. And it’s not about pedagogical theories and new techniques that look for shortcuts. The educational machine does not need fine-tuning; it needs a complete change of direction. It needs to make students read, read and read.

But perhaps the Mexican government is not ready for its people to be truly educated. We know that books give people ambitions, expectations, a sense of dignity. If tomorrow we were to wake up as educated as the Finnish people, the streets would be filled with indignant citizens and our frightened government would be asking itself where these people got more than a dishwasher’s training.

ESSAY TOPIC

What problems with the Mexican educational system does Toscana identify, and what solutions does he offer? To what degree are the problems and the solutions Toscana discusses relevant or applicable to an educational system with which you might be more familiar (such as the Chinese, American, Korean, or Finnish systems)? In formulating your response, be sure to structure your discussion using specific examples. Your discussion may draw on your personal experience, the experience of others, or any of your reading, including “The Country That Stopped Reading” itself.