
We remain committed to a possible better world and we believe that the basis of that desire is education

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Speech by Miguel M. Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, President of the Councils of State and Ministers, at the closing of the 2019 International Pedagogy Congress, Havana International Conference Center, February 8, 2019, “Year 61 of the Revolution”

I believe that La Colmenita has moved us all, it excited Sosita, we are all thrilled, and it is good that educators do not lose that ability to be moved, because when we get excited, we are able to inspire our students (Applause).

Dear educators, representatives of international organizations;

Ministers participating in the 2019 Pedagogy event;

Colleagues from around the world (Applause and exclamations of: “Thank you!”):

First of all, our congratulations to the best teacher-researchers of our country. (Applause)

When I was invited to close this event, I asked myself what to say to you, how to honor the work of the founders of this gathering, one of the broadest, most diverse and most popular educational events in the world.

How to summarize precisely, when today we need so even more, the dialogue that for so many years the participants in this Pedagogy Congress held with our Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, educator of the masses, and with comrade José Ramón Fernández, educator of

educators. (Applause)

But it has been enough for me to be twice among you over these days to sense their presence. Not only because you mention them or quote their words, but because in the program and in what I have been able to learn of the different symposia, workshops and meetings, the great motivation remains alive and active: the unity of educators. Not only Latin Americans or Ibero-Americans. Educators, such a beautiful word, which means so much.

A quick review of the history of these events reminds us that when they began, the decision to unite for a better world took precedence over all others, an idea that has prevailed over time. Then, you fought against the criminal foreign debt that asphyxiated our peoples, cutting educational budgets in most of the sister nations of the continent. And educators of the region came en masse, not only to gather experiences, but also to bring and share solidarity, which is the most beautiful and useful expression of unity.

It is very difficult to forget the magnitude of the first, and the following encounters, which became extraordinary events for the capital, for its schools visited by delegates, and for all Cuba, a country that cannot be ignored when it comes to education, literacy, teacher training, solidary cooperation, progress and shared practices.

With the accumulated experience of 15 previous encounters, you have now focused on the universal agenda directed toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal which is aimed to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

I would say that here are the best conditions to interpret, thoroughly analyze and make practicable that ideal.

The 60-year history of the Cuban Revolution vouches for that truth, almost like a mathematical axiom. The first step was the Literacy Campaign. Just two years after the revolutionary triumph, Cuba was declared a Territory Free of Illiteracy.

Then came the battle for the sixth and ninth grades, which drove enrollment in worker-campesino schools, to complete the upper middle educational level among workers.

Today we have one of the highest averages of university graduates – 21% of the total population of the country – of Latin America and the Caribbean, and much of the world.

This strength led us to promote and extend our cooperation with the entire Third World, creating literacy programs in our language and in indigenous languages.

And, logically, an event such as this needed to be born and grow, capable of showing and sharing the best experiences – with respect for the diversity and identity of each nation – that among Cuban educators has generated an extraordinary movement from schools, fostering creativity, innovation, experimentation, research and exchanges among them and their colleagues in the world.

As had been said more than once, the Pedagogy Congress is the most important scientific event of the Cuban teaching profession.

And it is also an inexhaustible source of solidarity among our peoples, with expressions of great

political and social commitment in each concrete historic moment. The final declarations of each edition attest to what I say.

On Fidel's passing, a young Cuban singer-songwriter, Raúl Torres, created a song that is like an anthem for Cubans. Although its title is "Cabalgando con Fidel" (Riding with Fidel), many call it "Los agradecidos" (The Grateful), because thus the poet defines those of us who haven't stopped thinking of him and defending his ideas.

Among the grateful of all professions, are Cuban educators. (Applause). They, you, like Fidel, know that we have much to achieve, and that all that we do for the dissemination of the knowledge that humanity has accumulated over centuries will never be enough. A lifetime is not sufficient to learn everything. Nor to teach everything.



Photo: Endrys Correa Vaillant

The merit is in the struggle, to always advance further, not being stopped by the obstacles. The case of this Pedagogy Congress can be cited as an example. Not even in the toughest years of the economic crisis of the 1990s, did these gatherings for the unity of educators cease to be held.

The Pedagogy Congress is the voice of the grateful in Education, of those who work for more and better access to knowledge, aware of what we are lacking, but also conscious of just how much we must defend, save and perfect.

Cuba, in recent months, has become a gigantic Constituent Assembly, on taking our new Constitution to a popular debate, prior to a Referendum, for which on February 24 we will vote Yes en masse, without a doubt.

Teachers and students of all levels are among the segments of the population that discussed with greater depth and enthusiasm the changes and new formulations for our Magna Carta.

I believe that this is due to the fact that, despite the criminal blockade that is being tightened, the financial limitations that hit us and delay the fulfillment of many of our dreams, the Cuban state has ratified, once again, its responsibility in terms of the absolutely free nature of education, from preschool to the conclusion of an undergraduate degree. And even more: to guarantee schools and full employment for graduate teachers at any level. This is something that surprises and is admired by many of our visitors. And it is simply a right, together with that of health, to which the Revolution devotes the largest budgets, as these are universal human rights and fundamental to our Martí inspired ideal of “conquering all justice.” (Applause)

Without any chauvinism, I feel that Cuba has long guaranteed that “inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all,” something that unfortunately remains an aspiration for many countries.

And the new Constitution reinforces all these concepts, is at the forefront of the most progressive trends in the world, and aspires to more, particularly in terms of quality, as the more educated and better informed people are, not only are they freer, as Martí stated, but they demand more.

Education and culture have the power to expand the horizons of knowledge infinitely. The desire to learn grows in as far as knowledge does.

In the coming months, two new special schools for children with physical and motor disabilities should be inaugurated, stemming from an idea of our First Party Secretary, Army General Raúl Castro Ruz, who was strongly impressed after his recent visit to an emblematic school of Cuban education.

The “Solidarity with Panama” school, inaugurated by Fidel 30 years ago, with all its facilities and services available to children with serious physical and motor disabilities who, nonetheless, achieve impressive development of skills and knowledge, thanks to Special Education, will very soon have the company of similar institutions, strengthened in specialties such as Vocational, Artistic and Scientific Education.

We are also immersed in the repair of those schools damaged by the devastating tornado that hit five municipalities of Havana on the eve of Martí’s birthday. And we have proposed to rebuild them even more beautiful and with better facilities for the education of their students. (Applause)

At the same time, the more than 300 teachers from those areas, who were affected to some degree, and yet did not abandon their teaching responsibilities, must be recognized, encouraged, and supported. (Applause)

The extraordinary solidary spirit of our people, the very values that Cuban education shapes, with all its imperfections, which we recognize and constantly criticize, has allowed us to break records in recovery times of basic services.

I believe we owe much to the emphasis that our education places on history, and on its most prestigious protagonists. We are in a period of patriotic commemorations for the 150 years of the beginning of the independence wars, and the 60th anniversary of the revolutionary triumph of 1959.

Our young people know, even though they didn't live it, that Cuba suffered 60 years of dependence on and neocolonial subjugation to the United States. The Revolution, in that same period, 60 years, has erased its consequences of profound inequality, racism, elitist education and exclusion. But schools have a duty to maintain that awareness in each generation that is educated in our classrooms.

We defend and exalt historical memory, culture and identity as a shield of sovereignty, "so that our children will not have to beg on bended knee, for the homeland which their forefathers won for us on their feet," as Rubén Martínez Villena said, a young Cuban poet and revolutionary of the 1930s.

The current technologies have imposed new communication codes, and we are committed to their knowledge and healthy, critical, creative use.

Fidel was the first to realize the value of the Internet to truly democratize communications. He said that it appeared as if created for revolutionaries, due to the ability to spread messages at a negligible cost and with an infinite reach.

But he also warned us of the risks of plunging into the oceans of information of the Network of Networks, without the necessary knowledge and critical awareness to use it without being used.

The greatest and most serious problems of the world today are settled in this immense network, that connects us subtly or openly, and it is necessary to confront such scenarios with sufficient knowledge to avoid being objects at the service of the worst interests, or uncritical subjects of an environment that compromises even the survival of the species.

Back to schools. Without them, the most wonderful instrument of human intelligence would be just a useless toy, or a mirror to satisfy vanity. With them, with the tools that they contribute and the critical awareness that they shape, a better world will be possible in a shorter time.

In her opening remarks, Minister Ena Elsa Velásquez spoke to you of the four pillars on which government management is built. The fundamental aspect is the connection with the people, and addressing their problems and demands, appealing to the participation of all, and the search for more than one alternative solution, in a permanent exercise of communication.

For this management to be effective, it is necessary to apply knowledge in depth, in the use of new technologies, and we are committed to this with the talent and contributions of our technical schools and our universities. But, at the same time, we defend an education that informs students of the political complexities of today's world, of the causes and origins of conflicts, the interventionist and overwhelming vocation of empires, and the right of the peoples to defend their dignity and sovereignty, as well as to value integration among nations of a similar composition, development, and interests, as a destiny essential to survival.

That knowledge is what makes us despise wars, defend just causes, practice solidarity with those who suffer, resist and overcome all forms of punishment that they attempt to impose on us for trying to forge our own path.

Under that conviction, we consider any scenario as useful to demand respect for International Law, non-interference or intervention in Venezuela (Applause), an end to the blockade and the threats against Cuba and sister nations like Venezuela and Nicaragua. (Applause)

In a text that every educator of our lands should know —“Maestros ambulantes” (Itinerant Teachers) — José Martí said: “Men need someone to stir their compassion often, and cause their tears to flow, and to give their souls the supreme benefit of feeling generous; through a marvelous law of natural compensation, he who gives of himself grows, and he who turns inward and lives from small pleasures, is afraid to share them with others, and only thinks avariciously of cultivating his appetites, loses his humanity and becomes loneliness itself. He carries in his breast all the dreariness of winter. He becomes in fact and appearance an insect.

“(...) Men grow, they grow physically and visibly, when they learn something, when they begin to possess something, and when they have done some good.

“Only fools or egoists talk of misfortune. Happiness exists on earth, and it is won through prudent exercise of reason, knowledge of the harmony of the universe, and constant practice of generosity.”

He wrote this in May 1884, but they are words that have the value of eternity, like almost everything we know about Martí.

Compañeras and compañeros:

I allow myself to approach these words to thank you for your presence here, your contributions to Cuban, Latin American and universal education. To express our permanent willingness to cooperate and exchange experiences and knowledge. To confirm that in Pedagogy, as in the Cuban Revolution, there is no rupture, there is continuity. (Applause)

We remain committed to a possible better world and we believe that the basis of that desire is education.

Thank you very much for making it possible every day.

See you at the next Pedagogy event! (Ovation)
