

Pernicious Complacencies

29/11/2014 12:00 am Por Velia Govaere Vicarioli / CatedráticaUNED

http://www.nacion.com/opinion/foros/Complacencias-perniciosas_0_1454254561.html

The prospects of nations can be measured by the concerns of their leaders. There are those who are anxious to please with the litany of historic achievements. They are recognizable by their characteristic ready-made phrases that exalt the pride of a usually mythical past.

There are also those, albeit fewer, the world over, visionaries who confront their own people, denouncing social stereotypes that pass for respectable collective imagery. We have some of those, and we remember them. When they were not vilified or ignored, they managed to leave indelible marks, after having challenged their generation to break traditional paradigms.

Shallow phraseology. Among us there is an abundance of shallow phraseology that is easily swallowed. It includes “the land of teachers not soldiers,” that fails to add “who have not kept up, who have no certifications of quality or evaluations of their performance.” In this demagoguery, there is also “the hundred-year old democracy” of a political class of scant quality, and we can’t forget “where there is a Costa Rican, there is freedom,” with more inequality in ... “the happiest people in the world. And the comedy goes on.

In politics, the bad is blamed on those who came before us, and the good is always yet to come, without ever defining it, emerging perhaps magically from “dialogue.” Some place in our wasted times, there is a lost paradigm that is seeking us but doesn’t find us. This inexplicable dissatisfaction is what leads us to keep looking for the new, risking everything under the spell of the unknown, only to take refuge in any passing glory, most recently soccer.

By contrast, Korea... Ah! That country whose leaders dare to question the most respectable stereotypes of their own society.

An admirable people. Can academic education become a stereotype? The leaders of Korea believe that it can, to our consternation. We are well aware that the entire world admires this country that, in education, has managed to score higher on the PISA exams than many of the most developed nations in the world. Their well-paid teachers are highly respected in society, and there, becoming a teacher is harder than becoming an engineer. Families unite to support their children’s studies, and airlines even interrupt flights during high school exams.

Do Korean leaders rest on their laurels? They could, and I believe they deserve to. With that idea in mind, I attended the talk given by Dr. Ji Yeon Lee on technical education in Korea, in the context of the National Convention on Vocational Education that was recently held in San Jose.

Understandably expecting to hear a bit more about the well-known Korean educational achievements, to my surprise I heard only criticism of their system. Dr. Lee did not stop at vainglory but expounded instead on the critiques by Korean leaders of their current paradigms. She spoke of the great controversy around the fact that the exaggerated social value placed on

academic education is seen as a detriment to the competitive need for more of a high-level technical orientation for their youth, with the aim of meeting the challenges of a globalized world.

In perennial transition. Korea is a country that understands how incorrect social visions can be modified with public policies that understand them. In Korea, they don't mull over what they have already achieved, but rather ponder what they still need. They emphasize public policies not in terms of complacency over noteworthy achievements, but rather in terms of challenges in a future in a permanent state of change, in which they always dare to dream that they will occupy a place of honor. They don't compare themselves to neighbors easy to beat, such as their compatriots to the north, but rather to Germany and Switzerland.

We could say that Korea is a country in perennial transition, in this case from a generically educated society to one that is specifically competent. The Korean guideline to shift away from being a society oriented toward academic education to one that targets competencies is noteworthy. What stands out in this vision is the flexibility of educational centers to be able to modify curricula in line with the needs of business and the central role played by industry in the processes of curriculum design and of evaluation of educational centers, teachers, and students.

Likewise, Korea shares the evaluation of the faculty and of the graduating classes of technical students with the productive sector. Without this vision of commonality of interests between the government, leaders of education, employees and employers, it would be difficult to have a continuous process of standardized adaptation of the vocational education of teachers.

An example for us. This integration between the educational and the productive realms seeks to learn from the experience of business, and it is an example for us, who still are carried away by the archaic opposition between capital and labor, and we don't even take the first steps toward a dual education that never quite takes off.

I would like to be positive and dare to think that we are capable of going beyond our own stereotypes. Costa Rica has a collective imagination that places education at the center of its priorities. The same is true of Korea. We have this in common. But we only pay lip service to it.

It's time to put an end to that pernicious complacency. We lack the reposition of that collective vision as our highest national priority, not in generalities, as it has been up to now, but in substantial terms. What can I say? Cassandra never had many friends.