

Keynote Speech
“Pedagogy 2021” Congress

“THE CUBAN PEDAGOGY AND ITS EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES IMPOSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC”

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Distinguished personalities;

Esteemed colleagues;

As you can see, this Twenty Seventh Pedagogy Congress is being held for the first time in a virtual format due to the circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the world.

However, if we act with flexibility and intelligence, which is a common feature shared by educators from all our nations, we will always find the ways and means to exchange the best experiences to support education at a time when the necessity to educate, in the full sense of the word, reaffirms its validity: to educate for life, adaptation and transformation; to care for our most cherished treasure, which are human beings. Fortunately, we can count on educators, who are the best of all the resources available to meet our challenges and implement initiatives without ever giving up.

The year 2020 has cast lights and shadows on all Cubans. The shadows were meant by the existence of this terrible pandemic that is taking a toll on human lives and is posing a permanent threat and is also dealing the country’s economy an overwhelming blow.

In our case, this terrible disease has been accompanied by the intensification and tightening of the criminal blockade imposed by the government of the United States against Cuba for more than six decades now. Recently, we strongly and absolutely condemned Cuba’s fraudulent designation as a State sponsor of terrorism.

It is also known, beyond any possible doubt, that the true motivation behind this action is to impose additional obstacles to any prospective restoration of bilateral relations between Cuba and the United States.

We reaffirm that Cuba is not a State sponsor of terrorism. That is a truth recognized by all. Our country's official and well-known policy as well as its impeccable behavior has been to condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, particularly State terrorism by whomever, against whomever and wherever it is committed.

The behavior of this revolutionary Island cannot be put into question. The entire world knows who we are; which are our values, convictions and principles. In these days we have received the international support and we appreciate it, for we have been recognized as a fraternal, humane and internationalist country that offers love without asking for anything in return.

Cuba makes progress day by day. The wellbeing of the people remains our top priority. Friendly countries have highlighted the Cuban government's concern to provide education and health for all. Several options are being pursued to acquire medical equipment, medicines or the raw materials necessary to manufacture them at home. The care we provide to our children, adolescents and youths; the home-based benefits we grant to mothers whose children suffer from severe disabilities and the protection we give to pregnant women and senior citizens are some of the distinctive features that characterize our work.

We have always been enlightened by the intense and permanent lights irradiated by the attitude of our people and their educators in coping with adversities; their resilience and unshakable determination to struggle and prevail. It is as if the myth of Sisyphus had evolved from isolation to the existence of many hands acting in concert to prevent the rock from rolling down the hill.

The fact is that, despite the imperialism and its intentions, we stayed our ground. And what is more: we have the conviction and determination to keep on staying our ground.

That is why, now and forever, our first words are and will always be to highlight the merit of Cuban teachers who, against all odds, regardless of

scarcities, difficulties and setbacks, are always devoted to defend our ideas and care for their pupils, being increasingly aware that love conquers all.

I have referred to the shadows, which have been the pandemic and the imperialist blockade. But in this year 2021 there have also been lights that have illuminated and guided us through. The sixty second anniversary of the Revolution, among other commemorations observed in January this year, evoked a major accomplishment we have highly cherished ever since, which was the triumph of social justice for the first time in our history. That victory paved the way for all other laws and measures that truly benefitted the people, which are some of the important part principles that we defend. And then April will come, also full of lights, marking the sixtieth anniversary of the proclamation of the socialist character of the Cuban Revolution and the victory over the mercenary invasion through Bay of Pigs; as well as the celebration of the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba, our Party, which will discuss and adopt new working guidelines in the interest of the people and will issue new guidance for Cuban schools through their continued improvement process.

You may very well understand the impact that the pandemic has had on all our nations.

The situation facing educational systems due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare our problems and weaknesses, but it has also compelled us to identify the reserves that we have, based on educational innovation, to improve, update and place in context as many aspects as necessary.

Only the educational systems that engage in continued improvements are capable, under the present conditions, to guarantee access by all students, continue developing distance education with the participation of families and turn homes into schools.

Our everyday challenge is to maintain a universal and free education system, despite the obstacles imposed by our historical enemy and the new approaches resulting from the current epidemiological situation. Life, which is our greatest teacher, has kept on teaching us that it is indispensable to live by re-thinking ourselves and adapting whatever we were used to do to the new circumstances. An example of that has been the way in which this virtual Congress has been organized. This Congress

was first held in 1986 at Havana's Conference Center and was attended by 6 000 educators in-person. Today we are faced with a different reality. If we had not been used to continuously look for new alternatives in the face of the imperial siege, our mindset would have been different.

Thus, in order to ensure the continuity of the educational process amidst the pandemic, the Ministry of Education resorted to the capacities created in our country and made available all the existing teaching aids and technologies.

That was possible because since the year 2001, at the initiative of our Commander in Chief Fide Castro, we have had a television channel devoted to education whose programs have a national coverage. Right now we also have CINESOFT, a company devoted to the production of audiovisual and ICT products which provides teachers with the necessary supporting aids through a data transmission network that manages an educational portal (www.cubaeduca.cu) as a repository of the products and resources produced by the aforementioned company as well as the contributions made by teachers and researches from all over the country.

This endeavor is based on the results of the Third Process of Improvement of the National Education System. The conception and principles of this process support the work and curriculum adaptations that are introduced in this phase, which allowed us, among other things, to implement several pedagogical activities, namely:

- The broadcasting of classes through the Educational Television Channel for all students, which is complemented by the use of textbooks and other school materials.
- The use of provincial television channels to support teaching activities, depending on the epidemiological situation and characteristics of every territory.
- The inclusion of sign language interpretation and other related skills in all television programs to facilitate the inclusion of students with special educational needs.

- The design of specific programs for the technical and professional education, adult education and the training and upgrading of the teaching staff.
- The live broadcast of information panels through the Educational Television Channel for the purpose of clarifying the doubts students or their families may have about the teaching and evaluation systems.
- The design of applications for computers and cell phones, free of charge for the families, with psycho-pedagogical teaching aids, such as “MochiMente” and “MiClase TV”, which were designed for mobile phones based on an Android operating system, which allow users to freely download the teaching activities broadcast on television. We have also introduced a national tutorship service that is available on a permanent basis that we call On-line Tutor, which works ‘round the clock to attend to the doubts and questions asked by students and their families. As part of that same effort, access to the Cubaeduca.cu portal was made available free of charge.
- The diffusion of spots intended for public good, including health education in times of the pandemic and social and emotional support messages.
- The use of territorial alternatives to reach out to students and families, such as the WhatsApp groups among students, families and teachers. Teachers communicate by phone to provide instructions and clarify the doubts of students, parents or tutors. From the schools, librarians have attended to the requests for books and didactic materials and have ensured their distribution to students’ homes and communities.
- The attention, through several ways, to students with special educational needs or those who maybe sick.
- Guaranteed education for children, adolescents and youths who live in remote areas and communities where there is no electricity and the creation of the necessary conditions to ensure this process in each and every case, according to the characteristics of every municipality.

- A close follow-up on the control and evaluation of the work of day-care centers in every province, with all the guarantees required by working mothers who entrust the education of their young children to these institutions, where there is a staff of well-trained and loving educators fully devoted to their work.

After the re-opening of schools, the preparation of teachers to provide individualized attention to the personal experiences of students who have been affected by the pandemic has been a top priority. Some were infected with the disease; others suffered the loss of loved ones or remained isolated because the community where they live happened to be under quarantine. There were also those who observed a strict discipline and remained for a long time without going out from home to avoid being infected. All of that is part of an ongoing research.

Last but not least is the continued monitoring of the telephone lines established to receive the complaints and suggestions of the population.

The method that has made it possible for us to move forward and correct in due time everything that needs to be corrected has been the systematic dialogue with everyone. By using this method, which is also implemented by the top leadership of our country, we get to know the opinions and criticisms on the program of action that has been designed. For example, since most of the teleclasses are broadcast live, it is possible to take into account the recommendations from students, teachers and families, who are permanently in touch with teleprofessors.

The design of curriculum adaptations for the conclusion of academic year 2019-2020 and the beginning of academic year 2020-2021 was the result of a research carried out by the Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, which has promoted an exchange with researchers, specialists and professors of different educational levels. Following that same procedure we determined the new lines of research in the area of Educational Sciences and other related sciences.

In my condition as Minister of Education, I have been joined by other officials from the Ministry of Education in several large audience information programs broadcast by the Cuban television not only to give information but also to answer questions and address the concerns expressed by educators, families and the population in general about

different aspects related to the work of educational institutions under the present conditions.

Likewise, we have established a system of videoconferences to interact with officials from all provinces of the country, which has been decisive in our work. If education is a task of all, as Fidel taught us, we have to permanently listen to all and learn from all.

We are aware that there are still deficiencies and that we have a long way to go. But we believe we have found a way to go forward, for there is a will to listen, learn and correct everything that needs to be corrected as we go.

It is also true that we have learned from the new circumstances. We are committed to change and transform schools. We are witnessing the creation of a school within the family environment and we are making a more intensive use of audiovisual aids. We have learned to adopt a different approach to the role of Educational Sciences, the optimal use of technologies and the irreplaceable figure of the teacher. We welcomed all the technologies that have allowed us to carry out our activities with students; we welcomed the diversity of forms and methods that have favored social distancing and the elimination of the concentration of persons in all our activities; we welcomed the revolution that is taking place in all means of education for we are pleased to realize that the role of teachers in the training of students, far from being minimized, is being reaffirmed like never before.

Those of us who are educators know that teachers are the soul of schools, for their human warmth, their knowledge, their sensitivity, their love for students and their capacity to communicate with families. We teachers are, in our own right, and indispensable part of the spiritual vanguard of peoples.

Therefore, the training and upgrading of the teaching staff is a strategic task in any nation's educational system. While engaging in that lofty endeavor, we should not cease in our efforts to continue encouraging a broad scientific movement among teachers at every level that would contribute to find the necessary solutions to the present and future problems facing the educational system by using scientific methods, which is equal to say by working with objectivity and with the participation of all the essential factors that take part in the teaching and learning process.

That means to promote creativity based on the requirements of our times, with great regard for the advanced pedagogic praxis and research results.

When teachers engage in research, their ideas and mindset are changed. They become imbued with scientific spirit and methods and start to see their classrooms as an environment for observation and inquiry. That is very much in tune with our ideal about schools, with the progressive existence of educators who manage a learning process and a type of education that would teach students to think, while favoring the possibility for them to play a prominent role, to the extent that classes would be more like invitations to reflect together, to share together, to create ideas, dialogues and controversies together, to respect the opinions of others even if they are different from ours; classes that would turn the expression of criteria into a working style, because schools are not only a reflection of the society in which they work, they are largely a preparatory phase that paves the way for social improvement.

Thus, authentic classes, moving away from hackneyed paths and obsolete didactic procedures, deserves to be at the center of the educational work, with all the creativity they demand and with maximum respect for the personal style every educator stamps on them.

I know that every country has an arsenal of experiences, some of which will be presented at this Congress. Let us take advantage of the lessons learned and cooperate in the effort to continue moving on towards the achievement of a common basic curriculum for our nations; promote the production of the means and resources necessary for the digital transformation of the teaching and learning process; share our experiences and lessons learned; the research made in the field of education, educational technologies, school health and the management of disasters, including epidemiological disasters. Likewise, we should reinforce our commitment to achieve an inclusive, equitable and quality education while promoting opportunities for life-long learning for all, as established in one of the Sustainable Development Goals.

This coordination is a thousand times worthy, because all of us are united by love and the commitment to our students, to turn them into good, decent, cultured and virtuous persons, and that would always be far more important than any differences that we may have. I invite you, with absolute

respect for diversity, to always find more reasons to unite us and minimize the ones that may distance us.

Our mission as educators will always be to unite, emphasize our commonalities, support each other in the richness of the best pedagogical traditions of our nations, in the development of the mindsets resulting from a culture of emancipation, which is both an alert and a form of struggle against the cultural colonialisms and hegemonisms that threaten us in several different ways by those who control the world's powerful media.

January 1 this year marked the 130th anniversary of the publication of José Martí's enlightened essay "Our America". Those pages continue to be a program, a cultural platform for our nations.

He then wrote, for his time and our own times, among other key ideas, the following:

The conceited villager believes the entire world to be his village [] unaware of those giants with seven-league boots who can crush him underfoot [...].

Serene and visionary, he further on added:

Nations that do not know one another should quickly become acquainted, as men who are to fight a common enemy.

[...] Trees must form ranks to keep the giant with seven-league boots from passing! It is the time of mobilization, of marching together, and we must go forward in close ranks, like silver in the veins of the Andes!¹

Going forward in close ranks! ; knowing one another better; helping each other better; exchanging more among ourselves; preventing our students from being trained with a conceited villager mentality, but rather as peoples "who should quickly become acquainted, as men who are to fight a common enemy."

Let us fight together for our cultural identity, for our traditions, for our pedagogical ideals, for our common values and hopes.

¹ José Martí: "Nuestra América". Edición crítica. Investigación, presentación y notas: Cintio Vitier, Centro de Estudios Martianos, La Habana, 2000, pp. 9, 10 11)

That is the best legacy that we, educators, can pass on to the newer generations that are springing up, that future that is already seated in our classrooms.

Let that be, noble educators who are accompanying us, our commitment to our conscience; our commitment to the greater homeland that we share, which is planet Earth; and our commitment to the future and our duty.

Thank you, very much.