

author

Educating for life. Thinking about the school we want



Pepe Menéndez (1956, Barcelona) has more than four decades of experience as a teacher and has spent more than ten years as an international consultant on educational matters for institutions and governments all over the world. He has a degree in Journalism from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and has been the rector of the Joan XXIII School in Barcelona and deputy director of the Network of Jesuit Schools of Catalonia. He was co-founder of the European International Education school association. He has a blog, 'pepemenendez.wordpress.com', where he publishes a series of educational conversations, and he is the author of the books "Educar para la vida" (2024, Siglo veintiuno editores) and "Escuelas que valgan la pena" (2020, Paidós).

INTERVIEW WITH PEPE MENÉNDEZ

by Ana Moreno Salvo

In your book "Educar para la vida" (Educating for Life), you ask the following question: What should we teach today to guarantee knowledge that makes us more human? Could you tell us which three lessons you would prioritise?

This is a question that it seems to me that educational institutions should ask themselves on a permanent basis. The first idea would be: it is not a question that can be answered and then dismissed, but a question that basically has to serve as a constant challenge because of the incessant changes that we are experiencing. It used to be said that things changed every few years, but now we can

almost say that they change every day. I would cite three lessons which I think should be prioritised. The first would be to teach how to search for information, discern sources and organise thinking based on rigorous data. We could summarise that with the idea of learning how to learn. But we also have to study to learn. And above all, schools should help to organise a solid way of thinking based on the rigour that comes from data, history itself and reliable sources. That's learning.

The second priority for me would be to work in a team, to know how to engage in teamwork, which seems redundant. But it also means an ability to understand other ways of being and thinking. That is, it

harbours a willingness to learn by understanding other ways of being and thinking, especially with an attitude that means we learn from others in all their diversity. In other words, it means learning to do and learning to live together. And at the same time, of course, it means learning to do.

And the third priority would be to connect learning with the construction and development of one's personal life project, which, in the words of the legacy of the Delors report, would be tantamount to learning to be.

How do you think that the binomial being + knowledge should be resolved in the age of artificial intelligence?

What we need to do is be careful how people use this powerful tool. We know that artificial intelligence is not intelligent inasmuch as it takes advantage of the data that human beings feed it.

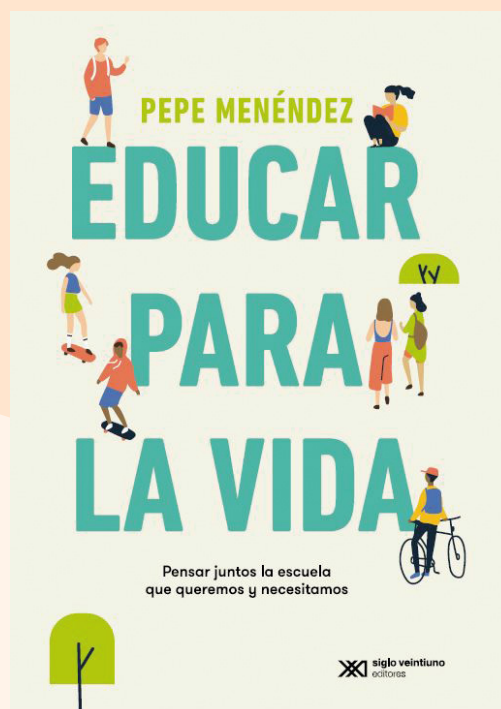
It seems to me that the great tools that human beings have given themselves throughout history, from the wheel, to fire, to the printing press, to gunpowder, to the laser beam, are all very powerful for doing both good and evil. That is precisely where their power lies: they are tools capable of doing good and evil depending on the way humans use them. Toni Matas said that we had an idea, excessively distorted by fiction and films, that artificial intelligence was going to overtake human beings. If education is unable to understand that technology is part of human existence and one of the tools we can use according to our educational goals, the question will be: What others will govern education?

What does the value of humanising school and learning as restorative processes mean to you?

My restorative vision has to do with a permanently critical view on the very becoming of humanity. For example, when we look at the twentieth century, we see that it is one of the most terrifying centuries from the standpoint of violence and human conflicts, but it is also one of the centuries that essentially developed the entire welfare state in Europe. It is the great century of the universal right to education. In other words, I like this critical but optimistic view of history, in which the main challenge is how we live, how we understand those advances and how we move forward on issues such as analysing climate change and the national histories that migratory movements have called into question.

Today the history of Spain cannot be taught as it was back when I was a student, now that we have schools in Catalonia with a huge North African population. You can't tell what other countries do when basically you're telling the story of the victors. These national histories based on winners and losers, with the migratory movements that we have; the debates on sexual identity; the dominance of patriarchy based on the permanent, preferential, dominant presence of the white man: this is an entire way of understanding the world... All of this is what we should be looking at now, in my opinion, with a restorative vision, which does not mean demolishing or taking a

Artificial intelligence can be a powerful tool, but it will depend on how humans use it for good or evil



hypercritical view of the whole past without taking into account certain contexts.

I think that one of the most obvious examples is that education has not always been an element of humanisation. It has often been an element of domination, even of forcing students' personality to adapt to a certain way of being, to a certain profile, in terms of not only cultural considerations but also forms and identities. Education has also been enormously valuable in the past, and it remains so, but we have to look at it with a critical, restorative eye. Let's think about the number of people who experience major traumas today as a result of their time at school. I am no longer talking only about abuse but simply about relations, about the relational environment. That is, school has also been a place of competition, the abuse of power, if you will, and classification. So, in my opinion, the restorative approach is a look from love and gratitude, as well as from the ability to build critical thinking that leads us to ask ourselves what is going to make schools truly more humane.

Educating in freedom means that students really take their own decisions and that their personal process is respected

What do you consider to be the key aspects of educating students in freedom?

If we focus on empowering the students' life projects, something that has become more prominent now than ever, it is important that students really take their own decisions and that their personal process is respected. To me, freedom has to do with the system's ability to adapt to each person, not the other way around. What we have to do is make sure it does not become a kind of head-on collision with a school system that has closed itself off. And we can't ignore the fact that people also have to adapt to social norms, conveniences, needs for the sake of coexistence and pragmatism.

What should not happen is for students to think that going to school is a kind of sacrifice they have to make, and that freedom, creativity and decision-making will come later, when they are adults. Early childhood is a crucial stage in forming a person, and I believe that has to do with the education of freedom and character.

How can the methodology of questioning foster a holistic education, an education for being, which puts the whole person at the core of the educational process?

Questioning is consubstantial with human development from the time a child is a baby. It is about curiosity, wanting to know, asking, questioning. We learn by asking good questions. With the advent

of artificial intelligence, one of the best exercises a person can do is to analyse what kind of questions they ask ChatGPT, how they formulate them. This may even be far more interesting than the answers they receive. To give an example of this, Melina Furman proposes an exercise that involves asking questions that cannot be solved with a single click of a search engine, that cannot be answered with 'yes' or 'no'. If I ask: 'Why is democracy so beneficial?', we are practically signalling to students that they have to answer in a politically correct way, but we're not actually asking them to think. A good question is one that forces a person to look for information, read, compare and decide which option seems better. And it's even better if those questions lead to good teamwork, in which we learn more from others, from their different way of seeing reality, by working with peers.

For me, learning with questions means learning to make connections between different kinds of knowledge after lots of reading and questioning, learning not to give an answer but to ask yourself new questions.

Right now, the instrument that very powerfully connects us with information is technology. It connects us with competencies related to reading comprehension and learning in all the major fields of knowledge. Methodologies are always functional and instrumental; they are seldom an end in themselves. But most of them have ideological components, an understanding of what we think learning is. Let's remember, for example, when the printing press was invented, how it practically scandalised those who held the power of knowledge. The same thing is happening now with the Internet.

That's why I say that questions, which are really a classical technique, are pretty much the

learning methodology *par excellence*. In addition, if we connect with the technological resources available historically, namely writing, printing and now the Internet, we get the same methodology, but extraordinarily enhanced through technological resources. I believe that the idea of integral education linked to questioning essentially has to do with a person who interrelates knowledge and is capable of basing their thinking on rigour and data. For example, if you use technology just to cut and paste, you're using the methodological resource of repetition, which scientific evidence shows has very little solidity, very little consequence in the subsequent consolidation of the student's knowledge. In other words, we have to relate what we want to consolidate, what we want to deepen, with the technology we use.

What teaching role does this new way of viewing education demand, and how do you work on the teacher's educational identity so that they know how to support students and be a role model?

I think now than ever it is more difficult to be a teacher, because it is also more difficult to be a parent, and because it is also more difficult to be a representative of public institutions. This is because everything is much more horizontal than it was 40 years ago, and because even access to knowledge, access to information, the very cultural conception of the dignity of the person and their rights

Questions are a classical technique, the learning methodology "par excellence", now enhanced by AI



have evolved a great deal. Some sectors are nostalgic for the time when teachers were the fount of knowledge, because students did not have those levels, but now knowledge is much more accessible for everyone.

Knowledge-related professions are much more demanding now and require much more versatile skills than they did years ago. In the past, it was enough for a teacher to know their field of knowledge. Now, however, they are asked to know much more about the teaching-learning process, psychology and conflict resolution, and they have to be capable of having a horizontal relationship with their students. And teaching is a typical knowledge profession. At the same time, we

find that the universalisation of school education, which has been a huge social conquest, has also strained its quality.

Major conquests often present us with new challenges. We still cling to old paradigms in the conditions of entering the profession of teaching, when the challenges of its practice have changed a great deal. I am surprised that in some sectors there is a kind of nostalgia for an idealised school, where students had outstanding skills and a zeal to learn. I think that that schools weren't quite that good and their students weren't quite that well prepared.

The requirement that the entire population should have a good level of education is an enormous challenge. And from my standpoint,

it should also be parallel to a country's own social, educational, cultural and economic conditions. In other words, we ask schools to be equitable and able to attend to this enormous diversity so that students leave with solid, firm judgement, but society does not support them and schools can't do it alone.

Teachers are facing much greater challenges; hence the need for

We still cling to old paradigms in the education profession, when the challenges have changed a great deal

If we change our predisposition towards relational learning, we will be better able to teach teamwork

training for all the activities we do, not only in training courses. Teachers are trained when they attend an assessment meeting or an activity preparation meeting. And they have a key idea in their heads: I am learning how to do this activity with others. If a teacher changes this predisposition, they will be much more capable of teaching students to work in teams because they will have done it beforehand, with that attitude of relational learning and preparing things for the good of other people. We have to do things this way, because nobody can teach what they haven't experienced, that is, what they don't know experientially. You don't learn how to work in teams from a teacher who has only read great books on teamwork. You do not learn to support a student if you have not experienced the process of supporting your own administrative team, the people around you who have helped you to grow throughout your professional life. You don't learn to ask good questions and get students to work with good questions if you haven't previously learned to ask those good questions through an exercise. I think there has to be a major change in the conception or in people's understanding that we are in a permanent process of transformation.

Do you think it is possible that one day machines will take over the role of schools?

Schools, like other social institutions, are not an isolated element; they

are in a crisis of recognition which all institutions are experiencing, even democracy itself. Why is that? It's because of the increase in horizontality in relationships and something that is costing us a lot as human beings: the speed of so much change keeps us from consolidating what has come before. So, a positive opinion of schools will not come by either good words or decrees, far from it. In reality, just like other social institutions, schools are called upon to earn their authority by the recognition that society gives them.

This means, for example, that society ends up understanding that schools not only have value as custodians of children and adolescents when parents work, but that they have a real, relevant, significant value in children's and young people's vital process of development. I think that sometimes we ask schools for things that are beyond their reach, like a kind of perfectionism. I also see that we demand the same of families. At the same time, we ask or tell schools that their authority has been lost.

Schools have to make an effort to earn that authority, just as other institutions do. If teachers can be replaced by machines, it is because they are only focused on transmitting information. And in that sense, machines are much more powerful. If schools continue to focus primarily on being spaces for transmitting information, teachers will gradually be replaced by technology. However, if schools focus on the most valuable thing they have, which is helping the advancement of the integral formation of children and adolescents, that is, of human beings, if they focus on that through learning knowledge, then they are irreplaceable.

A machine, at least the machines we imagine, cannot empathise

emotionally beyond the polite words it uses. ChatGPT, for example, tells you: How can I help you? If you say: Good morning, it replies: Good morning. In other words, it has formally acquired a polite formulation from information from human beings. But it is only a formulation. There is no soul behind it, no ability to empathise with another person's pain. So we will see things that can be learned with machines, but schools are unlikely to be replaced by machines that provide personal support. If we lose the sense of the very purpose of education and the educator, one who teaches by contagion, we will lose the human factor, and then we can be replaced by machines. But if we focus on the process of humanising schools, they will be irreplaceable. Human beings are irreplaceable.

You talk about the kind of school leadership that makes things happen. What characterises this kind of leadership?

'Making things happen' is a famous expression coined by the Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz. People, increasingly, and teachers, have always done things not by decree but out of conviction. The fact that teachers are usually alone in the classroom means that they have to be convinced of things in order to actually do them. In this sense, education, or teaching even more than education, is a process with strong intimate components. If we turn now to administrators, one of the lessons learned from the

If schools focus on the most valuable thing, helping the advancement of human beings, then they are irreplaceable

pandemic was that administrative teams were more highly valued. Their role really was strategic. I held many sessions with schools in Spain, Portugal and the Americas on learning from the pandemic. And one of the lessons that teachers pointed out was that they now valued the role of administrative teams more.

At that time, their role had strong organisational components, but at the same time it was also important in terms of what the priorities were, how teachers could be guided to keep students learning. In that sense, I think we need leadership geared at improving teaching and learning processes. We need leadership linked to student support, to creating relational contexts that favour this learning. And this calls for an administrative team profile with the ability to learn and move teachers' competencies and beliefs towards the conviction that everyone can

A good leader has knowledge of pedagogy and of guiding people towards a common project

learn. The characteristics of this leadership are people who have a solid knowledge of pedagogy and the relational part, the psychology of human groups, to help them to get to know each other better, work as a team and guide them towards a common project. We need leadership that takes advantage of teachers' competencies and experiences to improve practices. We do not need substitutive leadership, that is, replacing teachers with

each other, although in some cases it is necessary.

Good leadership knows teachers' competencies and experiences and puts them to work to improve practices in order to serve the educational project. This type of leadership requires humility. Sometimes there is a lack of perseverance. These people in administrative positions should be the first to meet these conditions of willingness to learn, willingness to work with others, empathy, honesty.

We need this training to focus more on professional skills, on the personal skills of mobilising people and resolving conflicts and knowing how to recognise and promote talent, and less on accumulating knowledge about regulations and technical issues. Making things happen not by decree but by stimulus, mobilisation or seduction is much more complex.

