

# Revista de Administración Pública

# INAP

**Miguel Agustín Limón Macías and José Luis Cuéllar Garza,  
(coordinators). (2011). *Los Libros de Texto Gratuitos:  
Una política de Estado en México.*  
*Perspectiva de medio siglo.* Mexico: CONALITEG. 289 pages.**

**Francisco Díaz de León Mendiola\***

The book titled “*Free Textbooks: A State policy in Mexico. Perspective of half a century*” makes a balance, a trip and a history full of vicissitudes in regards to Free Textbooks (Libros de Texto Gratuitos (LTG)). This book recreates the collective and institutional efforts of the National Commission for Free Textbooks (CONALITEG) in over five decades of existence. Free Textbooks are part of a public State policy based on liberty, equality and justice ideals; essential principles for the education of kids and youngsters. They comprise many generations of Mexican’s dream of knowing more about their past, present and future; thus, the State is fulfilling one of its constitutional obligations.

This book facilitates reflection and the understanding of political, social, cultural and educational circumstances CONALITEG has gone through and the development of LTG. It also makes us wonder, as an instrument how do LTGs promote the teaching-learning processes in public education in Mexico? Additionally how do we explain all of the years elementary education has not been related to LTGs? On the other hand, what is the role of CONALITEG as the institutions responsible for the edition, printing and delivery of free textbooks? To answer this we will try to make a brief review of the opinions of specialists that conformed it and their proposals could eventually become the future detonator to make better decisions and considerations regarding LTG and CONALITEG.

In this context, chapter one by José Javier Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Sergio Negrete Cárdenas addresses the following topic: “*Free textbooks as public policy and its impact on compulsory basic education in Mexico*”; the authors explain the theoretical differences between public policies

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and States policies. However, they make it clear that free textbooks are a redistributive policy because public resources are spent in a specific activity which benefits a sector of the population. We recommend the reader to stop and carefully scrutinize this excellent chapter which shares with us the decisive stages and moments to decide if CONALITEG's work should continue and consequently free textbooks.

The historical review examines the Mexican State's tries to implement a free textbook policy, identifying clearly two periods (1921-1944; 1944-2011). In the first period social education was promoted, this kind of education was fruitful due to tensions between the well-off class, the church and the State; in the second period the educational policy of free textbooks becomes a reality thanks to Jaime Torres Bodet; the 1960 school year was the first one where free textbooks were distributed.

The section by Gutiérrez and Negrete also analyzes presidential terms of Adolfo López Mateos up to the one of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa; emphasizing the relevance of this public policy and its vicissitudes are explained by the economic and political moment of each government. It also emphasizes the promotion of teachers' participation in the free textbooks history.

On the other hand, Luis Mario Aguilar and Maya Medrano are in charge of chapter two: "*Historical and financial perspectives on CONALITEG: budgetary behavior and economic impact*". They accurately state that free textbooks have been here for five decades and withstood social, economic and political situations in Mexico. It is also true that few government programs have stayed relevant and transcended time.

The author's approach is mainly based on making an institutional balance of the past, present and future proposals; this goal is achieved by making a detailed examination of CONALITEG's financial operation. The institution's budgetary behavior is divided into three stages: the first one associated to stabilizing development (1958-1970); the second one known as shared development (1970-1982) and the third one identified as economic openness (1982 to present). At the same time it identifies the impact free textbooks have on family economy, productivity and the coverage of school enrollment; topics that are directly related to Mexico's macroeconomic framework.

It is important to emphasize that this book has an economic component, throughout it economics terms appear, this does not mean reading and understanding it are uncomfortable to those who are not familiarized with them. On the contrary, it allows us to historically, economically, politically and socially analyze the financial and administrative organization of CONALITEG that allows it to, plain and simple, produce and distribute free textbooks to every corner of the country.

The reader should find it exciting to find ample data, numbers and periods graphically illustrated so as to compare the country's political-economic circumstances. It is also worth checking the analysis done by Luis Mario Aguilar in regards to the income-expenditure relationship of families based on the savings gained through free textbooks. It is also important to understand the relationship between school enrollment and the provision of public education service, the latter's evolution is on the rise, although there are unfulfilled infrastructure challenges; that is, more and better schools. One conclusion is we have to recognize CONALITEG's enormous legacy that has helped Mexico's basic education.

Ernesto Azuela Bernal and Natalia Rivera Hoyos wrote chapter three: "*Textbooks and public opinion*", which captures citizens' perception of this educational material which is seen as public goods. The authors think that because it is a universal access good and an instrument to configure public space in Mexico. Their chapter is based on a questionnaire –which is included- which 1000 people answered in September 2011, the questions covered the following topics: a) the learning process in classrooms and schools thanks to free textbooks; b) the way these books are perceived and their meaning in people's experience and c) interviewees' perception of free textbooks and reading experience.

The results of this survey confirms that free textbooks are a public good related to national education, which has undoubtedly supported the consolidation of the educational system in Mexico. In the educational policy context, they have constituted an essential patrimony in the construction of common references and shared elements between individuals and society that make up a mirror that reflects our national identity.

This chapter presents some graphs that illustrate data from the survey, they enrich the content and illustrate the results in a simple and convincing manner; a technical card is also included to present the data collected by the company of Berumen y Asociados, which lists the attributes people give free textbooks.

The book ends with an appendix developed by Mario Guillermo González Rubí which summarizes the interventions of renowned academics in the "*Free Textbooks: fifty years of public policy in Mexico*" Symposium, which took place on the summer of 2011 in the Faculty of Superior Studies Acatlán of the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

It would be unfair not to write a few lines to those people whose hierarchical position and responsibilities made possible the political, educational and administrative transcendence of CONALITEG. There is an old proverb that says that while people go, institutions remain. Surely there will be much

more to write on free textbooks in the future. We recommend this book, a pioneer work that will surely bring forward new questions and contributions to give continuity to this topic.