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Research article

A socio-historic overview of social pedagogy and social work in Mexico

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Abstract

In this article, we offer a socio-historic overview of the development of social work and social pedagogy in Mexico. First, we examine the rise of the welfare state in Mexico in the immediate post-revolution period and the way the new secular government assumed control of social intervention. We describe the inception of the School of Social Assistance and the emergence of social work in the country, as well as exploring the role and influence of Cultural Missions and the training of social workers. We discuss the role of Fundamental Education, rural schools and their resemblance to the ideals of social pedagogy. Finally, we describe the founding of the Degree in Educational Intervention, which we consider sows the seeds of socio-pedagogical thought and practice in Mexico. We conclude that, despite the many periods of reorganisation of social intervention by successive governments, different initiatives use education to promote individual and collective development. Though social pedagogy does not exist as a profession in Mexico

and social work is an imprecisely defined profession, education has a socialising potential that underpins pedagogical work of an extensive network of areas and agents animated by social ideals and goals.

Keywords social pedagogy; social education; popular education; history of social education; social work; history of social work; Mexican social professions; educational intervention

Introduction

One of the key features of social pedagogy is its lack of theoretical and methodological homogeneity. Social pedagogy is a diverse, complex and heterogeneous field, in which academics and professionals converge and, at times, diverge. Since there is not a single and unified model or theory of social pedagogy, it has not been possible to develop a sufficiently general definition accepted by all social pedagogues (Janer Hidalgo and Úcar, 2021). According to Janer Hidalgo and Úcar (2021), another feature of social pedagogy is the constant tension between scholars and professionals who have different views on how to present the discipline in real contexts. Scholars prefer using discursive technicalities, while practitioners use a vocabulary akin to the communicative forms of target populations.

Janer Hidalgo and Úcar (2021) found that socio-pedagogical approaches worldwide share some common traits: (a) social pedagogues work in the community and human development realm; (b) social pedagogues produce political knowledge, with which they contribute to the debate on educational and social policies; (c) social pedagogues are influenced by the political systems and moral values of their countries (in each context, they commit to social justice, community education, social equality and citizen participation); and (d) social pedagogy's professional field is broad and heterogeneous, and social pedagogues work in educational, social and cultural fields.

According to Mátel and Preissová Krejčí (2016), social work is a profession, a science and an academic discipline. As elemental as it sounds, it is a series of activities performed by specific actors called social workers. These activities are aimed at the clients, the social environment and the relationships between them. The goals of social work are: (a) empowering the clients and helping them to better their living conditions through the enhancement of their social responsibility and participation; (b) mitigating environmental impact to create favourable social conditions; and (c) fostering the mutual adaptation between the clients and their environment for improving social functioning (Mátel and Preissová Krejčí, 2016). That is to say, social work 'seeks to improve quality of life through the coordination of social resources' (Úcar, 2021, p. 3). Social work is also present in a variety of fields. Among them, Mátel and Preissová Krejčí (2016) identify labour, social affairs and family, healthcare, justice and education.

In this article, we offer a socio-historic overview of the development of social work and social pedagogy in Mexico. Sometimes both disciplines converge, sometimes they diverge. It should be noted that we only address the historical and contextual peculiarities of Mexico and that we have deliberately kept criticism to a minimum.

The rise of the welfare state in Mexico

Historically, Mexico has designed and implemented a wide variety of government programmes geared towards the country's development. In the immediate post-revolution period, the construction of a national planning system based on the 1917 Constitution began (Herrera Tapia, 2009). From that moment on, Mexico acted as a welfare state that intervened in the lives of its citizens through social programmes (Revueltas, 1993). The post-revolutionary state separated from the Catholic Church so that the new secular government assumed control of social intervention. It should be noted that, at the dawn of the welfare state, Mexico was devastated by armed conflicts and by the geographic dispersion of its population. Furthermore, the country's communication and infrastructure systems were quite precarious, forcing people to stay in their villages, or for a few to go from one village to another.

In the early 1930s, Mexico underwent a process of consolidation of its statehood. It began to configure public institutions linked to education, health and social assistance. These new institutions were key for the creation of the first schools of social work, as well as for the recognition of social work as a formal profession (Ribeiro, López and Mancinas, 2007).

At the end of the Revolution, the country had an extremely low level of socioeconomic development and a population that did not reach the minimum levels of well-being (Ribeiro et al., 2007). Development and welfare were major challenges, and financial resources were scarce; therefore, the government only implemented social policies oriented towards health and education. On the one hand, the government considered that health was essential to achieve high social development; on the other hand, education was understood as a means to both construct citizenship and stimulate the development of the country (Ribeiro et al., 2007). During the post-revolutionary years and beyond, the government gradually expanded these services. Paradoxically, although a lot of efforts were made, the government never managed to overcome the lag in health and education. This was partly due to the geography of the country and the uneven distribution of the population. The cities began to concentrate large population conglomerates, while the rural areas, distant and impoverished, were left empty of people. Overcrowded cities suffered from a lack of public services, and sparsely populated rural areas were simply ignored by the central government.

The process of expanding education and health services throughout the country required teachers, physicians and nurses (Ribeiro et al., 2007). As a result, in 1933 the School of Social Assistance was founded. It was necessary to have trained staff to attend to social needs. This is how professionalised social work emerged in Mexico (Silva Arciniega, 2016).

In the post-revolutionary period, social workers began to be inserted in public institutions that provided specialised services in the social field. According to Ribeiro et al. (2007), social workers carried out auxiliary actions and were not considered for the planning and management of the activities in which they took part. They were junior professionals who operated outside the decision-making processes.

In this same period, the role of the missionary teacher was still prevalent, which had emerged from the deeply rooted Catholic tradition in Mexico. The missionary teachers' goal was to spread education across the country. Social workers and missionary teachers had a common workspace in the development of the country – a strategy which was called the Cultural Missions programme.

The Cultural Missions: the first socio-educational experience

In 1910, 74 per cent of the Mexican population was illiterate. Much of the population had no idea of the geographical and cultural configuration of their home country. One of the main challenges for the rulers was to construct the idea of a 'nation'. Before the Mexican Revolution, pre-1920, there was no national identity, since the Spanish conquerors maintained a social organisation that differentiated indigenous people from Spaniards and *mestizos* (people of mixed ancestry). Each group therefore had its own idea of the territory in which they lived. The Spanish considered the territory as belonging to the Spanish Crown, while the indigenous people thought that their territory had been expropriated by the Spanish, and the *mestizos* were in a twilight zone – that is, they were not sure if they belonged to Mexico or Spain.

A highly influential figure in the early years of the development of the Mexican state was José Vasconcelos (1882–1959): a Mexican lawyer, politician, writer, educator, public official and philosopher. Vasconcelos promoted the idea of constructing a Mexican culture and consolidated the Cultural Nationalism philosophy. In 1920, Vasconcelos was appointed head of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. From that position, he proposed the creation of the Ministry of Public Instruction of Mexico and was appointed minister of education in 1921 (Ocampo López, 2005). For Vasconcelos, education was the core business of the state. As Minister of Education, he promoted some of the most important educational programmes of the twentieth century:

- (1) Literacy at the national level and the creation of schools in all corners of the country, including the creation of industrial, technical and agricultural schools for the practical training of Mexicans and to promote employment.
- (2) Missionary teachers, based on Catholicism, whose function was to locate indigenous villages, study their culture and learn about their needs.
- (3) The rural teacher training schools.

- (4) The Cultural Missions and the Houses of the People, in charge of training teachers and promoting the economic and social improvement of the communities (Ocampo López, 2005).

In 1923, Vasconcelos designed the Federal Education Missions Plan, which was aided by the Chilean pedagogue Gabriela Mistral. The first Cultural Mission was carried out in Zacualtipán in Hidalgo through the First Social Institute (Gamboa Herrera, 2007). The Cultural Mission consisted of a chief of mission, a group of teachers, a social worker, an expert in hygiene, childcare and first aid, a physical education teacher, a music teacher, a crafts specialist and an expert in school organisation and teaching methods (Ocampo López, 2005).

The Cultural Missions were the first national socio-educational strategy promoted by the government and, as we have previously mentioned, missionary teachers and social workers took part in this national project. The primary aim of these missions was to train rural teachers. However, the missionaries promoted social, economic and cultural changes in the communities where they worked (Calderón Mólgora, 2016). Social workers joined the missions in 1926. Their job consisted of caring for families by addressing issues such as hygiene. At that time, social issues were becoming increasingly relevant, and so the Ministry of Public Education contemplated creating a Department of Social Welfare. This initiative did not crystallise, but it made clear the social orientation of the Cultural Missions.

The Cultural Missions were part of an ecosystem of public policies oriented to what Czarny (2008) calls 'productivism', that is, the determination to subordinate the school apparatus to economic development in rural areas. This ecosystem was made up of rural schools, cultural missions, education committees, regional indigenous boarding schools, the regional peasant school and, finally, rural teacher training schools (Vargas Salguero, 2020).

The Cultural Missions were an efficient means to disseminate the educational policy of the revolutionary government. The missions had a strong civilising spirit. According to Vargas Salguero (2020), they brought principles of hygiene, home medicine, vaccination and first aid to rural areas. As well as these factors, they helped mothers improve their parenting practices. The rest of the family was integrated into processes based on cooperation and affection. They also taught home economics, skills related to agriculture and rural housing construction. Finally, at each of their locations, the missions made available kitchen equipment, carpentry, agriculture and gardening tools, a library and a medicine cabinet (Vargas Salguero, 2020). This was the geographic and cultural framework in which social workers moved.

Starting in the 1950s, social policies diversified. Governments were interested in addressing issues such as housing, demographics, poverty, the elderly and troubled youth. Social workers began to join the public institutions that provided these services. From that time until the beginning of the new millennium, the material changes were not numerous. The state continues to be incapable of guaranteeing universal access to education or ending poverty. Governments have dedicated themselves to allocating a large part of social spending to development areas that do not include specific intervention programmes aimed at single mothers, women victims of violence, older adults, and so on, which is a labour market for social workers (Ribeiro et al., 2007) or social educators.

In the next section, we explain the emergence and development of social work and social education in Mexico.

Emergence of social work in Mexico

In Mexico, as in all Latin American countries, the Catholic religion has been a predominant force in all social sectors. One of the roots of Mexican social work was the charity and aid activities carried out by Catholics. In colonial times, the Catholic Church was the only institution that had the organisational strength to offer social assistance. Of course, that aid was primarily aimed at converting indigenous groups to the Catholic faith. During the independence process, the charitable intervention continued. It was a way to cope with social chaos and an opportunity for the Catholic Church to take advantage of the government's inability to improve the situation and carry out its proselytising actions with little or no interference. This scenario was maintained with the reconstruction of the state, owing to the 1910 Revolution (Evangelista Martínez, 2013; Herrasti and Rodríguez, 1975; Valero, 1999).

In 1933, Guadalupe Zúñiga, a judge of the Juvenile Court, proposed the creation of the School of Social Assistance. This school had a paralegal orientation (Silva Arciniega, 2016). At that time, social work professionals tried to respond to the social needs of people involved in legal processes. This aspect of the profession remains today.

Mexican social work developed from a welfare inclination, while the country struggled for economic and political consolidation (Valero, 1999). However, welfarism was undermined by the neo-Marxist critiques of the dependency theory (Ander Egg, 1977). Some schools of social work in Mexico began to reject social assistance and institutionalised work. This caused a separation between professional practice and academic training. According to Evangelista Martínez (2001), during the 1970s, social work as a profession found itself between two opposing positions. The first – more ideological and linked to teaching – adopted a ‘liberating pluralist’ emancipation orientation, which leaned towards social transformation. The second was more adaptive and put into play mechanisms of relativisation and mediation of individual and social problems and needs (Evangelista Martínez, 2001). As a result of this bifurcation, social work gradually developed an association with social policies based on an uncritical commitment to the problems that afflict society. This lack of criticism came about because most social workers operate in the government sphere. In this sense, social workers became agents of government policies, that is, when working in the field, they applied what their employer asked of them, but did not participate in the design of those actions. In other words, they did not participate in policy-related decision-making (Evangelista Martínez, 2001).

The field of action of social workers was limited in the late twentieth century. For this reason, they relied on the theoretical contributions of other social sciences made outside Mexico. The nation’s government remains the largest employer of social workers; however, more recently, social workers have started working in private companies and non-governmental organisations.

Training of social workers

In Mexico, the first degree course in social work was created in 1967, at the Autonomous University of Nuevo León (Evangelista Martínez, 2001). The first master’s programme commenced in 1975 at the same institution. In 2001, there were 28 universities offering training in social work at the bachelor’s degree level (Covarrubias Ortiz, 2002). Currently, there are five master’s programmes and one doctoral programme. Interestingly, most social workers decide to study at the technical and professional levels and very few have a master’s or doctoral degree.

In curricular terms, the programmes tend to be quite heterogeneous. However, the emphasis on methodological aspects is clear. Specifically, there is a clear interest in training for community intervention. The contents related to ethics, social welfare policies and research seem to be of little importance. Paradoxically, in practice, most Mexican social workers do not do community intervention or case studies; instead, they work as public officials managing and recruiting human resources. As we have said, they do not play a part in the construction, planning, management or evaluation of projects, programmes and social policies. Since they are part of the system, institutionalised social workers do not favour the change of the status quo; that is, their actions are not oriented towards social transformation (Evangelista Martínez, 2001). Likewise, social workers have neglected the systematisation of their professional practice and, as such, a theoretical body of the discipline has not been developed, to the point that social work has a professional status that does not reach the level of other social sciences (Evangelista Martínez, 2001). Hence, the labour market for social workers is narrow and they are often at a disadvantage compared to other social scientists. Part of this decline in the quality and importance of social work has to do with the institutions that train social workers. These educational institutions have failed to establish a meaningful relationship between the teaching and learning processes and labour market demands.

At present, social work in Mexico is in crisis. Social workers have a confused and ambiguous professional identity and have a subsidiary role compared to other social professionals. Historically they have been employed by governmental institutions; however, increasingly, social workers have begun to occupy positions in the human resources departments of private companies (Ribeiro et al., 2007).

In 2019, the Chamber of Deputies (Cámara de Diputados, 2019) proposed the reform of the Education Law. As part of the reforms, the deputies recommended that social workers should become part of the staff of Mexico’s state schools. Social workers would diagnose and evaluate social problems, and implement prevention and care strategies to enhance the integral development of the students and their communities. The deputies believed that this proposal would strengthen the profession and help solve the problems of Mexican students.

The proposal was approved. The updated Education Law now establishes that the state will offer educational guidance and social work services to students from basic through to higher education. Social workers must foster a critical awareness in students for helping them to select their lifelong training pathways. This process favours students' personal development and the well-being of their communities. It is worth mentioning that the law does not specify how the social worker will promote this critical awareness. However, psychologists and educational psychologists already offer educational guidance and social work in some schools, so it is still extremely hard to define the precise role of the social worker.

From the missionary teacher to Fundamental Education

As we explained earlier, José Vasconcelos fostered the concept of missionary teachers. Missionary teachers travelled the country looking for indigenous communities and studied their economic conditions and social needs. They recruited rural teachers to serve the neediest residents, and for that they had to speak the native language and have sufficient pedagogical knowledge to train the teachers they recruited (Castillo-Castro and Luna-Alfaro, 2010). During the 1920s and 1930s, the recruited teachers were sent to establish rural schools. In 1926, the US philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey visited Mexico and, after learning about this system, commented that the new Mexican rural schools programme possessed a great spirit of the intimate union between school activities and the community (Vargas Salguero, 2020).

Since its inception, the rural school concept was thought to address the concerns of vulnerable groups from an educational perspective. The rural teachers organised and guided the daily activities of the community members and it was believed that this community effort was a lever for local development (Vargas Salguero, 2020).

By the 1920s and 1930s most rural teachers did not have professional training. Consequently, the Ministry of Education conducted courses to improve their general knowledge and pedagogical practice and to standardise their educational ideals. The courses focused on educational sciences, educational psychology, school organisation and administration and applied sciences. The actions of missionary teachers, rural teachers and social educators were similar; indeed, their work underpinned rural education in Mexico. Later on, around the middle of the twentieth century, a new educational project called Fundamental Education arose.

Rural school and Fundamental Education were crucial to including marginalised communities. In both projects, schools became a key part of communities. Villagers went to school not only for education but also for guidance on problem solving. Education stopped being just for children and incorporated the entire community. In the mid-twentieth century, teachers believed that community work improved everyone's living conditions (Vargas Salguero, 2020).

Fundamental Education was a model used by UNESCO during the post-war period. According to this concept, educators not only should teach reading, writing and basic calculations, but should also promote democratic principles. They should also encourage community development by teaching science and technology applicable to everyday life. Education should address the needs of communities by incorporating the work of their members (Acevedo Rodríguez, 2020).

To operationalise the concept and apply it in different nations, the Fourth General Conference of UNESCO proposed the creation of six regional centres of Fundamental Education in five regions of the world. The centres aimed at training professionals in Fundamental Education to work within communities and to produce printed and audiovisual educational materials. Teachers ran activities on literacy, nutrition, hygiene, health, production techniques, radio, theatre and film (Acevedo Rodríguez, 2020).

In 1950, UNESCO, the Organization of American States, and Mexico signed an agreement to create the first Regional Center for Fundamental Education for Latin America (CREFAL). CREFAL began operating in 1951 and received several students from various Latin American countries. Teachers, UN specialists and students defined Fundamental Education as the integral education of the community, which includes men, women, children, the home, the economy, recreation, health, literacy, as well as the hardships, joys, ambitions and desires of their inhabitants (Centro Regional de Educación Fundamental para América Latina, 1952).

Community development was a basic element of Fundamental Education. That being the case, professionals applied the community development method. Teachers used educational materials designed for addressing the members' needs and encouraging community participation.

In the 1970s, as a result of Latin American dictatorial regimes, Fundamental Education began its decline. Another factor was the application of neoliberal measures, which limited the resources allocated to CREFAL. Neoliberalism favoured a productivist labour education based on competition. Since then, CREFAL has been fighting illiteracy in rural areas of the country.

The National Pedagogical University and the Education Intervention

In Mexico, the history of the professionalisation of teachers has been complex. The result is a national training system whose organisation and functioning are heterogeneous. This heterogeneity has various causes. One of them is the diversity of agents taking part in the regulation, creation, maintenance and development of teacher-training institutions. Each successive government has created different teacher-training institutions with the same aims, which seems to suggest that it is easier to create new institutions than to reform existing ones (Arnaut, 2004).

These institutions dedicated to teacher training only trained professionals to work in the National Educational System. In 2002, scholars of the National Pedagogical University created the Bachelor of Educational Intervention (LIE). In 12 out of 32 states of Mexico, they found the social needs that could be addressed through educational programmes and strategies. According to the degree profile, the graduate can intervene in social and educational problems transcending the boundaries of the school (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 2002). They can analyse processes to conduct effective interventions. The educational intervener not only works in the classroom but also attends to social needs such as literacy, education for life, social inclusion (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 2002). The programme has six specific training paths: education for young people and adults; educational management; early childhood education; interculturality; social inclusion; and educational orientation.

The educational intervention programme recognises other workspaces. However, the term 'educational intervention' has generated disagreements among the professors of the programme, which has resulted in a series of inaccuracies not only in the meaning but also in the delimitation and other substantial elements that hinder the understanding of this programme (Matus López, 2019).

Matus López (2019) defined educational intervention as a socio-educational action that implies a process of accompaniment, mediation and irruption to address the needs of the community or enhancing the capacities of populations, groups or communities for coping with their problems. Nevertheless, most of the graduates from the LIE continue to work in schools as traditional teachers. They are the closest we have to a social pedagogue.

Conclusions

Mexico has a population of 126,014,024 (INEGI, 2021) and is one of the countries with the highest levels of inequality in the world. The gap between rich and poor is wide. For example, the richest man in Latin America lives in a country where more than 50 million people live in poverty. The fight against poverty and inequality has failed due to erring policies applied over the years. These policies have temporarily alleviated poverty but they have not promoted equal opportunities for Mexicans (Oxfam México, 2021).

Despite so much disparity, different initiatives use education to promote individual and collective development. These initiatives have been developed outside the official educational system. Among them, we find the Cherán K'eri Educational Project (Baronnet, 2017; Morales and Lira, 2013), the Zapatista schools of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Baronnet, 2009, 2015, 2018; Baronnet and Breña, 2008; Núñez Patiño, 2013), the University of the Earth (Beltrán Arruti, 2012; Esteva, 2014; Zaldívar, 2009) and the Peasant and Indigenous University Network (Hernández-Loeza, 2014; Tlacomulco Huerta, 2016) among others. These initiatives have had little or no government support. Some support from international funding has even been blocked or hampered by the government.

As we have seen in this article, unlike other Latin American countries, the Mexican educational system does not train professionals in social pedagogy. In some countries, socio-educational functions are performed by social workers. However, in Mexico, social workers are bureaucrats and have a secondary role compared to other professionals in the social sciences. Their work is different from that of social pedagogues.

However, in Mexico, teachers are trained exclusively to work in schools. During the first decades of the twentieth century, within the framework of rural education, also known as popular education, teachers were trained to be part of the social transformation of the country and to work with and for the communities. However, the ideology behind those good intentions sought cultural homogenisation. For instance, the government required that all Mexicans speak Spanish. In this way, the identity of the indigenous peoples was and continues to be attacked.

Another important stage in the training of social action professionals in the country, with an impact on Latin America, was the boom stage of CREFAL. Fundamental Education had strong government support and was guided by the idea that social pedagogues have been campaigning for throughout the history of their discipline: namely that education should contribute to social and community development. This stage ended with the application of the neoliberal model in the 1970s.

According to Caride, Gradaïlle and Caballo (2015), social pedagogy is still considered a novelty in educational sciences in Mexico. However, this discipline is a professional reality and an academic space. Furthermore, it has a long-standing presence in most of the countries that embraced the principles of the welfare state. In these countries, including Mexico, it is still necessary to assume the relationship between social realities and education. Those realities are full of opportunities for better personal and collective development. Education has a socialising potential and optimises the pedagogical work of an extensive network of areas and agents animated by social ideals and goals (Caride et al., 2015).

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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