

Introduction

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, researchers in the field of education have witnessed and participated in the emergence of new ways to learn about reality. Structural topics of social processes have been combined with an interest in exploring individual actions and the ways in which individuals appropriate culture.

Through different approaches, knowledge of the local and the quotidian began to be vindicated from the perspective of the individuals. Although in some cases the interest in highlighting the role of subjectivity led scholars to view individuals as entities independent of their social environment, the debate around the consistency and depth of the knowledge generated about the individual prompted researchers to rethink their focus in order to unveil links between the macro and the micro, between the individual and the social.

Through everyday work, life careers, and social practices, the way in which individuals express the influence of their environment began to be documented. This approach has offered not only new ways to look at social events, but also a better understanding of the individuals' ability to process what the world around them prescribes them.

In the field of history, the emergence of new approaches allows us to have a deeper knowledge of educational processes, the way in which they materialize, and how teachers and students translate the guidelines established by governmental bodies into practice. Approaches such as cultural history, socio-critical perspectives, and biographical narrative offer analytical views that help to open new veins of knowledge on the way that individuals process and materialize educational guidelines.

The biographical approach highlights the study of the individual, viewed within a context that permeates the individual, but does not determine the way in which the individual directs his or her life project. As historians specialized in biography say, be careful not to let context run free, because it might eat the character.

Risks also appear at the other end, when biography scholars tend to favor the individual over historical processes and institutions. In these cases the risk is overestimating the individuals' capabilities, believing that their individual production is entirely due to their own life experience.

Biases towards either the context or the individual are constant risks in biographical studies. As gaps appear during research work, the temptation arises to fill them with generalizations taken from the surrounding historical background. Conversely, when we have an abundance of personal information, it is like being offered a variety of delicious dishes: we become greedy and eat too much, and with so much information about the individual we might lose sight of

the environment that made the individual's production possible and the relationship between that production and the environment. Thus, the most important element in the construction of a biography is to mind the balance between the context and the subject of the biography.

In this framework, our invitation to researchers to write studies based on the biographical method had resonance and yielded good results, since most of the essays in this issue of *Diálogos sobre Educación* were written from this analytic perspective.

In a first group we include three texts that allow us to see the impact of individuals in the creation of educational institutions, the dissemination of pedagogical know-how and the way in which teachers assimilate the orientations of educational program.

The first one, in chronological order, is the essay "Matías de la Mota Padilla and the project of a university for colonial Guadalajara in Nueva Galicia", where Marina Mantilla describes social aspects of one of the most influential actors in the creation of this university and its institutional features. The biographical elements she mentions help to underscore the pivotal role played by educated individuals in the kingdom of Nueva Galicia in lobbying and promoting the opening of new educational institutions.

The promotion of education also followed other roads, as told in the essay "Ponciano Rodríguez: teacher and literature entrepreneur, 1893-1921". In this document, Rosalía Menéndez shows how a teacher's biography allows us to learn not only about the commitment teachers make to the dissemination of new pedagogical approaches, but also about the diversity of activities teachers undertake to bring editorial projects to fruition. The narrative recreates an example of the articulation between early twentieth century educational policies in Mexico, teachers with better pedagogical training and the processes that led to the materialization of their proposals. Through this teacher's career, Menéndez describes how the promotion of pedagogical know-how was organized and how the teaching elite contributed to its dissemination throughout the country.

The early decades of the twentieth century in Mexico witnessed not only a renovation of teaching traditions and the establishment of novel cultural policies, but also a confrontation between groups in power and the Catholic Church. The *Cristero* struggle and the controversy around the ideological orientation of education are clear expressions of projects and actors fighting over the formation of new citizens. This is the scenario of "Two rural teachers in Durango, Mexico: from the *Cristiada* to *henriquismo*", in which Celia del Palacio recreates the experiences of two teachers who decided to apply the postulates prescribed by the proposal of socialist education in rural communities. Throughout her narrative, Del Palacio shows not only the resistance encountered by that teaching model, but also the risks faced by the teachers to carry out their work. Worthy of note about this text is the fact that Del Palacio relied on the family archive left by the teachers, which included personal writings, official documents and photographs.

In a second group we include three essays that also rely on the biographical method and date from more recent times. They address the participation of female teachers in managerial positions in the educational administration, experiences on punishment at school and individual examples of how teachers assimilate and translate educational policy into action within teaching environments.

In the text “Gender and empowerment: a life story told through the experience of teaching in San Luis Potosí”, Juan Manuel Guel recounts the story of a female teacher who held higher management positions in the educational administration in San Luis Potosí, Mexico for over a decade. Her narrative gives us a glimpse of the way in which the power structures that restrict the access of women to spaces of greater social status are expressed, and the empowerment developed by this teacher to preserve her position within the hierarchy of the state’s educational system.

In the essay “School punishment memories. Graduate student stories”, María del Carmen Gutiérrez and Bernardo Martínez discuss an old recourse used by teachers to assert their authority and control over their pupils: bodily punishment. The authors address this issue through autobiographical accounts of people who are currently teaching and studying a graduate degree course on education. The study helps us to learn about the power mechanisms used by teachers in order to enforce order and discipline in the classroom.

Many notions that go beyond the use of bodily punishment circulate and are recreated in the realm of teaching, as explained in “Between the management and the circulation of pedagogical ideas: a biographical and narrative approach”, where José Antonio Serrano, Lorena del Socorro Chavira and Juan Mario Ramos describe the life experience of a teacher as she puts into practice the guidelines prescribed for the improvement of the quality of education. This article contributes to enrich our knowledge of the process followed by teachers from the adoption of contents and proposals made by the current educational reform to the application of those principles to their teaching activities.

As part of our look at the history of education, we also include the essay “From contemplative life to the classroom. The life of teaching nuns in Jalisco (1874-1920)”, in which Laura Catalina Díaz and Jaime Horta describe the initiation path followed by women who joined religious orders and became teachers and founders of private schools. The article offers ideas that help us learn about how the professionalization of teachers who work in Catholic schools took place and provides data which may contribute to the study of private education schooling in Jalisco.

On a different perspective of the history of education, we find the document “Neo-liberal policies and higher education in Mexico 1990-2016”, where Cuauhtémoc Espinoza discusses higher education policies in Mexico starting in the 1990s, a background that helps him contextualize the process of expansion experienced by private higher education institutions from 1990 to 2016. Espinoza highlights the marked internationalization of the national agenda for

higher education, as well as the characteristics acquired by this sector in that period. This study contributes to the discussion around public and private education, and allows us to learn about the particular features of the growing privatization of higher education in an environment of relative shrinking of public institutions.

This issue of *Diálogos sobre Educación* ends with the review “Reflection as a process in teaching and research practice”, where Claudia Fabiola Ortega gives us an in-depth look at the book *Práctica reflexiva: escenarios y horizontes. Avances en el contexto internacional*, co-edited by Domingo A. and R. Anijovich. Ortega retrieves important ideas of the authors who participated in this collective endeavor and underscores two lines of thought that may contribute to the discussion around the improvement of teaching: the role played by work experience in the teacher training processes and the importance of reflection on the practice of teaching as a key element in the optimization of teaching processes. Along these lines of thought, according to Ortega, one of the authors reviewed proposes that teacher training should be fostered within the school, and that it should take place between colleagues and revolve around each school’s needs. At a time when several countries in Latin America – including Mexico – are undergoing educational reforms in which teacher training becomes the central node of innovation, books like this one are essential reading.

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