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*Scientific articles*

**Bases filosóficas de la educación mexicana contemporánea: una aproximación crítica desde la pedagogía humanista**

***Philosophical Foundations of Contemporary Mexican Education: A Critical Approach from Humanist Pedagogy***

***Fundamentos filosóficos da educação mexicana contemporânea: uma abordagem crítica a partir da pedagogia humanista***

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## Resumen

La reflexión filosófica sobre la educación mexicana suele presentarse como una recapitulación de autores y corrientes ya conocidos. Sin embargo, su vigencia solo se comprende plenamente cuando esas ideas dialogan con la experiencia concreta del aula. En este artículo, desde un enfoque cualitativo y documental, se revisa críticamente la relación entre filosofía y educación, atendiendo especialmente a la tradición humanista que atraviesa el pensamiento de autores como Justo Sierra, José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Alfonso Reyes y Pedro Henríquez Ureña. A través de un análisis hermenéutico-crítico, más que repetir definiciones, se analiza cómo ciertos supuestos filosóficos siguen influyendo en la práctica docente contemporánea, a la vez que se señalan sus límites frente a los desafíos actuales de la educación pública en México. Los resultados del análisis muestran que se propone una pedagogía humanista crítica que recupere el sentido ético de la educación sin ignorar las tensiones institucionales y sociales del siglo XXI.

**Palabras clave:** filosofía educativa, pensamiento mexicano, humanismo, formación docente, política educativa.

## Abstract

Philosophical reflection on Mexican education is often presented as a compilation of well-known authors and intellectual traditions. However, its relevance can only be fully understood when these ideas are placed in dialogue with the concrete experience of the classroom. In this article, from a qualitative and documentary approach, the relationship between philosophy and education is critically examined, with particular attention to the humanist tradition that shapes the thought of Justo Sierra, José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Alfonso Reyes, and Pedro Henríquez Ureña. Through a hermeneutic-critical analysis, rather than repeating definitions, the study analyzes how certain philosophical assumptions continue to influence contemporary teaching practices, while also identifying their limits in the face of the current challenges of public education in Mexico. The results of the analysis show that a critical humanist pedagogy is proposed, one that recovers the ethical purpose of education without overlooking the institutional and social tensions of the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** educational philosophy, Mexican thought, humanism, teacher education, educational policy.

## Resumo

A reflexão filosófica sobre a educação mexicana é frequentemente apresentada como uma recapitulação de autores e correntes de pensamento consagrados. Contudo, sua relevância só é plenamente compreendida quando essas ideias se confrontam com a experiência concreta da sala de aula. Este artigo, utilizando uma abordagem qualitativa e documental, examina criticamente a relação entre filosofia e educação, com particular atenção à tradição humanista que permeia o pensamento de autores como Justo Sierra, José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Alfonso Reyes e Pedro Henríquez Ureña. Por meio de uma análise hermenêutico-crítica, em vez de simplesmente repetir definições, o artigo analisa como certas premissas filosóficas continuam a influenciar a prática docente contemporânea, ao mesmo tempo que destaca suas limitações diante dos desafios atuais da educação pública no México. Os resultados da análise sugerem uma pedagogia humanista crítica que resgata a dimensão ética da educação sem ignorar as tensões institucionais e sociais do século XXI.

**Palavras-chave:** filosofia da educação, pensamento mexicano, humanismo, formação de professores, política educacional.

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## Introduction

In Mexican educational discourse, expressions such as “holistic education,” “human development,” and “values education” are frequently repeated. These phrases appear in curricula, official documents, and institutional projects, but we rarely stop to ask what educational philosophy underlies them. For over a century, Mexican intellectual tradition has developed a series of answers to the question of the purpose of education (Villoro, 1995; Hurtado, 2007). However, in the daily life of the classroom, many teachers experience a gap between these ideals and the actual working conditions.

This article stems from a simple conviction: it is impossible to understand contemporary Mexican education without tracing its philosophical foundations, but neither is it enough to simply repeat what classical authors said about humanism or character formation. The intention is not to offer an exhaustive history, but rather to propose a critical reading that engages the humanist tradition in dialogue with the current challenges of teaching practice.

Specifically, the aim is to answer three questions:

1. In what ways does philosophy, and especially Mexican philosophy of education, continue to influence our everyday pedagogical decisions?
2. What contributions and limitations does the humanist tradition embodied in thinkers like Vasconcelos, Caso, and Reyes have?
3. How can a humanist pedagogy be reformulated today that does not remain in discourse, but recognizes the tensions and contradictions of educational reality?

## Goals

### General objective

To critically analyze the philosophical foundations of contemporary Mexican education based on the humanist tradition, with the purpose of identifying its contributions, limitations and validity in current teaching practice, in the context of the institutional and social tensions of the 21st century.

### Specific objectives

- To examine the relationship between philosophy and education in Mexican educational thought, emphasizing its influence on everyday pedagogical decisions.
- Identify and analyze the main contributions of the Mexican humanist tradition, represented by authors such as Justo Sierra, José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Alfonso Reyes and Pedro Henríquez Ureña, in the configuration of national education.
- To critically analyze the existing tensions between humanist discourse and contemporary educational policies in Mexico.
- To propose the fundamental conceptual elements of a critical humanist pedagogy that engages with current educational reality.

## Methodology

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach, with a theoretical-documentary design, focused on the critical analysis of the philosophical foundations of contemporary Mexican education. The hermeneutic-critical method was adopted, which allows for the interpretation and problematization of philosophical and pedagogical texts within their historical, cultural, and educational context.

The documentary corpus consisted of classic and contemporary works by Mexican and Latin American thinkers linked to the humanist tradition, as well as academic literature specializing in philosophy of education, pedagogy, and educational policy. The selection of sources was based on criteria of theoretical relevance, conceptual validity, and pertinence for the analysis of teaching practice.

The methodological procedure comprised the following stages:

1. Systematic review of primary and secondary sources related to the philosophy of education in Mexico.
2. Identification of central analytical categories, such as humanism, integral education, educational subject, teaching practice and educational policy.
3. Analysis and critical interpretation of these categories through a process of conceptual contrast between the humanist tradition and the contemporary educational context.

This methodological approach ensures analytical coherence, traceability of the interpretive process, and academic rigor, meeting the quality criteria required in theoretical educational research.

## Results

The research findings are conceptual and analytical, derived from a critical and hermeneutic analysis of the reviewed philosophical and pedagogical literature. These findings reveal the persistence of humanist assumptions in contemporary Mexican education, as well as the tensions these assumptions face in the face of current institutional, social, and political conditions.

### 1. Philosophy and education: beyond the usual definitions

The relationship between philosophy and education has been described in numerous works as a foundational one: philosophy provides the ends and education the means. This formula, common in textbooks and historical reviews, simplifies a more complex link. As noted in studies on Mexican philosophy of education, philosophical reflection not only defines general objectives but also influences how the learner, the teacher's authority, and the role of the school in society are conceived (Villoro, 1995; Hurtado, 2007).

In teaching practice, these assumptions manifest themselves in seemingly technical decisions: the type of assessment favored, the value placed on dialogue versus memorization,

the way conflicts are addressed in the classroom, and even the way students are referred to (as “students,” “young people,” “future professionals,” “in-training,” etc.). When a teacher adopts a more dialogical and less authoritarian stance, they are embodying, even if they don't explicitly state it, a certain pedagogical humanism. When the educational process is reduced to obtaining grades, it is operating from an instrumental view of knowledge.

This observation allows us to qualify some definitions widely used in academic literature. Rather than stating that education “pursues human perfection” or that it “forms mental, physical, and spiritual health” (statements present in several general reviews of educational philosophy in Mexico), it is important to emphasize that philosophy is played out in the concrete decisions of each teacher, not only in grand discourses (Meza-Medina, 2011).

## 2. The Mexican humanist tradition: contributions and nuances

Much of the scholarship on educational philosophy in Mexico highlights the importance of the post-revolutionary cultural and educational project, in which figures such as Justo Sierra, José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Alfonso Reyes, and Pedro Henríquez Ureña stand out (Dumas, 1992; Acosta-Rico, 2004; Roggiano, 1989; Zea, 1985). The aim here is not to repeat their biographies, but rather to highlight some features that are particularly significant for current pedagogical reflection.

- Justo Sierra conceived of education as an instrument of national consolidation. His concern was not only academic, but also political: the school should contribute to integrating a fragmented country.
- José Vasconcelos radicalized this idea by promoting an educational crusade that combined literacy, cultural dissemination, and a civilizing vision of knowledge. For him, books, art, and schools were part of an ethical-aesthetic project aimed at dignifying the popular sectors (Torres, 2006; Vasconcelos, 1976).
- Antonio Caso, for his part, emphasized the freedom and charitable vocation of human beings; he criticized positivism and defended a personalist vision that prioritizes the moral dimension over mere technical success (Krause de Kolteniuk, 1990).
- Alfonso Reyes contributed a more literary and reflective perspective; his concern for clarity of thought and intellectual responsibility led him to consider knowledge as a form of dignity (Reyes, 2016, 2018).
- Pedro Henríquez Ureña insisted on the role of culture and language in the formation of Latin American identity, emphasizing the educational responsibility of literature (Roggiano, 1989).

Together, these authors shaped a Mexican humanism that does not separate intellectual development from aesthetic sensibility and social justice. Their influence is still visible in the contemporary emphasis on "holistic education" and on education as a tool for social transformation.

However, this tradition is not without its tensions. Several of these projects assumed a relatively harmonious vision of the nation and the school, which hardly aligns with the inequalities, conflicts, and cultural pluralities of contemporary Mexico. Recovering their legacy, therefore, requires a critical reading that neither idealizes nor absolutizes their proposals.

### 3. The educator as an ethical subject and mediator of meanings.

Educational literature often describes the teacher as a "guide," "facilitator," or "personality shaper." Beyond these labels, everyday experience shows that educators play a much more complex role: they are mediators of meaning between the world of theory and the concrete reality of their students.

From an educational philosophy perspective, teachers not only transmit information but also interpret curricula, educational policies, and institutional expectations in light of their own ethical judgment. When they choose to listen to a student in crisis, even if that conversation isn't part of the course syllabus, they are prioritizing a humanistic value. When they create space for critical debate instead of simply delivering content, they are acknowledging that education also involves learning to think and to dissent.

Meza-Medina (2011) suggests that teaching has a spiritual dimension, understood not in a confessional sense, but as the teacher's profound involvement in the growth of others. At this point, humanist philosophy is not reduced to an abstract theory: it becomes a practice, a way of being with others. This "putting into practice" of humanism constitutes, perhaps, one of the most significant contributions of the Mexican philosophical tradition to teacher training.

### 4. Tensions between humanist discourse and contemporary educational policies.

A naive reading of humanism might lead one to believe that simply invoking "holistic education" is enough to solve educational problems. However, the current context reveals a significant gap between rhetoric and the actual conditions of the education system. Mexican teachers face large and heterogeneous student bodies, standardized assessment processes, frequent changes in regulations, and, in many cases, precarious working conditions.

In this scenario, humanist rhetoric risks becoming mere consolation if it is not accompanied by structural transformations. Educational philosophy, then, cannot simply reaffirm that education "must focus on being and not on the repetition of formulas," a formulation that appears in numerous texts on humanist pedagogy. It is necessary to explicitly ask the uncomfortable question: Under what material and institutional conditions is person-centered education truly possible?

Piaget (1997) insisted that knowledge is actively constructed and not simply deposited in the student's mind. Applying this idea to contemporary Mexico means recognizing that students not only construct academic knowledge but also survival strategies in the face of inequality, violence, or uncertainty. A humanism that fails to consider these realities risks becoming merely decorative.

These tensions are exacerbated by educational policies focused on measurement and accountability, where the value of education tends to be reduced to quantifiable indicators. In this sense, Biesta (2015) warns that an education centered exclusively on measurement risks emptying its ethical and formative dimension of meaning, displacing fundamental questions about the purpose and significance of education.

## Discussion

The discussion articulates the conceptual results of the analysis with the specialized literature on philosophy of education and humanist pedagogy, allowing for a comparison of the contributions of the Mexican humanist tradition with contemporary educational challenges. This section examines the ethical, pedagogical, and political implications of the findings, as well as their points of convergence and divergence with other theoretical approaches, making it possible to define both the scope and limitations of educational humanism in the current context.

Based on the above, it is possible to outline some characteristics of a critical humanist pedagogy for contemporary Mexican education:

1. He acknowledges tradition, but does not idealize it. He values the contributions of Vasconcelos, Caso, Reyes, and other thinkers, but also identifies the limitations of their contexts and the tensions within their proposals.

2. It positions the teacher as a reflective subject. It does not conceive of them as a mere executor of programs, but as someone who interprets, decides, and assumes responsibility for their pedagogical actions.
3. It articulates ethics and educational policy. It understands that values education cannot be separated from institutional and social conditions; therefore, it does not settle for abstract discourses, but seeks to influence concrete practices.
4. It acknowledges the complexity of the student. It stops seeing the student as a passive recipient or as an idealized "promise" and recognizes them as a subject with a history, emotions, contradictions, and agency.
5. It promotes critical thinking and participation. It does not limit itself to transmitting humanistic content, but opens spaces for dialogue where students can question, argue, and propose.

This critical humanist pedagogy is not intended to be a closed model, but rather a framework for work that is constructed within each context. Its value lies in its ability to recover the philosophical meaning of education without losing sight of the concrete difficulties faced by teachers and students.

The conceptual results obtained in this study share points of convergence with previous research in the field of philosophy of education and humanist pedagogy, particularly those studies that have highlighted the persistence of humanism as a discursive reference point in Latin American educational systems. Several studies concur in emphasizing that education continues to appeal to notions such as holistic development, human dignity, and ethical development, even though institutional conditions and educational policies tend to favor instrumental and standardized approaches (Zea, 1985; Villoro, 1995; Hurtado, 2007).

From a similar perspective, Nussbaum (2016) argues that an education focused exclusively on economic profitability weakens the development of freedom, democratic deliberation, and empathy—central elements of any humanist educational project. This critique is particularly relevant to the Mexican context, where educational discourses coexist with logics of efficiency and productivity.

In accordance with these works, the present analysis confirms that the Mexican humanist tradition, represented by authors such as Vasconcelos, Caso, and Reyes, continues to influence the conception of the teacher's role and the meaning of education. As Meza-Medina (2011) points out, it is observed that educational humanism is not limited to a

theoretical framework but is expressed in concrete practices, especially in the ethical relationship between teacher and student.

However, unlike studies that approach educational humanism from a predominantly normative or idealized perspective, this work emphasizes the tensions between humanist discourse and the real conditions of the contemporary educational system. In this sense, the findings coincide with research that warns of the existing gap between educational ideals and institutional dynamics marked by standardized assessment, administrative overload, and the precariousness of teachers' work (Hurtado, 2007; Villoro, 1995).

A key difference from other studies lies in the emphasis placed on the teacher as an ethical subject and mediator of meaning, rather than as a mere implementer of educational policies. While some of the literature focuses on the analysis of educational models or reforms, this work underscores the ethical dimension of everyday pedagogical decisions, an aspect that is often overlooked in research centered exclusively on performance indicators.

Based on this comparison, the study's main limitation is its theoretical-documentary nature, which does not allow for an empirical exploration of how these tensions manifest in specific school contexts. However, this same approach is also its main contribution, offering a critical framework that allows for an understanding of the persistence, limitations, and possibilities of educational humanism in contemporary Mexico from an integrated philosophical and pedagogical perspective.

## Conclusions

The philosophical foundations of contemporary Mexican education are not simply a set of abstract concepts about “human perfection” or “holistic development.” Rather, they constitute a field of tensions where the humanist tradition, the demands of educational policy, and the concrete experiences of the classroom converge.

A critical review of Mexican educational philosophy shows that the legacy of authors such as Sierra, Vasconcelos, Caso, Reyes, and Henríquez Ureña remains relevant, insofar as it reminds us that education is a matter of culture, justice, and dignity, and not merely of technique. However, this legacy must be reinterpreted in light of the challenges of the 21st century: persistent inequality, a crisis of meaning, administrative overload, and technological transformations.

In this context, a critical humanist pedagogy can offer a useful framework for reorienting teaching practices. This is not about abandoning humanist ideals, but about embracing them realistically, recognizing both their ethical power and their historical limitations. Educational philosophy, understood in this way, is not an academic luxury, but a tool for better reflecting on what we do when we teach and when we learn.

The proposal for a critical humanist pedagogy engages with contemporary critical pedagogy, which conceives of education as an ethical and political practice. Likewise, teachers cannot be reduced to mere teaching technicians, but must instead see themselves as critical agents capable of questioning educational structures that perpetuate inequalities.

### **Future lines of research**

Based on the results obtained, several lines of research have been identified that are relevant for deepening and expanding the analysis developed in this study. First, it would be relevant to conduct empirical research exploring how the analyzed humanistic assumptions are expressed in concrete teaching practices, considering different educational levels and institutional contexts.

Furthermore, future research could examine teachers' own perceptions of educational humanism and the tensions they face when trying to reconcile educational ideals with the administrative and regulatory demands of the education system. This type of study would complement the theoretical approach of this work with situated empirical evidence.

Another line of research of interest consists of comparatively analyzing the Mexican humanist tradition with other humanist currents in Latin American contexts, in order to identify coincidences, differences and possible mutual contributions in the field of teacher training.

Recent research has highlighted the need to rethink educational humanism from intercultural and decolonial perspectives. In the Mexican case, Marcelin, Collado, and Orozco (2021) analyze the role of intercultural universities as spaces where traditional humanist models and demands for epistemic justice are challenged, opening new possibilities for a situated humanist pedagogy.

Finally, it is considered pertinent to delve deeper into the impact of technological and digital transformations on humanistic pedagogy, particularly regarding the teacher-student relationship, pedagogical mediation, and the construction of meaning in technology-

mediated educational environments. These lines of research exceed the scope of this study, but they constitute a fertile field for future complementary work.

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