

Article

# ‘The meaning of my life will always be to defend our Motherland’: Raising and educating citizens in a child protection institution in Mexico

by

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**Abstract:**

*English*

The point of departure of this paper is that childhood is socially constructed and continuously re-defined through public policies, laws, practices and ideologies. The paper explores the perspectives on children, upbringing and socialization as reflected in the manuals, forms and questionnaires of social workers in a child protection institution in Mexico. It employs a theoretical lens borrowed from Childhood Studies, using three dominant images of childhood—the Dionysian, Apollonian and Athenian—to examine the links between discursive constructions of childhood and ways of governing institutionalized children. Four overarching themes were identified as representative of predominant concepts of values concerning children and child rearing in an institutionalized context in the documents: (1) Patriotism, (2) Work ethics, (3) Hygiene, and (4) Physical experiences and sexuality. The analysis reveals how children are perceived primarily as future citizens, with their upbringing being a part of a wider nation-building project. Hence, there is an emphasis on how to become a ‘decent’ labourer, internalize the values of- and loyalty to the nation-state, and develop into a ‘moral’ and ‘civilized’ citizen. It is argued that institutional socialization is part and parcel of a political ideology that reinforces the idea of children as relatively passive socialization objects.

**Keywords:** Child Protection, institutionalization, institutional upbringing, Childhood Studies, disciplinary, governmentality, Mexico

*Spanish*

**El sentido de mi vida siempre será defender nuestra patria”: Criando y educando ciudadanos en instituciones de protección infantil en México.**

El punto de partida de este artículo es que la infancia es construida socialmente, y que es continuamente redefinida a través de las políticas públicas, las leyes, las prácticas y las ideologías. Este artículo explora las perspectivas sobre los niños, la crianza, y la socialización según se reflejan en los manuales, planillas y cuestionarios de los trabajadores sociales en una institución de protección infantil en México. Se emplea la propuesta teórica tomada de los Estudios de la Infancia, usando tres imágenes dominantes (Dionisíaca, Apolínea y Ateniense) para examinar los vínculos entre las construcciones discursivas sobre la infancia y las formas que

gobiernan a los niños institucionalizados. Se identificaron cuatro temas relevantes como representativos de los conceptos de valores predominantes en los documentos respecto a los niños, y cuidado infantil en un contexto institucionalizado: (1) Patriotismo, (2) Ética de trabajo, (3) Higiene, y (4) Experiencias físicas y sexualidad. El análisis revela cómo los niños son percibidos primeramente como futuros ciudadanos, y su crianza es parte de un proyecto más amplio de construcción de la nación. De este modo hay un énfasis en cómo convertirse en un trabajador “decente”, internalizar los valores de y la lealtad al Estado nación, y desarrollar un ciudadano moral y civilizado. Se afirma que la socialización institucional es parte de la ideología política que refuerza la idea de los niños como objetos de socialización relativamente pasivos.

*Palabras clave:* Protección infantil, institucionalización, crianza institucional, Estudios de la Infancia, disciplina, gobierno, México.

## Introduction

The origins of institutional childcare can be traced back to countries in the global North and as later being exported to countries in the global South (Boyden, 1997). Whereas most countries in the North have experienced a strong deinstitutionalization movement in the last few decades, moving from a correctional view towards a rights-based child welfare, institutional care remains common in many parts of the world (Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2014). In fact, institutions remain the most widely used out-of-placement resource for children in Mexico today (Khoo, Mancinas, & Skoog, 2015). At the same time, studies investigating institutional childcare are mostly restricted to the global North, while regions such as Latin America remain under the radar (Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2014; Ayón & Aisenberg, 2010).

Images of childhood are immensely powerful (Jenks, 2005), as they live on in subsequent discourses that we have about children, also shaping the ways in which society has exercised its need to control, socialize and constrain people. As Boyden (1997) argues, hegemonic notions of childhood and upbringing emerging in the North have had a large impact on socialization, education and child welfare practices in Southern contexts. The field of social work is an example of this. Pioneers within social work were drawn to moralistic rather than sociological interpretations of social phenomena, understanding juvenile delinquency, poverty or homelessness as the result of individual psychopathology instead of social conditions (Boyden, 1997). Although contemporary approaches in social work have moved away from this perspective, Boyden underscores that these moralizing practices still influence welfare practice in many countries in the South.

This article is inspired by Rose's (1990) claim about childhood being the most intensively governed sector of personal existence:

In different ways, in different times, and by many different routes varying from one section of society to another, the health, welfare, and rearing of children have been linked in thought and practice to the destiny of the nation and the responsibilities of the state. (p. 123)

Moreover, it is based on the idea that childhoods are defined through public policies, laws, practices and ideologies. The research question is therefore: What are the prevailing discourses of children, childhood and upbringing in a childcare institution in

contemporary Mexico? The article draws on a document analysis of the institutional manual and tools that guide practical childcare work of social workers and other staff members in one specific childcare institution. It employs a theoretical lens borrowed from Childhood Studies, using three dominant images of childhood—the Dionysian, Apollonian and Athenian—to examine the links between discursive constructions of childhood and ways of governing institutionalized children (Smith, 2011). This theoretical framework is explained in more detail below. Thereafter, the roots of Mexican child institutionalization are explored in order to historically contextualize the following analysis before moving on to methodological reflections on document analysis. The analysis explores four overarching and value-laden themes in the chosen documents: (1) Patriotism, (2) Work moral and discipline, (3) Hygiene, and (4) Physical experiences and sexuality.

## **2. Theoretical anchoring – Childhood studies**

The following document analysis is inspired by interdisciplinary Childhood Studies and the perception of childhood as socially constructed and rooted in particular social, historical and cultural contexts (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). This does not imply that childhoods are not real and lived experiences, but rather that our ideas concerning what childhood is and should be are moulded by hegemonic perceptions prevailing in a particular time and place. Our notions of children and childhood are neither universal nor ahistorical. As Denzin (1977) asserted:

Children must be viewed as historical, cultural, political, economic, and social productions. There is nothing intrinsic to the object called 'child' that makes that object more or less 'childlike'. Accordingly, children as they are known in current social and psychological theory may in fact be historical and cultural products of the 19th and 20th centuries. (p. 72)

Researchers within the field have argued that puritanism, rationalism and romanticism have had a strong impact on current perceptions of childhood (i.e. Jenks, 2005; Kellett, 2014). The puritan dogma is embedded in the Old Testament and the belief of the 'original sin', perceiving the child as inherently evil and characterized in terms of wildness, wilfulness and sensuality (Smith, 2011). Rationalism drew on the ideas of John Locke of the child as *tabula rasa*, neither inherently good nor bad, but rather as blank slates and products of their environment (Kellett, 2014). Inspired by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, romanticism fuelled the idea of the child as naturally good, pure and innocent (Jenks, 2005).

Jenks (2005) argues that there are two images of ‘normal’ childhood—the Dionysian and the Apollonian—that transcend both time and place in shaping parents’ and professionals’ efforts to raise and educate children. Drawing loosely on Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power, Jenks links these two images with contrasting models of child upbringing. The Dionysian child is inspired by the puritan dogma, thus moral aspects of upbringing occupy all attention (Karson & Karson, 1976), thereby resulting in strict control and discipline through rigid codes of behaviour with little opportunity for individuality (Jenks, 2005). While this model of child rearing is associated with a social order labelled ‘the old European order’, ‘the new order of modern industrial society’ brought a so-called ‘child-centred’ approach inspired by the Apollonian child, in which the child is accorded the freedom to develop its own interests and talents (Jenks, 2005, pp. 65-66).

Smith (2011) introduces a third image—the Athenian child—as a relatively novel mode of regulating children through strategies of participation and responsibilization. Drawing on the arguments of White and Hunt (2000), Smith posits that the emergence of the Athenian child was prompted by the transition from an emphasis on the building of ‘character’ in the 19th century to the care of the self as the quest for ‘personality’ in the 20th century. The production of character depended on the disciplinary governance of individuals (White & Hunt, 2000), as discipline targets individuals in order to enhance efficiency and obedience (Foucault, 1995). According to Smith (2011), the project of personality reverberates throughout the rationalist perception of children as *tabula rasa* upon which the future can be written. The development of personality is thus subject to a liberal governance of the self, that is, the ways in which governments produce knowledge and establish discourses that are internalized by individuals, and that guide their behaviour (Foucault, 1995). Governmentality leads to more efficient forms of social control than direct disciplinary modes, fostering responsible, ‘governable subjects’ who behave in line with political objectives (Rose, 1999).

Smith (2011) reminds us that, although these metaphors emerged at different historical periods, they coexist in contemporary society. Realities are multiple, as are childhoods and ways of upbringing. The images of the Dionysian child, the

Apollonian child and the Athenian child are heavily interconnected with discourses concerning class, gender and ethnicity. For instance, while Athenian child rearing norms often inform the upbringing of white, middle-class children, promoting negotiation and participation, children reared in low-income families are frequently subjected to Dionysian disciplinary practices (Smith, 2011), as illustrated in the following descriptions of institutional upbringing in Mexico.

### **3. Institutionalized childhoods in Mexico throughout history**

Contemporary child protection systems in Mexico have their roots in a philanthropist movement constituted of upper middle-class women who emerged throughout the Americas in the late 1800s (Kuznesof, 2005). This movement was double-edged, perceiving poor children not only as endangered but also potentially dangerous. Hence, protecting children was also seen as a means of safeguarding society (Rizzini, 2002). Whereas middle-class children were increasingly embraced by the Apollonian discourse, children of the lower classes were generally positioned as the Dionysian ‘other’ (Cunningham, 1995). Blum (2001) documents how poor children in Mexico were commonly labelled as criminals and their parents as immoral, corrupt or criminal in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Institutional care and ‘practical education based on the clearest principles of morality’ were perceived as the remedy (Blum, 2001, p. 24). Education sought to be class-appropriate, ‘maintaining each one at her limit, without creating unrealizable aspirations’ (Blum, 2001, p. 21). Such interventions were viewed primarily as a means of reducing future expenditures on welfare provision and prisons (see also Hendrick, 2003). At the turn of the century, Mexican public welfare policies and establishments for children sought to discipline, moralize and create labourers who were loyal to the state (Blum, 2001). In a similar vein, private charities reinforced nation identity, family morality and paternal discipline. Institutions imposed a regimen of religion and work to transform the idle poor into pious and productive workers (Blum, 2004). In public welfare, as among the bourgeois, there was no conflict between sentimentalizing children and the use of child labour as long as the working children came from labouring classes (Blum, 2001).

The Mexican Revolution made the country ideologically ‘receptive to new developments in science and social thought’ (Stepan, 1991, p. 55), seeking to modernize the country. The cultural politics of nationalism and a ‘scientific’ movement of eugenics and hygiene was partially substituted for Catholic dogma during the post-revolutionary period in the 1920s and 1930s (Stern, 1999). The US, the UK, Sweden and Norway were leading eugenic countries in the first half of the 1900s, linking evolution, degeneration, civilization and modernity (Manrique, 2016). Despite being derived from science, the emerging norms governing childhood were neither the product of a purely objective enquiry nor neutral in their effects (Smith, 2011). Physical and sexual hygiene were perceived as ‘the necessary conditions for national hygiene to be the solution to the prevalent preoccupation with anxieties about national decline and “degeneration”’ (White & Hunt, 2000, p. 103). The Mexican state sought to educate the popular classes, and regulate and hygienicize sexual behaviour through public health and hygiene programs (Blum, 2004). This was imagined to bring about the ‘regeneration’ of the masses, conceived as indolent and ignorant, which in turn justified their increased surveillance (Aréchiga Córdoba, 2007).

Eugenic and hygienic discourses had a major impact on state-initiated child and family policies. Children were considered a promised land, viable social actors and subjects of reform (Stern, 1999). Revolutionary-era lawmakers, professionals and governors believed firmly in the possibility of constructing the ideal citizen through the balanced application of sound pedagogy, firm ideology and modern medicine (Albarrán, 2014). Motherhood, sexuality and childhood shifted from being part of a private, patriarchal sphere to becoming prime intervention targets of a paternal state (Stern, 1999). State professionalized nursing, childcare and social work increased its paternal reach through public schooling, the public health system and the Juvenile Court (Blum, 2004), with the latter seeking to remove undesirable children from the streets and into institutions (Albarrán, 2014). While the politics shifted, the child remained at the core of moral, religious, medical and educational debates in Mexico throughout the 1900s, perceived as a symbol of hope and regeneration by liberals and conservatives, as well as by reformers, military regimes and Catholic leaders alike (Albarrá, 2014).

The number of children in institutional care continued to increase throughout the 1900s (Kuznesof, 2005). Despite an emerging deinstitutionalization movement over the past decades (Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2014), institutions remain the most widely used out-of-placement resource for children in Mexico today (Khoo, Mancinas, & Skoog, 2015). The work by Meichsner (2014 a, b) documents how many childcare institutions in northern Mexico are still run by Christian charities, construing the child as:

... not only worthy of but also in need of protection, and the mission the orphanage has is conveyed as rescuing the children from a negatively violent environment and a sinful life. (Meichsner, 2014b, p. 74)

Recent numbers reveal that there are approximately 77 children in institutional care per 100,000 in Mexico (UNICEF, 2013). Researchers have argued that poverty and inequality continue to be the greatest reasons for parents to lose custody of their children (Relaf, 2010 in Khoo, Mancinas, & Skoog, 2015, p. 2, see also Ursin, Oltedal, & Munoz, 2016). Although over 85% of the child protection institutions in contemporary Mexico are non-governmental, they are still under the jurisdiction of the General Health Act (2014) and the Social Assistance Act (2013). The National Ministry of Health and the National System of Integral Family Development (*Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*, SNDIF) are responsible for the protection and care of institutionalized children; their regional branches called Integral Family Development (*Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*, DIF) respond to social problems on a local level. It is worth noting that the SNDIF has its roots in the *Gota de Leche* foundation, a hygienist and medically vigilant movement funded by upper middle-class women concerned with the nourishment of children from the lower classes in 1929, and traditionally led by the country's first lady (Sistema Nacional DIF, 2018; Treviño, 2008).

#### **4. Document analysis as a way of understanding institutional discourses**

The child protection institution where this study was carried out is a private, non-profit institution. However, it cooperates with DIF, which entails that the majority of children are in state custody. In addition, a minority of children are voluntarily enrolled by family members or others. At the time of study, the institution housed nearly 200 children ranging from infants to 18-year-olds, the majority being in the age bracket between 6-15. Of the 40 children enrolled in the year of the study, 13 were enrolled

on the families' initiative, while 27 were transferred by DIF. During the same period, 26 children left. In their annual report, the institution mentions the following reasons for enrolment: domestic violence, neglect, parental substance addiction and abandonment.

The institution was established in the early 1980s and is located on the outskirts of a metropolitan area in northern Mexico. Private sponsors, most commonly affluent citizens in the area, fund the institution. The sponsors receive tax reductions and participate in board meetings, deciding the overall course of the institution (Mancinas, 2015). The staff consists of trained caregivers, teachers, medical doctors, nurses, psychologists and administration. Additionally, there are one to two social workers for almost 200 children. Due to the heavy workload, they focus primarily on processes of ingress and egress. The institution contains dormitories, a canteen, a school, a church and health facilities. Because all of the children's daily activities occur inside the institution, and in a highly routinized and regulated manner, it can be defined as a total institution in the Goffmanian sense (further discussed below).

The institution's routines and activities are guided and regulated by an institutional manual, the Manual of Policy and Procedures (*Manual de políticas, procedimientos, manual operativo, reglamentos y formatos*). In addition, the social workers use a wide range of forms and questionnaires. An analysis of the documents identified as key tools by the social workers forms the basis of this article, namely the institutional manual and 13 forms and questionnaires. The forms and questionnaires were used to map and evaluate children and families when considering the ingress, progress and egress of each child. As such, they were powerful tools in deciding the destiny of the children and their families (see Ursin, Oltedal, & Munoz, 2017). While the forms were filled out by the social workers based on their observations and conversations, the questionnaires were based on the children's responses. The documents are part of a larger data corpus gathered during a three-month multi-method fieldwork at the institution, exploring diverse understandings of family and approaches responding to the needs of families (see Ursin, Oltedal, & Munoz, 2017).<sup>1</sup> A limitation of the study is

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<sup>1</sup> The study was part of an international exchange research project, 'Understanding and supporting families with complex needs', funded by the European Commission Seventh Framework Programme, Marie Curie Actions.

that there were no observations of situations in which the professionals used the questionnaires with children, or the consequences the form and questionnaires had for the child, an issue that is further discussed in the concluding remarks.

A conceptual analysis was conducted, seeking to decipher prevailing discourses around children, childhood and upbringing in an institutional context. According to Peter and colleagues (2007), a conceptual analysis sheds light on the values, principles and assumptions within documents. In this regard, Schwartz's (1993) definition of values is helpful, being 'principles, or criteria, for selecting what is good (or better, or best) among objects, actions, ways of life, and social and political institutions and structures' (cited in Peter et al., 2007, p. 1628). A conceptual analysis is beneficial in policy analysis, as policy has an irreducibly moral dimension insofar as it involves a decision about how to act toward affected others about an identified problem (Malone, 1999, p. 18). The conceptual analysis involved coding the documents for overarching concepts and themes in an inductive and descriptive manner before making a choice to follow and further analyse four overarching themes. The analysis from here on was an ongoing, repetitive process that took place simultaneously with an extensive literature search (Rotegård et al., 2010) to historicize, contextualize and theorize the chosen themes. The four themes were identified as representative of predominant concepts of values concerning children and child rearing in an institutionalized context in the documents, structuring the following analysis.

## **5. Perspectives on 'proper' upbringing in a Mexican child protection institute**

Children residing in childcare institutions are in the hands of professionals. Although many family members visit the children on a regular basis and seek to participate in their lives and upbringing as much as the situation permits, providing cultural, material and economic resources as well as emotional support (see Ursin, Oltedal, & Munoz, 2017), the children are first and foremost subjects of institutional socialization. According to Rose (1990), the institutionalization of children opens opportunity for documenting information in files and case histories, identifying, mapping and measuring each individual. By exploring the manuals and tools guiding the professional staffs' approach to- and evaluation of the children, it became possible to excavate prevailing discourses and values of institutional upbringing. In

the following sections, four value-laden themes are further explored: (1) Patriotism, (2) Work ethics, (3) Hygiene, and (4) Physical experiences and sexuality.

### *5.1. Amor a la Patria - Children as part of nation-building*

There was a strong emphasis on nationalism and patriotic values in several documents addressed at children. In the Value Questionnaire (*Cuestionario de Valores*), which social workers used to map the children, this was particularly evident as an entire section was dedicated to related themes (one-and-a-half pages). Some examples of themes were ‘Unity of man and country’, ‘Love for the Motherland’ and ‘I respect and honour the National Symbols’. Under each theme, the child was supposed to tick off one alternative. Examples of such alternatives were:

For me, the patriotic symbols are sacred, as well as the consistency of their history, for which, I will never betray my country.

The meaning of my life will always be to defend our Motherland, its values and sovereignty.

I will be ready, together with my people, to defend the Motherland from the aggressions of the enemy.

The questionnaire seems to explore children’s relation to- and perception of their motherland and instil a national consciousness, carving out their young national identities.

Eley and Suny (1996) define national identities as ‘something transmitted from the past and secured as a collective belonging’ (p. 22). According to Stephens (1997), it is important to have a historical understanding of the roles children and childhood have played in the development of the modern nation-state and nationalist projects. As mentioned above, children came to be seen as key in the development of the modern nation-state in post-revolutionary Mexico as symbols of hope and futurity. The questionnaire reflects the ideological and political discourse of the institution at the same time that it reveals a conceptualization of children as docile and as ‘citizens in the making’ (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). The attempt to stimulate patriotism and nationalism among institutionalized children, aiming for future loyal and patriotic citizens, is hence not only characteristic of nation-building in the early 1900s, as institutionalized children continue to be perceived as saviours of the nation as long as they receive the right kind of upbringing and education (Meichsner, 2014b).

A vocabulary of kinship (motherland, *mi Patria*) denotes a strong, natural tie (Anderson, 2006) between the children and their nation. The state's role as having *parens patriae* or responsibility over children (Boyden, 1997) seems to create certain expectations of children's devotion and loyalty in return. The questionnaire appears to be a way to tap into the children's state of mind, internalizing loyalty to- and respect for the Mexican state. The institution transmits national values to the children, the major message being: Children should be loyal to- and defend the nation, and respect and valorize its symbols and values. As Anderson (2006) argues, nationalism inspires love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love, for an imagined community of which we will never know most of our fellow members. National identity and a belonging to this imagined community is accentuated over other identity markers, such as class, ethnicity, religion and so on. This is particularly true in the context of Mexico, where a powerful nationalist symbolism has fostered unification in a socially and ethnically diverse society since the Revolution (Chong, 2008). According to Chong (2008), the myth making of Mexican national identity makes people aware of themselves as a unique collectivity and a defender of their possessions or historic patrimony, such as territory and culture.

The use of such questionnaires may be perceived as a means of fostering character formation, requiring the children to cultivate traits such as honesty, loyalty and bravery (White & Hunt, 2000). As previously mentioned, character building of the 19th century was both an individual and a national project. A notion of citizenship informed by the development of character focuses on the relationship between the subject and the state, and emphasizes public duty, obligation and obedience (White & Hunt, 2000). This type of disciplinary governance bears a strong resemblance to Dionysian socialization (Smith, 2011). The questionnaire reveals a perspective of children as not primarily having rights (of care, protection and education), but instead responsibilities in terms of respecting, protecting and defending the nation, its culture and its citizens. This shows a perspective of the institutionalized child as a duty-bearing subject of the state, rather than a rights-bearing citizen (White & Hunt, 2000). The latter rests on contemporary notions of citizenship, in which the governed subject chooses participation in a diversified public sphere—beyond the subject-state relationship—based on a cost-benefit calculus. Citizenship exercised in this manner

is connected to the quest for personality, and resonates with the image of the Athenian child (Smith, 2011). As seen in a historical context, nation-building projects and successful citizenship tend to not only draw on nationalist discourses, but also on the discourses of labour, hygiene and sexual reproduction explored next.

### *5.2. Producing good labourers*

The Manual of Policy and Procedures states that the staff should make sure that the younger children ('minors') feel a sense of responsibility, commitment, a sense of productivity and team work, while the older children ('adolescents') should be stimulated to be responsible and capable of receiving orders. With the Value Questionnaire, social workers interview children about their work efforts and engagements in the following themes: 'Assistance and punctuality', 'Fulfilment of assigned tasks', 'Quality of work' and 'Sustained efforts'. The overall emphasis in these documents reflects an institutional work ethic that favours diligence, punctuality, productivity, a sense of responsibility, compliance, cooperation and pleasure in fulfilling assigned tasks. This resembles perspectives on the work of the 19th and early 20th centuries, which, according to Rose (1990), accentuated obedience, self-denial and deferred gratification. The strong emphasis on the discipline and work morale of the child, producing what White and Hunt (2000, p. 103) describe as an 'upright' moral subject, denotes a Dionysian approach to child rearing (Smith, 2011). This stands in contrast to more recent perspectives on work ethics, in which productivity and efficiency are perceived as a result of the attitudes, motivation and morality of the workers (Rose, 1990). Such techniques of governing are aligned with Athenian socialization, regulating children through instilling a sense of autonomy, participation and responsibilization (Smith, 2011).

In addition, the institutional manual provides a detailed description of the scheduled routines of the children, listing the following activities:

- Children have to get up according to an institutional time schedule;
- Perform the assigned hygiene measures;
- Eat breakfast at a specific time;
- Present themselves in uniform in school;
- Going to and from school, the children should walk in a disciplined manner;
- Eat lunch at a specific time;
- Return to the dormitory to take off the school uniform;

- Perform extra-curricular activities;
- Perform work tasks;
- Be inside the dormitory at 20.00;
- Watch TV when it is turned on; and
- Be asleep after 21.00.

The children are allowed little free time and time for leisure activities. This corresponds with a study of Khoo, Mancinas and Skoog (2015), in which institutionalized children in Mexico experienced their everyday lives as highly structured and regulated by professionals. The manual further states that the professional caregivers are obliged to watch the minors at all times and report all abnormalities to their superior, not unlike what Foucault (1995) calls a 'disciplinary gaze'. The manual does not state the consequences of institutional misconduct. However, disciplinary techniques (including physical punishment) have been found to be used to correct and prevent what was perceived as misbehaviour and a lack of compliance in other Mexican childcare institutions (Meichsner, 2014b).

The institution fulfils Goffman's (1991) criteria for total institutions: First, all aspects of daily life are conducted in the same place and organized by the same authority. Second, all activities are carried out in groups, members of whom are all required to do the same. Third, all activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next. Finally, all activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfil the official aims of the institution. The time schedule shows clear expectations on where the children should be, at what times and for which activities. The institution is therefore 'an external regime of structured times, spaces, gazes and hierarchies' (Rose, 1999, p. 22). By its emphasis on authoritarianism, rigorous control and discipline, it follows norms of Dionysian upbringing, in which children are controlled in relation to the different spaces they inhabit and paced according to the timetable (Jenks, 2005).

In accordance with Dionysian reasoning, the institution inculcates a work ethic aimed at submission. This reveals that the upbringing of institutionalized children in Mexico has not yet shifted from conformism to individualism, and from a disciplinary to a liberal governance of the self (cf. White & Hunt, 2000). The institution aims not only to socialize the young people into rightful citizens, but also seems to draw on dominant

discourses about how citizenship should be exercised among the lower classes—as loyal patriots and good labourers productive, devoted and subservient for the good of the nation. Nevertheless, the educational norms and attitudes of the institution seem to differ. For instance, the section on education in the General Questionnaire—Life Plan (*Cuestionario General—Plan de Vida*) explores children's sentiments and behaviour in regard to schooling, teamwork and professional aspirations. This includes questions such as: 'Do your grades improve when you are happy or satisfied?', 'Do your grades improve if you are not sick?' and 'Do you want a job where you help others when you grow up?'

The focus on the connection between personal sentiments and educational achievements seems to draw on an Athenian rationale, in which children are perceived as competent and participative, and as 'partners' in the socialization process (Smith, 2011). There is an emphasis on reflexivity, in which 'children are not only obliged to shape their own learning, but also to take responsibility for this shaping' (Kryger, 2004, pp. 154–5). This mirrors modern pedagogical theory and practice about the agentive subject aimed at inculcating the ability to monitor and adjust desires, attitudes and behaviour in line with educational goals (Fendler, 2001). In this way, subjects become responsibilized by making them see social risks such as illness, unemployment and poverty not as a responsibility of the state, but as an individual flaw or failure. According to Rose (1999), unemployment has come to be viewed as a phenomenon to be governed through acting on the conduct of the unemployed person, obliging him or her to improve 'employability'. Smith (2011) reminds us that such forms of 'empowerment' may obscure wider inequalities in terms of resources and opportunities. Yet, the education and work ethic in the institution come short of encouraging an active, self-responsible, risk-taking, entrepreneurial and problem-solving mind-set that characterizes modern education (Ikonen & Nikunen, 2018).

### *5.3. Hygiene habits: Civilizing the poor*

The analysis of the documents reveals an institutional accent on hygiene. The institutional manual describes the medical procedure at the ingress of a child as the following: The medical staff should measure and examine the child's body, checking for parasites and infections, among other things. It also states that caregivers must

ensure that the children have good personal hygiene. ‘Performing the assigned hygiene measures’ is part of the daily schedule. In the social workers’ Interview Guide of the Minor (*Entrevista a menor*), children have to provide detailed descriptions of their hygiene habits. In the General Questionnaire: Life Plan (*Cuestionario General: Plan de Vida*), the social workers ask children questions such as: ‘Do you like to be clean and keep yourself neat?’, ‘Do you understand the importance of being clean?’ and ‘Do you enjoy taking a bath every day?’

The formalized instructions and investigations concerning the children’s hygiene bear witness of both Dionysian and Athenian ways of thinking. The institutionalized and routinized inspections and examinations are disciplinary modes of making sure the children are clean and uninfected. At the same time, moralistic values of ‘correct’ conduct saturate the questions in the General Questionnaire: Life Plan, echoing what Rose (1999) calls ‘public objectives for the good health and good order of the social body with the desire of individuals for health and well-being’ (p. 74). Thus, in addition to instructing and disciplining the children into compliance with the hygiene standards of the institution, certain documents seem to instil self-governance, based on the idea that subjects will themselves strive to preserve these hygiene standards if properly governed. By interpreting personal sentiments and sensitivities in a highly moralized manner, it becomes clear what is considered ideal, which is a sanitized and responsible self who enjoys both being clean and the process of cleaning. Hygiene procedures may therefore be perceived as part of the personality project, as something that must be continuously developed and adjusted, eliminating deficiencies (White & Hunt, 2000).

As described above, hygiene has been an essential part of nation-states’ civilizing projects and way of gaining control throughout history (Sibley, 1995). According to Bashford (2004), hygiene has been historically construed as a manner of pursuing safe and responsible citizenship while delimitating ‘Us’ from the ‘Other’ (see also Ursin, 2016). In Mexico, hygiene campaigns and interventions targeted the poor in particular (Stern, 1999). The pervasive hygienist semantics in the institutional documents suggest that this continues to be the case today. According to Sibley (1995), a hygienist discourse tends to label certain groups as dirty and contagious. By labelling someone as unclean, they are rendered discrepant and polluting in both

a literal and symbolic sense (Douglas, 2002), in which the contagious ‘Other’ is not only a risk to her or himself, but for society as a whole. The strong attention on hygiene divulges a perception of the poor as ignorant, uneducated and uncivilized (Sibley, 1995). Moreover, it reveals a perception of children in families of low socio-economic background as inadequately socialized (Smith, 2011), in need of being told about the dangers of bacteria and infections and taught how to take care of themselves.

#### *5.4. Regulating physical experiences and sexuality*

The body is not only a site of inspection and instruction when it comes to hygiene, but also for sensations and experiences. In the General Questionnaire: Life Plan, the social workers inquire about children’s bodily self-perceptions by asking questions such as ‘Do you like your body?’ ‘Why?’ In addition, they also want to know about whether the children have experienced any bodily changes: ‘Do you experience any new physical sensations?’, ‘Which ones?’ ‘When?’, followed up with ‘Can you handle these feelings?’ ‘How?’ In a similar vein, the social workers map children’s love life and sexual relations through the following questions:

Would you like to have a boyfriend? Why?  
Would you like to carry out activities in common with your boyfriend? What?  
Do you know what a sexual relationship is? What is a sexual relationship like?  
Have you experienced a sexual relationship? When? How?  
What do you think of young people who have sexual activity?  
Do you know the consequences of having a sexual relationship? Which ones?

When considering these intimate questions, it is important to remember that there were one to two social workers working with nearly 200 children, which likely inhibits close relationships between the professional and the child.

The direct and intrusive questions about highly delicate and intimate areas such as body self-perception and sexuality bear a resemblance with the ritual of confessing in Catholicism, in which people disclose their sins and secrets. Historically, the Catholic Church had the ‘rhetorical power to denounce society’s sinfulness and to correct the popular classes’ in Mexican society (Gutiérres, 2016, p. 422). Creating stable families through matrimony and monogamy was perceived as key to a stable colony, and later to a stable nation-state. The Catholic confession was essential in the emergence of governable populations through its spiritual disciplining to make

individuals 'ethically self-concerned', seeking to compose themselves as subjects of their own conduct (Hunter, 1996, 158). Even though secular discourses of medicine and hygiene have been partly substituted for religion as a means of dictating social behaviour in Mexican society (Gutiérres, 2016, see also Foucault, 1976), the new discourses both challenged and underscored earlier religious understandings by invoking scientific notions of cleanliness, purity and moral duty. However, Catholicism continues to be the most powerful discourse regarding sexuality in contemporary Mexico (Herrera, 2001), including a continuity of a discourse of sin, although substantially weakened (Gutiérres, 2016).

Rose (1990) argues that confessional mechanisms in social work are an extension of discipline and professional control over life itself, and continues:

In compelling, persuading and inciting subjects to disclose themselves, finer and more intimate regions of personal and interpersonal life come under surveillance and are opened up for expert judgement, and normative evaluation, for classification and correction. (p. 244)

Such practices are located at the intersection of disciplinary mechanisms and ways to incite self-regulation and self-government (Rose, 1990). By using the tripartite of: 1) moral codes, 2) ethical scenarios, and 3) techniques of the self, Rose explains that the confessional mechanism exemplifies an ethical scenario that inserts moral codes while instilling self-reflection and self-transformation, urging the children to become ethical beings, beings who regulate themselves according to a moral code. Norms, Rose (1999) reminds us, are enforced through the control of impulses and the calculated administration of shame. Traits of both Dionysian and Athenian upbringing are thus manifest in such questionnaires.

The institutional attention to the young generation's bodily sensations and sexuality suggests a need to regulate and curb youth sexuality. The questionnaire also reveals ways of discerning legitimate from illegitimate sexual contact, and instilling what constitutes 'appropriate' sexual behaviour. This supports previous research in a Mexican child protection institution, in which social workers' efforts to control youth sexuality suppressed the young people's right to sexual exploration and pleasure (Mancinas, 2015). In her study, Meichsner (2014b) finds that sexuality is an absolute taboo in Christian childcare institutions, and that showing signs of sexual interest is punished, in the worst cases with expulsion. The current study and the work of

Mancinas (2015) and Meichsner (2014b) echo historical institutional childcare saturated with moralism, seeking to correct and improve the behaviour of children from lower socio-economic classes (Blum, 2001). Analysing this through the prism of morality/immorality, the institution's approach draws on the view of the Dionysian child and the 'original sin', resting on the assumption of an orgiastic and prurient child who loves pleasure and celebrates self-gratification (Jenks, 2005). According to Foucault (1976), such ideas regarding the sexuality of children and the 'sin of youth' rest on a double assertion that children are prone to indulge in sexual activity at the same time as this activity is posed as a physical, moral, individual and collective danger (p. 104).

Foucault (1976) reasons that the need to take charge of the precocious and perilous sexual potential of youth by professionals was originally related to nation-states' demography and regulation of populations (see also Rose, 1999). Through comprehensive measures, statistical assessments, and interventions based on political, economic and ideological reasoning, nation-states sought to discipline the body and regulate populations (Foucault, 1976, p. 146). As mentioned before, the burgeoning welfare agencies in Mexico were heavily involved in the instruction and regulation of sexuality to ensure the healthy reproduction of the nation in the 1920s and 1930s (Stern, 1999). Women who did 'not fulfil the physiological and social requirements demanded by her reproductive functions' were discouraged from impregnation and in some cases sterilized by force (Stern, 1999, p. 375). Sponsored by the US and inspired by Neo-Malthusian ideas, educational programmes in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s aimed to convince poor people that the reason for their poverty was the large number of children they had (Cardarello, 2012). As Morrow (2011) contends, the age at which it is socially acceptable for girls to enter motherhood exemplifies how constructions of childhood change over time and between cultural contexts:

In most places in the 19th century, it was not only normal but also expected for women to marry and have their babies young. Now [...] teenage parents are dominantly viewed as a 'social problem' whose sexuality needs to be controlled. (p. 5)

In line with other researchers, Morrow underscores that this often functions as a way of controlling the number of offspring of the poor. Bearing in mind history, Neo-

Malthusian ideas of population control might also be present among professional staff in contemporary Mexican childcare institutions.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

By analysing documents used by social workers who work with children in institutionalized care in Mexico, this article has excavated links between constructions of childhood and institutional child rearing practices. The empirical material presented shows the importance of scrutinizing the ‘naturalness’ of the socially constructed nature of contemporary childhood, and deconstructing the socio-cultural and political ideas embedded in the particular construction of childhood. By borrowing concepts from Childhood Studies—namely, the Dionysian child, the Apollonian child and the Athenian child—the document analysis reveals that the most common discourse is inspired by Dionysian ideas and ideals, whereas a ‘child-centred’ approach inspired by the Apollonian child is absent.

In Mexican institutional care, ‘the discourse of evil persists and the discourse of rights has not displaced the discourse of innocence or gained the status of supremacy’ (Meyer, 2007, in Smith, 2011, p. 87). Through external means of exercising power, including educational and corrective tools, the institution seems to attempt to shape children into ‘modern’, ‘productive’ and ‘sanitized’ citizens. Bearing in mind the historical roots of institutionalization, this approach represents a sociocultural time lag, echoing colonial and modernization discourses’ quest for order, sanitation and discipline (see also Ursin, 2016). In the documents’ instructions concerning education and labour, there are clear resemblances with historical agendas of transforming the poor into dedicated and productive workers (cf. Blum, 2004). Children from the lower socio-economic classes are still perceived as a threat to society as long as their habits and manners are not efficiently corrected (Meicshner, 2014b); hence, the motivation behind educating the poor might continue to generate a productive labour force, while reducing future costs related to crime and welfare provisions.

Yet, there are also traces of Athenian-inspired upbringing, both when it comes to assigning responsibility of educational achievements and sexual morality. These discourses are therefore not mutually exhaustive. As Smith (2011) emphasizes, the Athenian child supplements rather than supplants earlier modes of conceptualizing

and regulating childhood. Across policy domains—and in child protection in particular—child subjects may yet be constituted in Dionysian or Apollonian terms in strategies that can vary, according to age, gender, class or ethnicity. Both discourses—the Dionysian and the Athenian—share the idea of children's malleability (Smith, 2011). This entails that they both operate within a broader framework of 'investment', which positions child rearing as 'investing in the future' (see Hendrick, 2003).

While the institutional approach rests upon an understanding of children as relatively passive socialization objects, assuring the state of a useful future citizenry, middle-class children are more often perceived and encountered as autonomous and participative subjects. Whereas democratic engagement largely involves middle-class children, lower socio-economic class children are still subdued to regulating practices. As Rose (1990) describes, the modern middle-class family is not governed by philanthropy, imposed under the threat of social workers or through the coercive intrusion of family law but rather by the unceasing self-reflexive gaze. Institutionalized socialization thus continues to be a form of moral regulation, with the aim of cultivating future generations in line with the dominant discourse of traditions, values and social norms.

It is important to underscore that the discourses evident in the documents do not first and foremost represent the social workers' thoughts. Although they are guided by and use the manual, forms and questionnaires in their everyday work life, they do not have the final say in institutional regulations and guidelines. Instead, the existing discourses should be interpreted as a nexus of the following components: Institutional ideology, aims and rationale; private funders' profile and background; political tendencies and policymaking; international dominant discourses on children, childhood and upbringing; and Mexican socio-cultural and political history. It is also worth noting that a conceptual analysis of institutional documents produce an abstract, top-down examination of the residential care policy while disregarding empirical reality (McKee, 2009). While the current analysis draws on discursive practice, social workers' and children's reactions and resistance are ignored, thereby resulting in a disconnection between the study of specific mentalities of rule and the social relations in which they are embedded (McKee, 2009). As Flint (2002) notes,

governance is characterized by contradictions, complexities and inconsistencies, a gulf between policy rhetoric, implementation and practices (p. 621). In the case of institutional settings in Mexico, empirical studies have detected acts of resistance among both children (Khoo, Mancinas, & Skoog, 2015) and their families (Ursin, Oltedal, & Muñoz, 2017). Nonetheless, although discourses are intangible and the consequences are unpredictable, they have a major impact on the ways in which institutionalized children are perceived, encountered and debated. Through institutional procedures, including the analysed documents, the complexity and uniqueness of the child is translated into ‘an ordered space of knowledge’, and the child becomes ‘a knowable individual’ (Rose, 1990, 136). Hence, these discourses have real-life consequences for each child in the institution.

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