



SECTION 3. History of Education in Mexico



SECTION 3



THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN MEXICO¹

3.1 Pre-Cortes Era

In the most influential times of Pre-Hispanic Mexico the predominant cultures were the Aztecs and the Mayas. Long before Hernan Cortes arrived, these people had developed a system of education that played an important role in their cultures.

In the Aztec society, quality education was reserved for the classes that held the highest positions of power in society. The youths of this elite society were taught high mathematics astronomy, medicine, war tactics, traditions and a profound understanding of self and ones' relationship to the community.

The Aztec nobles went to the Calmecac. This enclosed area had an important mystical quality surrounding it and brought immediate elevation of status to those entering as well as a long road of study leading to the highest positions of political and social power.

Future soldiers received a very specific education in an enclosed area called the "Telpochcalli". The Telpochcalli was one of the principle constructions in each important Aztec settlement and was commonly placed in the central plaza. These buildings were set apart from the others by their elevated and interlocking platforms built around a patio with rooms, passages and alters placed on the highest platforms. The floors and ceilings were commonly built of stone and covered with stucco and red paint however there were variations in materiality according to each region.

The buildings built for both Telpochcalli and Calmecac were impressive; columns, spacious courtyards and smaller enclosed areas most likely used for meditation were some of its characteristics.

Everybody else in the town was also expected to attend school at a certain age. In a special school called the Cuicacalli they were taught songs, games and dances that encouraged spiritually growth.



1. information and images for this section have been taken from the CAPFCE Institutional Document *La infraestructura escolar en Mexico*. September 2005

3.2 The Conquest (1521)

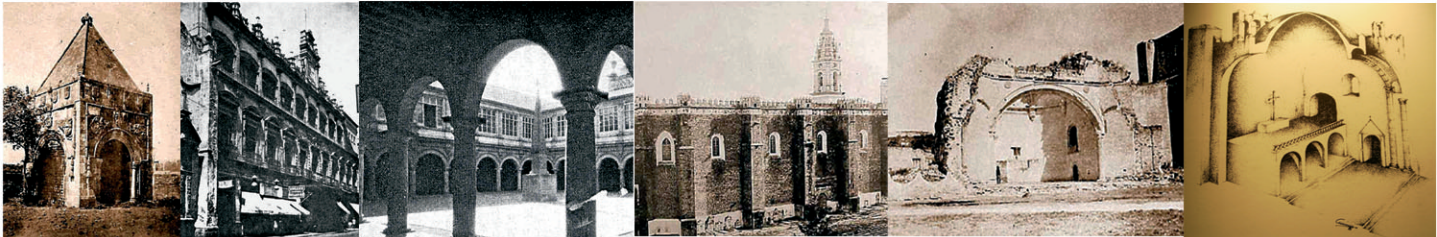
Hernan Cortes sought to wipe out any customs, languages and religions of the conquered inhabitants and replace them with those belonging to Spain. During the first years after the conquest, the task of the "educators" was solely to impart on the 'Indians' the Christian doctrine and the Spanish language in order to 'civilize' them. The old Telpochcalli and Calmecac were replaced by temples and open chapels and were used for religious cults and 'education'.

In 1523, two years after the fall of the Aztec Empire, the Franciscan monks, led by Friar Pedro of Gante, founded the first school of the continent in Texcoco, designed to teach the Indians. In 1527, the same friar Pedro founded la Capilla de San Jose de los Naturales within which was the Gran Escuela dedicated to the teaching of primary studies for children and Arts and Professions for adults.

In the centre of the country, the spaces for instruction were not isolated; instead they were integrated into multifunctional complexes, which included hospitals, workshops, and cooperatives.



The Conquest. 'On top of the Ruins of the Templo Mayor, the new city is erected'.



Posas. Franciscan Children's College 1548. convent 1530-1570. Friar Pedro of Gante Huejotzingo, Pue

Betlemitas College 1675. Escuela Gratuita de Primeras Letras

Capilla, Dominican convent 1576, Coixtlahuaca

Capilla, Dominican convent 1576, Coixtlahuaca

3.3 War of Independence (1810)

Schools paid a high price during the War of Independence because the church had founded the majority of schools and the attack on the church's interests caused many of them to shut down. Also many Spanish priests were sent back to Spain diminishing the number of teachers. This set Mexican education back considerably.

In 1867, La Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, a new, universal, free and obligatory basic school was installed in Mexico.

In 1888, President Porfirio Díaz promoted public education for everyone (children and adults without discrimination between men and woman and social status) however, in the 20th century, education was still a privilege held by the sons of the bourgeoisie, who controlled all cultural, educative and political institutions.

In 1910, more than 85% of the adult population and more than 78% of the total population did not know how to read or write.

3.4 Revolution (1910)

The revolution of 1910 was a fight for liberties and reforming laws that until then had been systematically controlled by the elite. It is considered the pillar upon which modern Mexico stands.

Some of the many demands of the revolutionaries were non-religious education, obligatory instruction until the age of 14, higher salaries paid to teachers, and more primary schools constructed throughout the country.

Heated debates in 1917 led to article 3 of the constitution that all Mexicans had the right to a free and obligatory basic education. The revolution molded a new Mexican school system that indeed was non-religious, national, free, obligatory and under the responsibility of the state.



War of Independence 1810

Porfirio Díaz. Foto de archivo.



Revolution 1910



Gertrudis Sanchez School before and after its rehabilitation by CAPFCE

3.5 Post Revolution

In 1921, with Alvaro Obregon's government in power, Mexico began for the first time to formulate a public school system. A proposal was drawn up for the growth of school infrastructure and for a higher quality of instruction and materials.

La Secretaria de Educacion Publica (SEP) was founded on September 29, 1921 which was a centralized nationally regulated institution dedicated to overseeing the new public school system. Philosopher, humanist and nationalist Jos? Vasconcelos was put at its head.

"Jose took on this role like a nationalist crusader determined to bring practical education to rural communities that were difficult to access. He combated illiteracy and continued with the reforms of primary school, understanding that the most urgent thing was to teach Mexicans how to live. These ideas led to the creation of technical schools where they prepared qualified labourers, created agricultural schools that taught how to cultivate better quality produce at higher yields, began dignifying popular Mexican artwork, and encouraged Mexicans to return to their roots."¹

Towards the end of 1924, 1089 rural school houses were up and functioning with 65,000 indigenous pupils.

1. (CAPFCE docu p21) Vazquez Aquino Jose Fernando *Who Was Jose Vasconcelos?* Pg. 6. www.monografias.com

3.6 1930's - 1940's

The urgent need to construct schools in all parts of the country initiated a considerable change in school typologies.

Functionalist architecture began to spread throughout Mexico during the 1930's because it was a way of economically generating a great quantity of hygienic, ventilated modular buildings in a very short period of time. Industrial materials were used such as brick, partition walls, reinforced concrete, metal structural frames that adjusted easily to incorporate regional materials and modern construction processes that facilitated mass production.

Schools at that time were built in this industrial manner and characterized a typology that is still seen today all over the country. During the 1940's this typology became a nationalist symbol that reflected the new social values of the country and linked local actions with those of the nation.

By the mid 1940's, the educational concern moved its focus from the rural areas towards the city. The population of Mexico City had increased dramatically (see section 2.4) and it was obvious that a new plan was needed to increase its number of schools. It also became obvious that the education system put in place before the city's massive population increase was still lacking. By 1940 there were 2 million more illiterate people than in 1930.

In 1941, under the government of Avila Camacho, Ocatvio Vejar Vazquez was appointed as the new head of SEP. During this time article 3 of the constitution was revised which again redefined Mexico's goals for sufficient public education. Educational programs were reformed as a result making them more uniform across the country. Building schools became the next concern.

In 1943, Don Jaime Torres Bodet became the head of SEP and over the next year started organizing the Planning Program for the Construction of Schools for Mexico. In 1944 the first proposal was accepted. Its main goal was to construct schools in every region of the country as indispensable bases geared at combating illiteracy.

Many studies about the country's then current educational situation had been done such as demographic studies, the areas that needed schools and how they were going to be distributed.

Some of the results of this study were as follows:

- i) More than 45% of the school-age population did not rely on schools
 - ii) 11% of Mexico's 20 million inhabitants were between the ages of 6 and 14 and were practically denied access to classrooms due to overcrowding.
- As a result illiteracy and ignorance was growing at a rate of 2 000,000 Mexicans per year.