

## Under the ABC Umbrella: Orphanages, Rights, and Education in Mexico

Claudia G. Grigorescu and M. Fernanda Pineda  
Florida International University, USA

**Abstract:** The National System for the Integral Development of the Family (DIF) in Mexico assists children in orphanages. This paper provides an overview of its current practices, and advocates a holistic educational/social model for “alternative orphanages,” integrating Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and the rights-based approach. The model complements DIF’s social efforts.

Mexico’s National Commission for Human Rights-(CNDH) in its 2006 agenda proposes to reevaluate and reconsider existing programs, such as the Mexican National System for the Integral Development of the Family (DIF), for protecting underprivileged groups of children (neglected, abandoned, street children and/or orphans). They challenge human rights’ advocates and government officials to move “from mere campaigns of awareness to real actions” (CNDH, 2006, p. 20) to defend their rights. The “alternative orphanages” proposed herein seeks to complement the Commission’s goal to improve their services in orphanages and link them effectively to children’s rights. DIF is a public institution devoted to articulating, advocating and implementing public policies that pertain to social welfare. Through these policies, DIF attempts to promote family values, community development, while simultaneously combating causes that lead children into orphanages, and addressing the effects once they enter the orphanage system (DIF, 2007). The institution also serves as an important voice within the federal government, as it assures that the State provides what is needed to foster the respect for and dignity of children (DIF, 2007). In essence, DIF monitors the State’s role as an enforcer, protector, and facilitator of children’s rights. It also acts as its implementing arm.

Although DIF is adjusting to a changing world, the ABC principles propose an expansion on their current objectives. The acronym *ABC* stands for the following: *A = Apples and Advocacy*, which suggests educational action based on which needs of Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs; *B = Being and Building Communities*, which advocates establishing sustainable communities based on psychological and self-actualization needs; and *C = Caring and Connecting*, which promotes the creation of interconnected networks of agents and agencies to assist children in the following: finding rich intellectual development opportunities; becoming self-sufficient and self-empowered; developing spirituality and leadership-building capacities; becoming agents of purpose-driven outreach, advocacy efforts, and social change; and establishing interconnected local, national, and international partnerships. Taking action on these holistic approaches to orphanages will truly be advantageous physically, intellectually, and spiritually for the children in DIF institutions. This paper provides an overview of the government-based orphanages of the Mexican National System for the Integral Development of the Family (DIF) using the Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and the rights-based approach. The main purpose was to establish a holistic bridge between social justice practices and orphanages, and provide a supplementary vision of and for “alternative orphanages,” known as the *ABC Umbrella*.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs encompasses five areas as they relate to humans and their lifetime growth/development. In sequence, these include physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow also conceptualizes these needs. The physiological, for instance, indicates homeostatic needs that enable a person to function physically, such as food, air, and sleep. Safety needs entail having security in terms of family, health, economics (i.e., have a job), and others. Love needs, socio-psychologically speaking, consist of having a sense of belongingness, which includes (albeit not exclusively) friendships and family. Within the theoretical framework proposed by Maslow (1943), it is important to distinguish the needs-based and the rights-based approaches. The latter theoretical lens characterizes the holistic niche for the views expressed herein.

### *The Needs-based vs. Rights-based Approaches*

The needs-based approach represents the lower ranks of the hierarchy in Maslow's pyramid, which would include meeting the following "needs" of individuals (albeit not limited to): food, shelter, clothes, health services, psychological counseling, and legal protection. The rights-based approach, on the other hand, takes the needs-based approach into consideration, but has a rather different end goal in mind. Whereas the DIF approach considers the lower three of five needs from Maslow's hierarchy, which include basic, safety, and psychological needs, the DIF plus the ABC principles would include these and the higher two needs, which deal with self-actualization and peak experiences.

The main distinction between the needs approach and the rights-based approach lies in the power relations between the agents. The needs-based approach suggests acts of charity and satisfaction of the needs of others, with little or no sense of duty, while the rights-based approach re-directs power by enabling self-determination and choice. In other words, the rights-based approach suggests "the 'act of mercy,' considered as being a factor of inequality for which the donor expects tokens of submissiveness or political flexibility on the part of the receiving State" (Steiner & Alston, 2000, p. 1323).

The rights-based approach provides a human rights lens to pursue policy changes and program design and implementation. It creates a bridge between human development and human rights: "Human rights and development both aim to promote well-being and freedom, based on the inherent dignity and equality of all people" (OHCHR, 2006, p. 14). If DIF considers that "integral development" includes well-being and freedom, and they seek a life of dignity for their children, implementing this approach might be enriching, especially in DIF's role as an advocate of children's rights (within the government itself). The rights-based approach represents a viable option for programs (like DIF orphanages) dealing with disadvantaged children. It's comprehensive in that it fits the developmentally-appropriate practices that educators are always striving to achieve. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2006) explains with regards to the rights-based approach that "Human rights and human development share a preoccupation with necessary outcomes for improving people's lives, but also with better processes" (p. 14). Since dealing with children goes hand in hand with human development, the rights-based approach to DIF programs/orphanages is very likely to enrich them.

By utilizing a rights-based approach, the alternative orphanages shift priorities in power structures and systems, and meet some of the basic needs in the process. Adopting the rights-based approach reduces the dynamic of dependency and increases sustainability (Uvin, 2004, p. 129). Theoretically then, the alternative orphanages address the concepts of "needs" within the

rights-based approach that must be fulfilled by anybody, and in this case the children, to achieve well-being and self-actualization.

### Method

Since the paper's aim is to develop a better understanding of the DIF services and practices, a qualitative method is employed, which includes document analysis, and more specifically, external communication. This mode of inquiry enables the researchers to establish perspectives on the general infrastructure of DIF, as well as its implementation processes and accountability measures. The official website of DIF was examined. An analysis of online documentation is underway, which includes their mission statement, mode of operation, accountability processes, research publications, public statements, regional information, and policies. Personal communications (emails) with staff members of DIF also provides background information on the organization. Statistical data is obtained from the UNICEF and the National Commission on Human Rights (Mexico), to develop a comprehensive outlook of the Mexican case. For the purpose of this paper, examples of the ABC principles are briefly outlined to illustrate practices that embody the authors' holistic approach.

### Results

The analysis so far indicates that DIF does indeed expend tireless efforts toward this vulnerable section of the population. They have ventured into holistic practices, and attempt the same: having a human rights-based approach and meeting some of Maslow's hierarchical needs.

They have considered (to some degree) the program's sustainability (a key aspect of holism) regarding the child's life after the orphanage experience. As stated earlier, the vision of DIF's orphanages ("Tlalpan" and "Coyoacán") is to serve this underserved population by meeting their basic needs and to become an active "social welfare institution that promotes actions of training and research that would generate replicable public policies" (DIF, 2007). Furthermore, the general program description of the DIF orphanages suggests that they foster wholeness in the child's development—including his/ her physical, emotional and spiritual development (DIF, 2007). DIF staff place significant value in the child's overall formation: his/her moral and ethical character, intellectual and personal development, and the acquisitions of skills/capabilities for a productive life once he/she integrates into society (DIF, 2007). For these aspects and skills to develop, the institution must consider long term visions as part of the whole orphanage experience. The notion of holism, as sustainability, is far more complex than a child's preparation for social reintegration and workforce adaptation. The "alternative orphanages" would, therefore, expand thoroughly on the areas of self-empowerment, leadership skills, critical thinking skills and other long term skills necessary to become active members of their community.

*Casas hogar* (DIF's orphanages for children over 6 years of age) reflects aspects of the human rights-based approach. One such example is *casa hogar* for girls, "Graciela Zubirán Villareal." This institution seeks to provide care with quality and warmth (DIF, 2007) to assist the girls in mainstreaming into society once they are 19 years old. They strive to protect their girls and to provide them with lifetime skills, which include educational, vocational and cultural activities, as well as individual well-being (health and basic needs). In the case of the boys' *casas hogar*, the children receive similar services, including activities such as tae-kwon-do, yoga, and soccer classes and workshops in bakery and crafts (DIF, 2007).

*Calidad y calidez* is pivotal for children of *casas hogar*. When children enter their institutions, they are received warmly. Staff members are fully aware of the possibility that children view the entry into an orphanage as yet another loss or trauma—since many already

come from neglect, traumatic experiences, and abuse (DIF, 2007). Once inside, the children are given chores and responsibilities in the house they are in, and the opportunity to socialize with the other children. This in-house community seeks ways to embrace children, who participate in daily routines, follow the internal rules, and live up to expectations as community members (DIF, 2007).

Evident in the mission of the DIF programs is a sense of open mindedness and willingness to address the needs of their children. *Casas hogar* and *casas cuna* in Mexico exemplify institutions that do attempt to meet Maslow's hierarchical needs of their children. Because they also carry out some rights-based practices, these orphanages can be considered holistic in their intent, resolution, and advocacy efforts toward their children.

The challenge and concern of the orphanage programs and projects is interconnectivity and sustainability: the life-long impacts/experiences that enable children to become healthy, productive, independent citizens and the social, emotional, and educational interconnections needed to do so. Many aspects of the *casas cuna* and *casas hogar* suggest practices that include Maslow's theory and a human rights-based approach to orphanages. To establish the "integral development" of the child is the ultimate goal, details on the ABC Approach are provided.

*The ABC Approach: Hands-On Suggested Activities*

The section consists of an open-ended practical list of ideas that reflect and embrace our A, B, C. The activities overlap in some ways with current practices, but many simply build bridges and fill in gaps in the DIF model. In our personal journey to become holistic educators, we attest that this list of ideas conveys developmentally, pedagogically, and socially sound practices. DIF staff, educators, and children's rights advocates should find this information useful.

*A = Apples and Advocacy*

In the orphanages' routine, staff should have children make the shopping list and go with staff and other children to the markets. This might be somewhat challenging when first implemented, since DIF orphanages have a set budget and systematized operations (L. Mendoza, personal conversation, April 16, 2007). However, transforming the orphanage into the warmest (and natural) home as possible enriches the children's experience in the institution.

Children should create plays and invite senators and other government officials to their "home" and extend the invitation to their community in general (this overlaps with "B"). In DIF orphanages, volunteering is not encouraged (L. Mendoza, personal communication, April 16, 2007). This could translate into a great opportunity to include non-DIF people in orphans' lives.

If space permits it, a communal garden should be created within the orphanage; children can sow vegetables and fruits. Children should be encouraged to work as a team to take care of their garden, to conduct research about gardens and growing vegetables, and to cook and eat their vegetables when ready.

Children should create a newsletter from the DIF orphanages to other orphanages of the world and to children in general. Setting up a printing shop inside the institutions is not very expensive and it will be a great experience for children. From an educational point of view, becoming part of the editorial team will be constructivist and will infuse children's love for literacy, with teamwork, and entrepreneurship. This will also encourage civic participation from an early age. This overlaps with "C".

National and international programs should invite orphanage children to travel and bring a message to policymakers and society in general. These programs must provide a safe environment for the children to share their advocacy message to the world; their emotions must

be thoroughly protected at all times. Some institutions that cherish listening to children's voices and perspectives are UNICEF and DIF.

*B = Being and Building Communities*

Children in DIF orphanages attend public schools (L. Mendoza, personal communication, April 16, 2007). Inviting their classmates to have dinner at their home (the orphanages) and planning as many field trips and other activities as possible would bring the world to them, but also expose them to the world. The social divide and the stigma that society has placed on children living in orphanages must end. Children in orphanages have the right to belong, the right to not be looked down upon, and the right to live a life as normal as possible.

Inviting grandparents living in retirement homes to spend some time with orphanage children, and vice versa would be very enriching for both groups. Once a system is established, this could be extended to Christmas celebrations and regular story-reading afternoons, for example. Children who leave the institution and lead a successful life should be encouraged to come back as often as possible to promote the building of communities.

*C = Caring and Connections*

Children in orphanages often carry a heavier emotional/psychological burden, especially regarding having self-esteem and a sense of belongingness (Cohen, 1980). DIF is known for its multidisciplinary team of experts working at the orphanages, who appear to meet the needs of their children with positive results. In addition, they should also promote professional careers more actively aside from vocational school. Providing leadership workshops and opportunities, inviting artists (painters, poets, actors) to give workshops, and inviting working professionals in a Career Day would assist in developing higher expectations and encouraging future independence.

**Educational or Scientific Importance of the Study**

DIF must receive—and receives—kudos for its tireless efforts in support of a vulnerable section of the population. This paper provides educational ideas that DIF and other systems may find enriching and innovative. However, the number of street children increase, and many human rights issues remain uncovered. The researchers call for a more comprehensive approach to orphanages, in which children will operate not only from a basic needs-system, but from a holistic lens and a rights-based approach. The ABC model could operationalize the comprehensive approach we call for.

**References**

- Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos. (CNDH) (2006). *Agenda de derechos Humanos 2006*. Retrieved on April 14, 2007, from <http://www.cndh.org.mx/lacndh/agendadh/ag2006.pdf>
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights-(OHCHR). (2006). *Frequently asked questions on a human rights-based approach to development Cooperation*. Retrieved on April 14, 2007, from [http://ohchr.org/english/about/publications/docs/FAQ\\_en.pdf](http://ohchr.org/english/about/publications/docs/FAQ_en.pdf)
- Maslow, A. (1943). *A theory of human motivation* [Electronic Version]. *Psychological Review* 50, 370-396. Retrieved on April 9, 2007, from [http://www.advancedhiring.com/docs/theory\\_of\\_human\\_motivation.pdf](http://www.advancedhiring.com/docs/theory_of_human_motivation.pdf)
- Pérez, J. M. (2003). La infancia callejera: Apuntes para reflexionar el fenómeno. *Revista Española de Educación Comparada* 8(2003). Retrieved April 10, 2007, from [http://www.derechosinfancia.org.mx/Documentos/art\\_inf\\_lat.pdf](http://www.derechosinfancia.org.mx/Documentos/art_inf_lat.pdf)

- Rousseau, J. J. (1987). *On the social contract*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF) (2007). Retrieved April 10, 2007, from [http://www.dif.gob.mx/inicio\\_1.asp](http://www.dif.gob.mx/inicio_1.asp)
- Steiner, H., & Alston, P. (2000). Globalization, development, and human rights. In missing editor, *International human rights-in context: Laws, politics, morals* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 1319-1326). Oxford: Claredon Press.
- UNICEF (n/a). *Convention on the rights-of the child. The human rights-framework*. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from [http://www.unicef.org/crc/index\\_framework.html](http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_framework.html)
- UNICEF (2000). *First call for children*. New York: UNICEF.
- UNICEF (2005). *Los primeros pasos*. Vigía de los derechos de la niñez mexicana, IDN (0 a 5 años) 1(1). Retrieved April 14, 2007, from [http://www.unicef.org/mexico/spanish/mx\\_resources\\_vigia\\_1.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/mexico/spanish/mx_resources_vigia_1.pdf)
- UNICEF Mexico. (UNICEF) (2007). Retrieved April 9, 2007 from <http://www.unicef.org/mexico>.
- Uvin, P. (2004). *Human rights and development*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.