School Curricula for Mexican Students in Texas in the Early 20th Century: A Comparison of Rural and Urban Settings

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There is a common perception that the academic opportunities offered children of Mexican heritage in Texas from 1910 to 1930 in public schools were uniformly poor.[1] Upon closer observation, however, we see vast differences. There was a variety of schooling patterns involving different forms of segregation and integration as well as differentiated curricula at both the secondary and elementary levels. This paper describes the variety of curricula offered children of Mexican origin in Texas in three different public elementary school settings: 1) small, segregated, rural schools; 2) an ethnically mixed urban school serving primarily immigrant children; and 3) an ethnically mixed urban school serving children of both Anglo and Mexican origin.

The largest wave of immigration in history from Mexico to Texas occurred during the period of the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath, from 1910 to 1930. Most of these newcomers entered by informal channels,[2] but it is estimated that approximately 800,000 persons of Mexican descent lived in Texas by 1929.[3] The majority of these immigrants and others of Mexican origin who had been born in the United States were migrant agricultural workers. However almost one-quarter of this group lived in urban areas. In 1930 San Antonio had a Mexican population of approximately 82,000; El Paso, 58,000; Houston, 14,000; and Dallas, 6000. Almost 5000 people of Mexican heritage resided in Austin. More than 50% of all persons of Mexican ancestry living in the United States were in urban areas by 1930.[4]

Over 14 million immigrants from Europe, Mexico and elsewhere settled in the United States during the first two decades of this century.[5] More than a third were illiterate, most came from peasant backgrounds, and many were unskilled. By 1919 it was estimated that about one-third of the total U.S. population was either foreign-born or the children of foreign-born, almost 34 million people.[6] The major response by native-born Americans to this huge wave of immigration was a desire for the immigrants to fit into established society. A campaign to Americanize immigrants by teaching them English, citizenship, and vocational skills centered in public schools.

Texas responded by organizing a variety of educational settings for immigrant children, most of whom were from Mexico. Perhaps the most common schooling offered these students was in segregated, one-room, rural schools. Such schools were often underfunded and poorly maintained. They generally operated on a five or six month school year, often only for half-days. They were usually presided over by young, untrained teachers whose main function was to teach oral English language skills.

In urban settings however, children from Mexico and elsewhere often attended school in excellent facilities, with comparatively well-trained teachers and nine-month, full-day school years. An example of such a setting is the Jose Antonio Navarro Elementary School in San Antonio. In the 1920s this school had a 30-room stone building with steam heat, good lighting, and a modern playground. It served a low-income Mexican immigrant neighborhood, but was also attended by Chinese immigrant children and others.[7] Curriculum development for non-English speaking students in San Antonio, El Paso and other major cities emphasized innovative approaches to English language instruction.

The third setting discussed in this paper is integrated urban or small town schools with good facilities and trained teachers that quietly served both White and Mexican students. Metz Elementary School in Austin, for example, enrolled from 10% to over 25% children of Mexican origin in a primarily White school from the mid-1900s to the mid-1930s.[8] The school maintained one first grade class exclusively for teaching English language skills to Spanish-speaking children and offered a broad, enriched curriculum to all students beyond that level.

Varieties of Elementary School Curricula

The learning objective in most small, segregated, rural schools for Mexican origin children was the ability to communicate in English. Speaking English was seen as the most critical achievement for immigrants throughout the U.S. At least twenty states including Texas passed laws prohibiting public school instruction in any language other than English during World War I. Since most Mexican immigrant children in Texas were Spanish-speaking, this had great implications for educational practice.

Rural schools for Mexican students generally had few books or other learning materials, and no enrichment beyond the teacher's own ingenuity. The young female teacher was usually the only native English speaker regularly encountered by the students. Most language lessons consisted of the teacher reciting in English and the children repeating her phrases. A survey of 230 rural schools in Texas in the early 1920s describes a preponderance of teacher-initiated drill and rote memorization, not unlike most other classrooms in the United States at the time.[9] Observers noted that without an enriched language context, actual language learning was often minimal in such schools.[10]

With the occasional exception of singing and basic mathematics, other subjects were often neglected entirely. For instance physical education and playground equipment were virtually nonexistent in rural schools. Small barren plots of one-fourth to one acre in size were the norm for rural school grounds in the segregated schools. This obviously did not afford the opportunity for expanded activities.[11]

San Antonio was the largest city in Texas during this time and had considerably more funding for public education than rural school districts. Attempts were made to improve English language instruction for non-native speakers in San Antonio, which had a population of over 50% Mexican origin. William J. Knox, principal of the Navarro School from 1900 to 1920 advocated a "sound and object" method of language instruction.[12] This technique utilized "ordinary word-sentence methods, richly supplemented with pictures, objects, actions, games, songs and excursions." He

stressed the need to teach oral skills before reading, especially words that appeared in the primer. He encouraged teachers to teach the names of readily available objects such as parts of the body or objects and pictures in the room. Then he demonstrated how to combine these language lessons with mathematics, creating word problems for the students. While the first three grades at Navarro concentrated on English language acquisition, arithmetic, music, drawing, supervised outdoor play and other subjects were also included in the school curriculum.[13]

Elma A. Neal, Director of Elementary Education for the San Antonio Independent School District in 1923, and her assistant Ollie P. Storm, developed and field tested special materials designed to promote English reading skills for Spanish-speaking children.[14] Neal and Storm emphasized a practical vocabulary drawn from the everyday experiences of the child. Their approach stressed oral language training first, supplemented by enrichment activities such as pictures, songs, games and excursions as advocated by Knox. Students practiced short conversations about a given topic, then practiced reading and writing using the same vocabulary. Neal and Storm developed an "expanding horizons" language concept for the early grades. First grade lessons centered around the child himself; in second grade, emphasis was on home and community. This curriculum was credited with improved achievement by Spanish-speaking students in San Antonio. Other factors contributing to increased academic progress, such as moderately improved family economics or changing migration patterns, were not taken into account however, so it is difficult to determine the actual effect of this new curriculum.

In a few towns some schools serving ethnically mixed neighborhoods opened their doors to all children. Metz Elementary School in Austin is one such example. Classroom instruction in the early 1930s included art, music, and physical education in addition to reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, social studies and science. Each morning began with opening exercises, announcements and a Bible reading. The majority of students in the first decades of this century were concentrated in the first and second grades at Metz, while enrollment in third through sixth grades dwindled approximately by half.[15]

Metz was located in a working class neighborhood inhabited primarily by Anglos during this time, with an increasing Mexican origin population. Some of the students of Mexican ancestry at Metz came to first grade already speaking fluent English.[16] While many of the families in the neighborhood were recent immigrants, others traced their roots in Texas back many generations. By no means were all schools in Austin integrated, however. Several strictly segregated schools for children of Mexican heritage existed in Austin during the early part of this century. The rich academic experience offered students at Metz and a few other schools in the state at that time is an anomaly for most students of Mexican background in Texas.

Americanization

The process of Americanization was almost nonexistent for Mexican immigrant children in Texas. Americanization was conceived in the rest of the U.S. as a way to help immigrants join the mainstream of American society. This did not seem to be a widespread goal in Texas, however.[17] Not only did large numbers of children labor in migrant agriculture, but the short academic term and poor quality of instruction often found in rural schools also contributed to this neglect. For instance in Sugar Land near Houston, few school children of Mexican descent learned to speak English, even though that was the main objective of the local school. No other effort towards citizenship training was made. The magnitude of this problem is illustrated when we discover that the school enrollment in Sugar Land in1936 consisted of 624 Spanish-speaking students in a total of 913 pupils. Thus the school system failed to serve adequately over two-thirds of the eligible students. [18]

Principal Knox of the Navarro School in San Antonio was an exception to the rule, however. He included various citizenship activities in his school curriculum such as patriotic stories and songs and weekly flag exercises. Before American participation in World War I was declared, he apparently not only raised the United States flag at these ceremonies, but the Mexican flag as well. Reportedly, children cheered and sang the Mexican national anthem on these occasions.[19]

Vocational education was another mainstay of Americanization programs across the country. Few such classes were developed for students of Mexican heritage in Texas however. Only four counties in Texas offered vocational education to school students of Mexican origin in 1928.[20] Some of those offerings were extensive however, such as those at Lanier Junior High in San Antonio. [21]

Vocational education was implemented mostly at the high school level in Texas during this time. Since fewer than 4% of Mexican origin students attended high school during this period, most were effectively denied training for any occupations other than field work. Only a small percent of the federal matching funds for vocational and home economics instruction granted under the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 were actually used in Texas because the state did not meet the necessary conditions.[22] Of the annual $50,000 in state aid for vocational training, almost all went to White schools. [23]

Conclusion

The differences in public elementary school curricula detailed in this paper illuminate a variety of academic experiences offered to children of Mexican heritage in Texas over 65 years ago. While this is helpful, there are still many questions about these educational opportunities that remain unanswered. For instance it is probably impossible to determine how many children actually attended the three types of schools described. The majority of children of Mexican origin migrated from place to place throughout the year as agricultural labor needs demanded . Some attended rural schools during part of the year and more progressive urban schools at other times. It is also difficult to determine differences in academic outcome for the three types of curricula because students often did not remain in one school long enough to complete a course of study. The rigidity of the school calendar stymied many student efforts as they were continually forced to start anew.

Some families of Mexican descent representing a variety of economic levels were permanent urban residents, however. This may have been the key for some children to experience fuller educational opportunities in Texas public schools than has heretofore been described. More research is needed to detail other types of curricula that may have been offered to children of Mexican

heritage in various urban or rural settings. This will enable us to gain a fuller understanding of the schooling opportunities available to minority children in the early years of this century, as well as the development of curricula to meet specific needs.

Endnotes

[1] G.G. Gonzalez, *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation*. (Philadelphia: Balch Institute Press, 1990); G. San Miguel, Jr. *"Let Them All Take Heed:" Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas 1910-1981*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

[2] R. Romo, The Urbanization of Southwestern Chicanos in the Early Twentieth Century. In R. Romo and R.A. Paredes (Eds.) *New Directions in Chicano Scholarship*. (Santa Barbara, CA: University of California, Center for Chicano Studies, 1984).

[3] H.T. Manuel, *The Education of Spanish-speaking Children in Texas*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1930).

[4] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, Vol. 2*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930).

[5] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975).

[6] E.S. Bogardus, *Essentials of Americanization*. (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1919).

[7] J.K. Harris, "A Sociological Study of a Mexican School in San Antonio, Texas." (unpublished master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1927). Also see W.J. Knox, "The Economic Status of the Mexican Immigrant in San Antonio, Texas." (Unpublished master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1927).

[8] M.S. Black, The Battleground: The History of Metz Elementary School, paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southwestern Historical Association, New Orleans, March 27, 1997.

[9] Texas Educational Survey Commission , *Texas Education Survey*. (Austin: Author, 1924) and Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classroom*, 1890-1990 (Second Ed.), New York: Teachers College Press, 1993.

[10] W. W. Hart, "A Survey of the Present Conditions of the Schools of Travis County, Texas, with a Proposed Plan for Their Reorganization." (Unpublished master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1937) and A. T. Kaderli, "The Educational Problem in the Americanization of the Spanish-speaking Pupils of Sugar Land, Texas." (Unpublished master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1940).

[11] D. J. Chavez, "Civic Education of the Spanish-American." (Unpublished master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1923); S. Guerrero, *Memorias: A West Texas Life*. (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1991); and Hart, 1937, previously cited.

[12] Charles Hanus. Educating Non-English Speaking Students. *One by One*. (San Antonio: San Antonio Independent School District. Winter 1996). Also W. J. Knox, *Teaching Foreigners*, 1915, as cited by Hanus.

[13] Mrs. F. S. Dupre, "Play as a Factor in the Education of Children." (Unpublished master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1925): 275; and Hanus, previously cited.

[14] E.A. Neal and O.P Storm, *The Open Door Primer: First and Second Reader, Prepared Especially for Teaching Spanish-speaking Children*. (New York: Macmillan, 1927). Also Hanus, cited above.

[15] Unpublished memorandum, Metz Parent Teacher Association, 1931.

[16] L. Camacho, personal interview, 1994; also T. Lott, "Neighbors Take Pride in Metz Rebirth," *Austin American Statesman*, 19 Oct, 1992: B1.

[17] A notable exception is the efforts of the League of United Latin American Citizens, which campaigned diligently for increased participation in mainstream institutions in Texas by people of Mexican heritage. See G. San Miguel, Jr., 1987, previously cited.

[18] Kaderli 1940: 45

[19] Hanus, previously cited.

[20] Manuel, previously cited.

[21] J.F. Bobbit, *The San Antonio Public School System: A Survey*. (San Antonio: San Antonio School Board, 1915).

[22] C. E. Evans, *The Story of Texas Schools*. (Austin: Steck,1955): 121.

[23] H. Platt, "Negro Education in Texas." (unpublished master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1917): 8.

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