

Chapter

EDUCATION AND NATIONALISM IN MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to depict the construction of a unified Mexican national identity, in a territory originally divided by adversarial ethnic groups, into one nation glued by a common language and history.

The concept of nationalism, in this historical context, is discussed within the frame of formal education and educational policy. We identify specific elements in the curriculum that foster and reinforce nationalistic feelings and thoughts. We discuss further the value of education in the construction of Mexico as a nation.

It is concluded that nationalism in Mexico must be understood within educational, historical and contextual influences to assess costs and benefits.

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INTRODUCTION

North America was inhabited by hundreds of ethnic groups with their own language, values and traditions. In the territory known as Mexico today, such was the animosity and hate between aboriginal groups, that the European conqueror's Spanish language was established as the common vehicle of communication and national integration.

In this chapter, we aim to review the role of nationalism as a unifying force in the construction of the Mexican modern state, and how the educational establishment designed, developed and fostered a universal sense of national pride to support a single, cohesive entity called Mexico.

NATIONALISM IN THE MEXICAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The history of Mexican education has maintained a parallel relationship with the national problems and the political agenda of the government in turn. Educational institutions and policies are neither separate nor autonomous entities.

Since colonization, formal education had the purpose to impose a monotheistic belief system anchored in the catholic religion that sponsored the discovery and conquest of the Americas. During the independence movement, early in the XVIII century, educational efforts were directed to unify the many ethnic groups in every corner in Mexico under one religion and one language. Schools were expected to consolidate national identity with fresh elements such as a flag, anthem, shared national heroes and a common history for all in this emerging sovereign nation.

Beyond fighting illiteracy, schools had as a primary mission to create a sense of nationalism congruent with the concept of Mexico, as Paoli Bolio (2010) asserted "education in Mexico was poor in scientific solidity, in artistic imagination and, especially, in moral intelligence. But, it was centered on giving information about the country and on presenting a "patriotic mystique"(p. 213).

Following many other states that used the educational process as an instrument to shape the collective conscience of a country and to arouse the loyalty of its inhabitants towards the national state (Vázquez, 2000), education in Mexico helped construct a sense of national identity and to foster national pride within the classrooms (Alsina & Capote, 2010).

Perez, Sanchez and Hollingworth (2013), argued that because teachers are social actors in charge of instilling positive expectations in children toward the future of the country, their own national identity shaped expectations about the future of the country in their students. Thus, fostering a sense of national pride was at the top of the agenda of the Mexican teacher training model institutions, best known as “normal schools”, where basic education teachers were committed to inculcate unconditional loyalty towards the nation in their pupils.

In the following sections, we will review some historical landmarks of the education as a factory of nationalism, we will identify some curricula issues that create and maintain national feelings and we will pinpoint some rites, traditions and legends around Mexican national pride and meaning.

HISTORICAL LANDMARKS

In the XVII century, the colonial condition of the territory, which today is known as Mexico, maintained divisions between the indigenous groups (García Saiz, 1989). The colonial state was a stratified society in which social class, ethnic origin and castes privileged the Spanish conquerors and their descendants (Gonzalbo Aizpuru, 1999).

In the XVIII century, and because of crossbreeding of all kinds, Mexican society became mixed and mestiza, and social conditions diminished differences between the aboriginal ethnic groups. Simultaneously, the creoles grew negative sentiments against the Spanish rule (Gruzinski, 2000).

The independence movement was finally led by the children and grandchildren of the Spanish conquerors, sometimes even mestizos themselves, inspired by the liberal social movements from Europe and

other American countries (Schwartz, 1995). Furthermore, Miguel Hidalgo, the hero of the independence, was also a priest. Hence, this was a rebellion against both the catholic church and the Spanish crown.

At the time, Mexico was characterized by illiteracy (Aymes, 1985) and promoters of independence realized the opportunity to consolidate the separation from Spain through an education that held a new nationalistic sentiment, coherent with the idea of a novel and sovereign country. Formal education then, resulted to be a natural scenario for the proper discussions of political realities during the construction of the national identity of this emerging country in need of its new laws and own symbols of nation.

In the XIX century, Mexico wanted to extend the education of their citizens along with the construction of an ideal national state, for which France was a model. For this, formal education, still with heavy religious influence, intended the centralization and elimination of cultural and idiomatic differences (Vázquez, 2000). The discussion in political and academic circles promoted the creation of a federal republic in the Constitution of 1857, which held the state accountable for a free, mandatory and lay public education (Dietz & Mateos Cortés, 2011).

As Vázquez (2000) argued, both groups which were disputing power in the XIX century, characterized as conservatives and liberals, perceived education as a key element for their political intends (Hale, 2002), taking the European model as an example (Bazant, 2006). Then, formal education focused on citizenship considering the existence of many of the indigenous groups. Scholastic debates included cultural and biological homogenization, that classified human beings in different races and hierarchies, in the words of Taguieff (1995) “in a rather racist vision of the world” (p. 157).

In this context, nationalism in Mexico was a force of unification and creation of national identity, in contrast to positions based on race and blood. Arguing that belonging to the higher Mexican state, was much more important than the indigenous group of origin, the amount of Spanish or Indian blood in the veins. Nationalism was then an antidote to the “danger meant by the racial miscellany” (Argueta, 2009, p. 76).

Justo Sierra in 1892, a recognized pedagogue in Mexico, expressed that education was the essential instrument for the national integration: "the school is the salvation of our national personality" (quoted in Vazquez 2000. p. 102).

At the end of the XIX century, formal education in Mexico was an element of transformation and creation of a national identity, turning the fact of being and Indian, an asset and a quality to be admired and considered because of its glorious past(Vázquez, 2000, p. 68). Likewise, in this century, public education is removed from religious influences through the laws of Reform.

The emergence of the XX century was colored by the right-wing government of general Porfirio Díaz (1884-1911) with a clear attempt to homogenize the sense of national identity in the Mexican population, characterized then by a young nation with ancient pre-Hispanic autochthonous roots(Tenorio & Gómez, 2013).

Nationalism, as an agenda of the state, created a sense of one nation in creative ways, for example, whilst the glorious history of peoples as the Aztecs, Olmecs or Mayas was highlighted in educational materials(González Navarro, 1994), European immigrants were welcomed by different regional governments to improve the race and the social tissue (Hale, 2002).

This nationalistic agenda was further preserved by the large numbers of migrants to the United States, estimated between 15 to 20% of the Mexican population, maintaining language, symbols, religion and traditions in their communities across the border.

Unification thought national identity was a strategy of peace, modernization and progress. Education was considered the main tool of this nationalistic movement along with the first attempts to provide the same curricular contents to every school in the country (Bazant, 2002, p. 128).

Porfirio Diaz ruled Mexico 34 years (from 1876 to 1911) and he set basic and lasting principles for the educational system, declaring that public education should be free, universal and lay.(Loyo Bravo, 1999)

Major changes to the educational agenda were made later because of the Mexican revolution, a bloody social revolt to overturn Díaz. When this civil war finished in 1920, almost a third of the population was killed and the rest of the remaining population was impoverished, illiterate and living in remote rural settings. Thus, post-revolutionary governments attempted to expand and serve every corner of the Mexican territory to consolidate the sense of national identity.

Around 1921, the Ministry of Education was founded to formalize and administer the budget for education and to establish specific educational policies to shape a social imaginary of the Mexican revolutionary state. Special mention deserves its first minister José Vasconcelos, who set two important initial goals: 1) to alphabetize the entire country and 2) to incorporate the indigenous population into the nation (Rockwell, 2011, p. 469). This was however, an oxymoron.

On one hand, it recognized the contribution and values of original ethnic groups; on the other, this policy of integration, denied their right to preserve their ancestral particular culture as such (Loyo Bravo, 1999, p. 163).

The Ministry of Education extended the educational agenda later to set economic progress and social advancement as goals of the educational process, providing a more pragmatic approach in promoting the incorporation of children to the formal school establishment (Marsiske, 1999).

Even the educational ideas of John Dewey and the influence of the Protestant ethics were considered in the Mexican educational system and at the end of the XX century, nearly 7 thousand rural schools accomplished full coverage of basic 6 grade education in the country (Vaughan, 2001, p. 49).

It is important to mention, that within the context of global political struggles in the XX century, the influence of socialistic thinking in Mexican scholars that in the period of President Lázaro Cárdenas, in the eve of WWII, set a school calendar in an annual national schedule, with a clear socialistic and antireligious agenda (Vaughan, 2001). Actually, article 3th of the Mexican constitution, at the time, claimed that public education

was “socialistic in nature to exclude religious doctrine, in order to fight the fanaticism and prejudices”. And claimed that “Teaching activities must allow the youth to create a rational and exact concept of the universe and of the social life” (Chapter III, Mexican constitution of 1936).

In sum, a light historical review of the role of nationalism in Mexican education demonstrates that instruction, in both private and public schools, tried to shape national feelings per the government agenda. In the name of the nation, and within the discourse of modernization, the educational establishment had the specific mission to integrate the same values, beliefs and expectations for every Mexican and to procure one nation and one state.

CURRICULUM ISSUES

The construction of the national identity requires the induction of a sense of state through formal education, under the assumption that the curriculum will shape the students’ later behavior as citizens of the nation.

Efforts in the early XX century to establish a homogenous national curriculum crystalized in 1959, when President Lopez-Mateos created the National Commission for the free text book that produced and distributed free, universal and compulsory text books for elementary education ever since. In accordance with Aguilar and Meyer (1997), this action enabled the state full control over the contents of education in the schools, that were geared to the development of a national feeling. In addition to this political load of the book’s content, for the covers of the first volumes used from 1960 to 1962, outstanding painters of the epoch were invited to recreate the great social movements of the country, such as the Independence, the Reform and the Revolution (figure 1).

In this section, we will identify some of the key curricular contents related to the installment of nationalistic feelings in Mexican children and the creation of a national identity and pride.

These contents are beyond basic expected disciplinary knowledge in natural sciences, grammar and Spanish language and basic knowledge in mathematics.

Recent changes in these text books have been directed to increase scientific knowledge in STEAM, for many years neglected due to the priority of the diffusion of a national history and Mexican values. In fact, changes have been consequence of globalization and because of poor results in the international testing program PISA (OCDE).

The policy of free universal free textbooks to nearly 16 million students today, created an enormous controversy.



Figure 1. Cover page of a typical free text book in Mexico (No copyright).

On one hand, supporters argued that this expense was justified, since it has created a sense of a common national identity and practically finished with violence between aboriginal ethnic groups. On the other, critics claim that the state has wrongly become the editor, publisher and distributor of

texts that abide to the government interest and ideology, in detriment of religious beliefs (inherent to the American basic education), the traditions in the original indigenous groups.

More compelling was the fact, that information contained in these books was biased to uphold economic policies and government decisions. For example, the oil monopoly held by the Mexican state, for many years was defended by glorification of the petrol expropriation in the late 30s that aroused resistance, especially from conservative sectors of society (Pérez-Rodríguez 2012).

Three major trends can be identified from the analysis of the curricular contents of these free and mandatory books: a struggle to remove religious education, glorification of indigenous roots and the creation of a Mexican identity through the insight of a glorious historical past.

NON-RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION

Ideology is basic to the sense of nationalism. In Mexico, the new and modern state needed to replace the religious origins of the colonial schools, in which Catholic schools struggle to change the superstitious magical thinking, based in the original polytheistic belief system of the natives, into a monotheistic Christian belief system directed to generate an allegiance to the Catholic hierarchy and obedience to the ecclesiastic authorities.

During the movement of reform, led by President Juárez (who studied in a Catholic school) in the mid XIX century, the state became officially separated from the church and two major things were stripped from the colonial catholic establishment: all properties, including temples, convents, schools and churches; and the religious character of formal education at the time.

Therefore, public education, since then, has been characterized by an agnostic curriculum based in scientific principles inspired by positive thinking.

From a curriculum perspective, it is the absence on religious values and movements what is relevant to bear in mind.

GLORIFICATION OF INDIGENOUS ROOTS

Perhaps and because of the need to integrate original ethnic groups that were enemies in the pre-colonial times. Textbooks included extended chapters on the history of Mesoamerica and the indigenous groups. The contributions of the Mayas, Aztecs, Toltecs, Nahuatls and many other groups were depicted, underling their contribution to the country cultural richness, such as architectural, astrological and medical gains. It was intended that such knowledge will provide meaning and value to current Mexican traditions, cuisine and world class archaeological sites, among other assets.

An exemplary case is the discourse on President Benito Juarez, an Indian from the state of Oaxaca, who was president of Mexico during the European occupation for almost 15 years. He is considered a hero and a patriot, hundreds of schools in Mexico bear his name and he was responsible for the movement of Reform that finished with religious public education.

The Mexican flag also portrays an eagle devouring as snake, the sacred signal for the migrant Aztec tribe that meant they should settle and build, what it is today Mexico City, on the middle of a lake.

Textbooks provide a sense of pride from our indigenous roots and effectively erased the sense of race or division due to ethnic origin.

A COMMON HEROICAL HISTORY

A third key element on textbooks was the creation of a common history for the Mexican people as a whole, characterized for glorious, if rather fictitious events. For example, the invasion of the United States to Mexico in 1846, that forced selling half of the Mexican territory (including Texas, California, New Mexico and Arizona), was minimized by the story of a child hero, a cadet from the military school that wrap himself in the

Mexican flag and throw himself to the precipice before letting the American soldiers capture it.

Likewise, a big mention is made from the battle of May the 5th 1862, in which the Mexican army defeated a French military division sent to collect a debt. However, the war was lost a year later, when the French army took over Mexico City and imposed an emperor from Europe. Commemorating a battle in which a war was lost, led to currently celebrate 5 de mayo as the Hispanic day in the United States!

Anyhow, such manipulation of historical facts may be justified from a nationalistic point of view, since national pride may be only achieved when people feel that they belong to a glorious past and, within this framework, as Perez-Rodriguez (2012) asserts “to find the bridges which take it to a present full of meaning and a promising future” (p. 16).

CIVIC RITES AND TRADITIONS

A multitude of civic rituals and activities to preserve traditions from indigenous ethnic groups are still alive in Mexican schools. Some of them help us better understand the ways the school created a sense of a nation.

For example, an expected celebration every Monday, consists in the pledge of alliance in which both the Mexican flag and the national anthem are honored by students and teachers alike.

By the way, the Mexican national anthem has a rather bellicose content (Mexicans heed the cry of war...), in a country in which the expend on the armed forces is one of the lowest in America due to the geo-political situation of the country (Far from God, and close to the US).

Music is a great vehicle to foster nationalistic feelings, mostly considering that many children in rural schools were illiterate until forth to fifth grade. Thus, many songs fostering the qualities and bravery of Mexican heroes were part of the curriculum in public education and they were singed and danced by children all over the country(Llinás, 1978).

Pre-Hispanic traditions are also preserved in the educational policy, for example, in the days of the death (November 1 and 2) children set up altars

and settings, in the tradition of the Indians, to honor the death and they are reminded of the importance of preserving and the legacy of the original ethnic groups.

CONCLUSION

The cost of nationalism in the construction of the Mexican state may rely in the loss of many tradition and cultural assets. Aborigine ethnic groups were incorporated to the mainstream by adopting the Spanish language, a common history and cherished symbols that represented the emerging country. Mexican citizens practice new traditions and rites of passages, these practices associated with a new national identity. Nationalism effectively erased many of the big differences in the original Mexican indigenous groups.

The gain relies in the fact, that Nationalism effectively set the bases for a new country that only existed, in the beginning, in the collective imaginary of teachers, intellectuals and politicians.

The cost relied in the homogenization of a diverse and rich territory populated by culturally different people.

In this chapter, we have provided evidence that educational process was a key player in the development of the national identity and pride. Thus, educational practices must be considered as important when approaching the construct of Nationalism, which is indeed a psychological phenomenon leading to the consolidation of one's identity.

As in many other countries, the school establishment helped to create a sense of one nation, one country. Public education transmitted the necessary information, ideology and emotion to become a Mexican citizen. According to Solana (1982), identity as Mexican, can be summarized in the educational agenda in five key components: a) the awareness of being Mexican, b) a sense of historical past, c) a sense of territory, d) the notion of a motherland, and e) the understanding of the national soul (p. 114).

Nationalism in the public Mexican educational system could generate a sense of national pride and national identity that amalgams today nearly

120 million people in Mexico and close to 20 million people in the United States.

In the case of Mexico, nationalism as a political agenda of the state, created the collective concept of one integrated country. A new and solid Mexican national identity.

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