



# Transforming nationalism into social action with teachers from Yucatan, Mexico

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – National basic education curriculum in Mexico emphasizes the need for the construction of a positive national identity. The purpose of this paper is to describe the perceptions, expectations and views of pre-service Mexican teachers about Mexico as a country.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Participants were 193 in-training teachers in the last semester of study from the four normal schools (3 public, 1 private, Catholic) in the state of Yucatan who participated voluntarily in the study. From these, 44 (23 per cent) were men and 149 (77 per cent) were women, with a modal age of 21 years old.

**Findings** – Opinions extracted from a paper and pencil survey administered to 193 pre-service teachers from Yucatan showed that the new teacher training curriculum has succeeded in creating a sense of nationalism and promoting feelings of pride and positive national identity, with the construct of Mexico as a motherland.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research suggests training must include activities in community service projects that effectively teach the value of actual work and involvement in the community: all this beyond existing sublime feelings of belonging. Teacher candidates seem to have an increased drive to participate in social and community projects, despite the fact it is not currently formally fostered in the national teacher training curriculum. Further research in these important aspects of traditional teacher training education is needed to better understand the role of nationalism and the values and tradition of the teaching profession in Mexico.

**Originality/value** – The study found a lack of criticism and reflection about the disadvantages and limitations of a unique orientation to the countries' symbols and rituals. Do teachers need to be a mere reproductive force of values and identities? Or, should teachers be expected to be reflective, critical and aware of the risks and dangers of blind loyalty to the country's policies and government dictates? Teacher training national guidelines should be revised and perhaps an effort to go beyond ideological issues should be considered, posting the concept of performance standards and other forms of accountability whilst in the schools.

**Keywords** Mexico, Education policy, Education colleges, Teachers, Curricula, National cultures, Social action

**Paper type** Research paper

In Mexico, the school has been considered a key player in constructing the concept of a single, unified and delimited country, as one nation that emerged from more than



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60 culturally different indigenous peoples with their own language, tradition, and history. Carretero (2010) explains that the school system in Mexico was able to homogenize the concept of “nation” through the implementation of the Spanish language as the prevalent communication vehicle. Furthermore, free text books with nationalism themes given to Mexican schools since the 1960s encouraged devotion to a single flag and anthem. School classrooms have transformed certain historical events into history lessons of glorious accounts starred by national heroes which built a common national history, despite clear and persisting differences among these very dissimilar and even rival ethnic groups. Because the classroom teacher is instrumental in developing the nationalism curriculum, it is important to explore the notions of national identity in the teacher.

Teachers are social actors in charge of instilling positive expectations in children toward the future of the country. This study is based on the assumption that the teacher’s concept of national identity will shape expectations about the future of the country in their students. In this perspective, the school is the social institution crucial in developing the sense of national identity. Indeed, fostering pre-service teachers’ own national identity has been at the top of the agenda of the Mexican teacher training model institutions, best known as “normal schools”, where basic education teachers are expected to instill feelings of pride, commitment, and even unconditional loyalty towards the nation (SEP, 2009).

### **Theoretical framework**

National identity is the result of the interaction of various factors: ideological, living experiences, and educational influences. It is grounded in the common social meaning of national symbols, language, national colors, the nation’s history, national consciousness, culture, music, cuisine, and arts to particular group of people. Anderson (1991) claims that national identity is an imaginary entity that responds to political, economic and historic conditions, and that this construct is instrumental to establish the sense of belonging. In this perspective, national identity is a person’s identity with one state and his/her sense of belonging to one nation; a feeling one shares with a group of people, regardless of one’s citizenship status. Ruiz and Carretero (2010), assert that the construction of national identity is a process that the state induces through the school to establish common values and a shared community sense in citizens’ daily actions. Indeed, national identity serves social glue due to its influence on people’s actions and judgments of value regarding both past and present events. These authors assert that national identity is displayed in a continuous between two poles of feelings, one of pride and belonging and the other of rejection and defensiveness toward others that do not belong to the group.

However, the construction of national identity deserves to be investigated, according to Gimenez (2007), because people “select and express subjectively these different identities in their discourse and social practices” (p. 62). In other words, people may manifest diverse identities simultaneously. In the building of national identity a basic element is nationalism, which is an “artificial political product” based in the civic symbols such as the flag, the anthem and common heroes. The textbooks used in Mexico’s classrooms are filled with these symbols of nationalism. But how are the teachers trained to instill a feeling of national pride in their students? According to Blancarte (1994), Mexican teachers have developed a sense of national identity based upon a common perceived history and the construction of a collective civic culture.

In particular, a national language has been instrumental to develop a standard to homogenize differences. In Mexico, Spanish language was indeed the major vehicle to diminish differences that allowed native rival groups before the Spanish conquest to become allies within a new culture with a common language, a unique religion, and a new sense of nation.

The key research question guiding this study is: how does the concept of national identity develop in the pre-service teachers in Mexico?

This work attempts to gain insight into the ways Mexican schools builds a sense of national identity and citizenship in the studies. For this, common perceptions of pre-service teachers about Mexico were collected and analyze in order to explore their construction of national identity. It also discusses the role of teachers in the development of a positive national identity.

The tenet of the emphasis on national identity in Mexico is that teachers, with high national identity, will participate more actively in national and community projects (a desirable feature of a good Mexican citizen). However, as Bejar and Cappello (1986) have argued, contrary to the effects of family and church influences in creating a strong sense of family affiliation and religious sense in Mexico, the school system has failed to bridge the romantic and sublime feelings of Mexicans regarding their national identify because it did not effectively promote social participation and change. As Kriger and Carretero (2010) assert, if in the development of national identity emotive factors prevail, the capacity to understand historical and civic dimensions of this concept are hindered, decreasing civic participation and community involvement.

Regarding the appraisal of national identity, Bejar and Cappello (1986) provide guidelines that include the measurement of both affective and behavioral aspects: first, by estimating the feelings of belonging, such as pride to be Mexican; and second, by estimating the predisposition to participate in community actions. This kind of research has been regarded as important, because teachers reflection on their past and future allows them to construct a subjective identity that becomes central to their biographies, and thus to their cultural development (Kriger, 2010) In the case of teachers in training in Mexico, Pérez (2008) has previously reported that there are no conflicting ideas in their sense to belonging either to the Yucatan or Mexico, she suggested that, despite high expectations about the role of teachers as agents of social change in Mexico, their public image has been devalued. Nowadays, there is a general complain in the Mexican media regarding constant marches and protests and class suspension in states such as Oaxaca, Michoacán and Guerrero by teachers unions (particularly from Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), and there is a sense of poor teacher – community involvement which may evidence a gap between a sense of belonging and actual community involvement ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cdun5uk-J\\_k&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cdun5uk-J_k&feature=related)).

This situation has been also reported by Mijangos (2001) who asserts that national and ethnic identities are not mutually exclusive.

This study also relates to Robinson (2009), who studied nationalism building in sub-Saharan African states where there is considerable variation across countries in the level of nationalism expressed by their citizens. Her research correlated the level of national identification and the identification with the ethnic group, and demonstrated that the degree of ethnic partition was positively related to national identification in these sub-Saharan tribes. In México, despite that the country emerged from more than

65 different ethnic groups with more than 85 different languages, there is a lack of studies that allow us to fully understand how the educational system was able to fuse these highly diverse and opposed people: [www.redindigena.net/mundoindigena/n2/pag1.html](http://www.redindigena.net/mundoindigena/n2/pag1.html)

**Research site**

The study focuses on the Mexican Yucatán Peninsula, which is home to the Mayan culture. It is a distinctive and unique state, because of its historic attempts to separate from Mexico. A sense of independence and separation has culturally distinguished people in the Yucatan from the rest of the country from the ancient Mayan culture. Almazán (2005) posits that ethnicity is a strong identity in the Yucatán, since this region became independent from Spain and even from Mexico during the XIX century.

However, cultural differentiation remained after rejoining Mexico, because the Yucatan’s relative geographical isolation. For example, it was easier to travel to Cuba or Louisiana rather than to Mexico City, because of the natural barrier of the swamp region of Tabasco and the heavy jungles of Campeche that made almost impossible the transit by land (Figure 1).

**Method**

*Participants*

Participants were 193 in training teachers in the last semester of study from the four normal schools in the state of Yucatan participated voluntarily in the study. From these 44 (23 percent) were men and 149 (77 percent) were women, with a modal age of 21 years old. The majority of students who attend the four normal schools are from lower middle class families. Three of the schools were public and the remaining one was a private, Catholic school.

*Instruments*

A self-administered instrument was developed to measure the two specific dimensions of national identity proposed by Capello (2005): sense of belonging and predisposition



Source: Created by authors

**Figure 1.**  
Map of Southeast Mexico  
evidencing the geographic  
barrier to access  
the Yucatan

to community action. The first was measured with five items of mixed format (open ended and forced choice). The second was estimated by asking the participants to identify the community association that he or she actively belonged. The survey also included two open-ended questions regarding current issues such as the relationship with the USA and the effects of the global economy.

*Procedures*

The questionnaire was anonymous and it was administered in the teacher training schools. Participants were told the purposes of the study and were given the opportunity to respond anonymously, leaving their questionnaires in a sealed box. Data were coded to protect anonymity of participants, and a statistical processing package was used for the analysis.

*Results*

Table I summarizes the results from the analysis of the responses regarding “sense of belonging”.

In general participants feel proud and positively identified with the country. However, when asked to describe Mexicans, 49 percent used terms related to conformism, 22 percent to selfishness, and 15 percent to corruption. Table II summarizes results related to community participation.

Two-thirds of participants claimed participation in some sort of association in their community. Furthermore, while 90 percent of participants asserted that Mexicans demonstrated solidarity and social commitment in natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes), two-thirds think that people in their community get involved in social projects only when they receive something in exchange. Only, four percent of respondents were willing to participate in community events related to education, despite this being the field of their chosen future career.

**Table I.**  
Sense of belonging

	Modal response	%
How proud are you of being a Mexican?	Very proud	58
I think that Mexicans often feel [...]	Identified with their homeland	62
The Mexican of today is characterized by [...]	Personal interests	41
The Mexican usually [...]	Does nothing to improve	49
Being Mexican is important of who I am [...]	Agree	83

**Table II.**  
Community participation

	%
Religious groups	31
Sports organizations	18
Political parties	12
Neighborhood projects	9
Citizens groups	5
Cultural groups	4
None	21
Total	100

*Standing in relation to international issues*

Table III provides the results of the questions about feelings of nationalism and the relationship between Mexico and the rest of the Western Hemisphere.

Half of participants would like to see a merger in North America and would accept a one country scheme between Mexico and the USA. However, 64 percent asserted that the USA has brought more problems than benefits to Mexico. Considering the importance of the USA – Mexico relationship, these perceptions deserve to be further explored in future studies.

Regarding Latin America, 72 percent asserted that Mexico should not pretend to be the leader of the region and 80 percent posited that Mexico should not be involved – in any way- in other country’s issues. However, 40 percent agreed that Mexico should abide by the United Nations resolutions, even if these are contrary to the official standing or interest of Mexico.

**Discussion**

Teacher training curricula has succeeded in creating, in 60 percent of students, a sense of belonging and to promote feelings of pride and positive national identity with the construct of Mexico as a motherland. This is consistent with findings previously reported by Maya and Silva (1998), Ruiz and Carretero (2010) and Kriger and Carretero (2010) regarding the prevalence of patriotic and nationalistic feelings in Mexican teachers.

The fact that sense of belonging is indeed higher than sense of social participation reinforces Capello’s (2005) suggestion of a certain civic and political estrangement in Mexican teachers. In fact, these teachers perceive their role as active social actors, however they are not willing to participate in social and community projects.

Teacher training may be an additive influence to the ideological load of textbooks (compulsory and free for every student in the primary school system in Mexico) and the ceremonies, rites, and celebrations within the school represent the official discourse in educational policy. However, findings question the influence of training fostering social participation and a more complex perception of the political and social context in which Mexican schools are embedded.

In a broader perspective, the future teachers in this study seem to have a sense of Mexico’s global position. It was surprising to see these teachers immersed in the ideological community of the normal school to foresee a merger in North America and to view future global villages as desirable. Perhaps, this is due to Mexico’s long history of immigration to the north, the influence of immigrants in current economic and political issues in the country, and the increasing mutual acculturation between Mexico and the USA.

	Modal response	%
Mexico and the USA should be a single country [ . . . ]	In accordance	50
Being a resident of the USA [ . . . ]	More trouble than benefit	64
What do you think should be the role of Mexico in Latin America?	Participate without trying to be leader	72
Mexico should abide to UN resolutions [ . . . ]	in accordance	40
Regarding other countries [ . . . ]	Avoid internal affairs	80

**Table III.**  
Perception of students of international relations maintained by Mexico



Results in this study suggest that there is a gap between the importance given to the role of educators in instilling the countries' symbols and rituals and a sense of national identity and the strength of national identity of teachers themselves. Do teachers need to be a mere reproductive force of values and identities? Or, should teachers be expected to be reflective, critical and aware of the risks and dangers of blind loyalty to the country's policies and government dictates?

Teacher training national guidelines should be revised. Perhaps, policies in the Mexican educational system must change focus, from an emphasis on ideological issues that demands aspirations and attitudes from teachers, to a more pragmatic policy that demands school and community actions and fosters accountability within the schools.

### Conclusions

A sense of national identity and sense of belonging in a citizen of a country is desirable because these feelings unite people they and are instrumental to the design and development of social projects that promote development and change. However, institutions charged with teacher training, such as normal schools, must go beyond the instillation of emotive and affective domains regarding national identity, and they should emphasize social participation through the incorporation of community and social projects to their curriculum. Furthermore, policies must include time, indicators, incentives and consideration to community actions when assessing teachers. This will serve to effectively teach the value of involvement in the community: all this beyond existing feelings of belonging or feelings of community service salient in most students of the teaching profession.

González (2003) suggests that schools in Mexico, beyond rearing citizens with a nationalistic view, they should cultivate a political culture of a democratic nature that enriches daily life and future political decision making. Teachers, on the other hand must develop a shared vision, regarding citizen formation, in order to effectively foster both civic and ethic competencies in the students.

Further research in these important aspects of traditional teacher training education is needed to better understand the values and tradition of the teaching profession in Mexico. Most important is the fact that this kind of research evidences the need for change and improvement in this branch of Mexican national education.

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#### Further reading

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)



**Appendix A. Survey instrument used**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ M ( ) F ( ) Age \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer freely and write as many ideas that come to your mind.

**National Identity**

How proud are you of being a Mexican? \_\_\_\_\_

I think that Mexicans often feel ... \_\_\_\_\_

The Mexican of today is characterized by ... \_\_\_\_\_

The Mexican usually ... \_\_\_\_\_

Being Mexican is important of who I am \_\_\_\_\_

**Community action**

Are you a member of a club, association or any organization in your community?

No ( ) ... Yes ( ) explain \_\_\_\_\_

Have you been involved in any community activity in the last year?

No ( ) ... Yes ( ) explain \_\_\_\_\_

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What is your sense of ethnic identity and how does it relates to your sense of national identity (write as much as you can to explain your thoughts)...

How do you feel about the role of Mexico in the global economy and the position of the country regarding the United States and Latin America (write all you can think about these topics)

Specifically answer these questions:

- Do you think Mexico and the US should merge into a single country?
- Would you like to be a resident/citizen of the US?
- What do you think should be the role of Mexico in Latin America?
- Should Mexico abide to the UN resolutions?

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