

National Identity and Country Perceptions of Teachers from Yucatan, Mexico.

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Abstract

National curriculum in Mexico emphasizes the need for a construction of a positive national identity. This paper describes the perceptions, expectations, and views of Mexico as a country from the point of view of pre-service Mexican teachers. Opinions extracted from a paper and pencil open survey administered to 193 pre-service teachers from Yucatan showed that the new teacher training curriculum has succeeded in creating a sense of belonging and promoting feelings of pride and positive national identity with the construct of Mexico as a motherland. Furthermore, these students seem to have an increased sense of participation in social and community projects. This positive attitude should be formally fostered in the teacher training curriculum. 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. 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.

Key words: Teachers, National Identity, community participation.

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This work describes common perceptions of pre-service teachers about Mexico and explores their construction of national identity. It also discusses the role of teachers in the development of a positive national identity. Ruiz & Carretero (2010), assert that the construction of national identity is a process that the state induces through the school, in order to establish common values and a shared community sense in citizens' daily actions. We define "national identity" as 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. 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 concepts such as national symbols, language, national colors, the nation's history, national consciousness, culture, music, cuisine, and arts to particular group of people.

In Mexico, the school has been considered a key player in constructing the concept of Mexico as one nation that emerged from more than 60 culturally different indigenous peoples with their own language, tradition, and history. As Carretero and Castorina (2010) asserted, 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 given in Mexico since the 1960's were used to encourage devotion to a single flag and anthem. School classrooms have transformed certain historical events into history lessons into glorious accounts starred by national heroes, which built a common history to all, despite clear differences among these very dissimilar and even rival ethnic groups.

National identity serves a social need, because of its influence on people's actions and judgments of value regarding both past and present events. Since this concept is instrumental in

developing perspectives to the future, 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 as a social institution has been crucial in developing the sense of national identity. Indeed, the teachers' own national identity has been at the top of the agenda of the Mexican normal schools, where basic education teachers are expected to instill feelings of national pride, commitment, and even unconditional loyalty toward the motherland (SEP, 2009). The question is: how does the concept of national identity develop in the pre-service teacher?

The tenet of the emphasis on national identity in federal Mexican education policy is that teachers with high national identity will participate more actively in national and community projects, and that this is a desirable feature of a good Mexican citizen. However, as Béjar & 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 trespass the romantic and sublime feelings of Mexicans regarding their national identity, because it did not effectively promote community participation and social change.

Regarding the appraisal of National Identity, Béjar & Cappello (1986) provided guidelines that include the measurement of both conative 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) However, there is a gap between the sense of belonging (for example, pride of national origin and identification with patriotic symbols) and actual community involvement. This tension should be taken into account when estimating the effects of national identity.

The study focuses on the Mexican Yucatán Peninsula, which is home to the Mayan culture. It is a distinctive state and a unique context because of its historic attempts to separate itself politically from Mexico. A sense of independence and separation has culturally distinguished people in the Yucatan from the rest of the country.

Methods

Participants

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%) were men and 149 (77%) were women, with a modal age of 21 years old. The majority of these participants were from middle income families. Three of the schools were public and the remaining one was a private Catholic school.

Instruments

A pencil and paper instrument was developed to measure the two specific dimensions assumed in National Identity proposed by Cappello (2005): sense of belonging and predisposition to community action. The first dimension was measured with four open ended questions related to sense of belonging and two questions regarding community participation. The second dimension included two questions asking the participants to identify the community associations and religious activities. Finally, it also included four open-ended questions

regarding international issues such as the relationship with the United States and the effects of the Global economy. Table 1. lists the questions included.

Table 1.-

<i>Questions</i>	
Category	Items
Sense of Belonging	How proud are you to be a Mexican?
	How do you think Mexicans usually feel?
	Tell me some characteristics of a Mexican person.
	Tell me how Mexicans usually behave?
Community participation	Tell me if you have participated in a club, association, or community project in the last six months. Explain
	Have you participated in a religious group in the last six months?
Identity Formation	What does it mean to be a Mexican person?
	How do you think national identity is developed?
International relations	Do you think Mexico should be involved in international issues?
	How do you feel about Mexico and the US merging into a one country?
	Should Mexico abide to the UN resolutions?
	Is it an advantage to be a neighbor of the US?

Procedures

The questionnaire was anonymous and it was administered in each one of the Normal schools to the students in a room assigned for this purpose. In-training teachers were told the purposes of the study, they were encouraged to respond as extensively as possible and they all responded voluntarily, leaving their questionnaires in a sealed box.

Results

Responses were analyzed and categorized in order to provide sense to the data. Table 2 summarizes results regarding sense of belonging.

Table 2.-

Sense of belonging

	Modal response	%
How proud are you to be a Mexican?	Very proud	58
How do you think Mexicans usually feel?...	Identified with their homeland	62
Tell me some characteristics of a Mexican person ...	Personal interests	41
Tell me how Mexicans usually behave?...	does nothing to improve	49

In general, participants feel proud and positively identified with the country. However, when asked to describe Mexicans, 49% used terms related to conformism, 22% to selfishness, and 15% to corruption. Table 2 summarizes results related to community participation.

Table 3.-

Community Participation

	%
Religious groups	31
Sports organizations	18
Political parties	12
Neighborhood projects	9
Citizens groups	5
Cultural groups	4

Two-thirds of participants claimed to participate in some sort of association in their community. Furthermore, while 90% of participants asserted that Mexicans get actively involved 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 participants reported a willingness to participate in community events related to education.

Identity formation

Regarding identity formation, 83% of participants responded that being Mexican was an important descriptor of what they are. Almost all of them (99%) argued that the school and teacher efforts to describe the history of the country, civic ceremonies and rites and the use and commendation of country's symbols (flag, anthem etc.) were very important to national identity formation and the development of a positive image as a Mexican citizen.

Standing with relation to international issues

Given the historic context in the Yucatan, it is not surprising that half of participants would like to see a merger in North America and would accept a one country scheme between Mexico and the United States. However, 64% asserted that the United States has brought more problems than benefits to Mexico. Regarding Latin America, 72% asserted that Mexico should not pretend to be the leader of the region and 80% posited that Mexico should not be involved – in any way – in other country's issues. However, 40% agreed that Mexico should abide by the United Nations resolutions, even if these are contrary to the official standing or interest of Mexico.

Discussion

National teacher training curricula has succeeded in creating a sense of belonging and to promote feelings of pride and positive national identity with the construct of Mexico as a motherland. Contrary to previous findings, in this study teachers in training seem to be more involved in community participation and support the perceived role of teachers as active social actors and hence as transmitters of national identity in Mexico.

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. Teacher in training seem to be more civic-minded and active in the community?

In a broader perspective, these future teachers seem to have a sense of a global. 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 our 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 United States.

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?

Conclusions

A sense of national identity and sense of belonging in a citizen of a country is desirable, because these feelings unite people. What is more, they 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. This will serve to effectively teach the value of involvement in the community: all this beyond existing sublime feelings of belonging or feelings of community service salient in most students of the teaching profession.

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 if the federal goals for nationalism are to be realized.

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