

Mexico

Located in Central America, Mexico is bounded by the United States in the north, Guatemala and Belize in the south, the Gulf of Mexico in the east, and the Pacific Ocean in the west. Its climate is variable from desert in the north to tropical in the central and southern regions. The population of Mexico is approximately 105 million people, of whom about 60 percent are *mestizo* (Amerindian-Spanish), 30 percent Amerindian, 9 percent white, and 1 percent other. The chief language is Spanish, but several Amerindian (or indigenous) languages are also prominent.

Class and the origins of Mexican public schools

The site of great Mayan and Aztec civilizations long before the arrival of Europeans, Mexico was conquered by Spain in the early sixteenth century. When Mexico declared independence from Spain on September 16, 1810, its leaders viewed public education as a way to mold a new society, but political and economic instability hindered development for the remainder of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. Historians usually date the modernization of Mexican education with the revolution of 1910, although important aspects of its educational system originated in measures enacted under Benito Juarez in the late 1850s and under the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz from 1876 to 1910. During Diaz's regime, called the *Porfiriato*, educational reformers called for state-supported primary education as necessary for the survival of the nation and for national economic growth. Education was also viewed as an alternative to socialism and as a way to mollify and discipline the working classes. The *Porfiriato* was a time when class differences were accentuated, and while reformers promised democratic goals, their intentions were nationalistic, not democratic.¹

The revolution from 1910 to 1917 overthrew the *Porfiriato*, and reformers championed a more far-reaching system of education. Universal education became a major priority, many reformers seeing it as a way to promote greater human equality, build a more democratic society, develop a modern economy, and increase productivity. Not only did middle-class educators and activists champion educational reform, but the working classes also embraced it. In the years since, Mexico has, like many other modern nations, encountered a dualistic tension: on the one hand is the desire to develop democratic equality and human rights, on the other hand is the desire to develop Mexico's economy and its natural and human resources. Hence, Mexican educational reform was used to lift up the underprivileged and promote greater equality, but it was also

used to convince the general population to forgo radical changes for state authority and national economic development.²

Class and Mexican education today

According to critics, income inequality and poverty rates are much higher than should be expected in Mexico today, considering the country's many natural and human resources, and the cause of such economic inequality is not a matter of individual choices but of social exclusion. Such exclusion is the denial of equal access to various opportunities, imposed by certain groups of society on others. A case in point is the educational opportunity afforded to indigenous (or Amerindian) groups in Mexico. Despite considerable educational progress made by Mexico, there continues to be a persistent lack of literacy among indigenous people, many of whom live in remote towns and villages in the mountainous regions where inhabitants remain culturally and linguistically isolated. They have access to broadcast media in both native and Spanish languages, but print media has little or no impact in many such enclaves. Even though Amerindian literacy dates back to the hieroglyphic writings of the ancient Mayas and Aztecs, these writing systems fell out of use long ago, and modern attempts to develop alphabets and printed materials for native languages have met with limited success.³

At the beginning of the twentieth century, approximately 80 percent of Mexico's population was illiterate, but by the beginning of the twenty-first century, that figure had been reduced to only 10 percent. This is an important achievement, but there has not been an equally dramatic reduction in income inequalities. While there have been important educational improvements in urban areas, rural areas continue to lag behind, with the most excluded groups being the Amerindians. An important aspect of that exclusion is the lack of educational opportunity, and since educational attainment is usually considered a primary way to improve socioeconomic standing, the lack of educational opportunity helps keep indigenous people in a lower status. Mexico has a large indigenous population (approximately 10 million people), and evidence suggests that indigenous children who use only a native language do not fare as well in school as their bilingual peers who use both Spanish and a native language. Those who learn Spanish tend to go further in school, and the better their Spanish the better their chances to attain higher socioeconomic status as adults. Where indigenous children also learn Spanish, social exclusion based on language barriers seems to be reduced.⁴

Ever since the Spanish conquest, there have been efforts to fuse Indian and Spanish cultures, first into a New Spain and later into the Mexican nation. One

result has been the rise of a large mestizo population in Mexico, and it is primarily from the mestizos than the modern Mexican middle class emerged. While ethnic identity certainly plays a role in class identity, it by no means totally defines class identity, just as class and ethnicity do not totally define personal identity.

Bradley A. U. Levinson conducted a study attempting to clarify how Mexican children and youth came to develop personal identities in the 1990s. He studied a Mexican general secondary school (*secundaria general*), which is equivalent to grades seven through nine in the American system. Among students at “Escuela Secundaria Federale” in “San Pablo” (both pseudonyms), Levinson found a general feeling about class among students: The student body surely had class differences, but the students themselves seemed to value similarities more than differences, claiming that “we are all equal” (“*todos somos iguales*”). Perhaps this was a legacy from the revolution’s emphasis on equality, or perhaps it came from what parents and teachers taught the students. Whatever the source, the notion of equality was an important part of student efforts to form a sense of group solidarity. The majority of students considered themselves to be middle class, whatever their actual economic and cultural differences. However, despite the oft-expressed ideal of equality at Escuela Secundaria Federale, Levinson observed a growing gap between the middle and lower classes in San Pablo itself, and at the school an undercurrent of class awareness among students, faculty, school officials, and parents. He also found student awareness of class differences between themselves and students from the other three *secundarias* in San Pablo. At Escuela Secundaria Federale, students believed they were trying to make something of themselves, getting ahead and going on to perhaps more education and more secure economic futures. Similarly, those who remained in school and sought to complete their studies considered themselves to be better than the dropouts, the “punk” and “dude” members of urban gangs, or the “rednecks” (*rancheros*) and the “big hatters and big booters” (*sombrerudos e botudos*) from the countryside. Levinson’s conclusion was that while a sense of equality was strong among students, class awareness was also imprinted by the powerful influences of the larger community. Their sense of equality, while impacted by the teachings of parents and teachers, was also a matter of students developing their own personal identities through the roles they played in school and friendship groups; the impact of societal influences such as music and media, gender, and ethnic identities; and the influence of outside political and economic forces. Such role playing constituted a very serious “game” of life, but a game with actual consequences for students’ class identities, aspirations, and futures.⁵

Notes

- 1 Mary Kay Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico, 1880–1928* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1982), 22–35.
- 2 Vaughan, 82–97, 191–214; and Bradley A. U. Levinson, *We Are All Equal: Student Culture and Identity at a Mexican Secondary School, 1988–1998* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 18–20.
- 3 Jere R. Behrman, Alejandro Gaviria, and Miguel Székely, “Social Exclusion in Latin America: Perception, Reality and Implications,” in *Who’s In and Who’s Out: Social Exclusion in Latin America*, Jere R. Behrman et al., eds (Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank, 2003), 1, 11; and Linda King, *Roots of Identity: Language and Literacy in Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).
- 4 Susan W. Parker, Luis Rubalcava, and Graciela Teruel, “Language Barriers and Schooling Inequality of the Indigenous in Mexico,” in *Who’s In and Who’s Out: Social Exclusion in Latin America*, 145–146, 176–177, also at <http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=419929> (accessed on March 30, 2010).
- 5 Bradley A. U. Levinson, *We Are All Equal: Student Culture and Identity at a Mexican Secondary School, 1988–1998* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1–3, 38–54, 47–48, 173–179, 318–321.