

**Differences in Popular and Formal Educational
Systems in Mexico Including the Structures of Primary
and Secondary Education**

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Ilvia Larragán Osceola, Ed. D. Student

College of Education
School of Teaching and Learning
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 34104

E-mail: iosceola@coe.ufl.edu

Abstract

This paper studies modern population trends and educational needs in Mexico. It discusses popular, non-formal education in the State of Yucatán. Overall and specific analysis is given to administrative and organizational structures and composition of students in primary and secondary formal educational systems in Mexico with emphasis on research and interviews conducted in the State of Yucatán. Highlights of my anthropological investigations conducted in the State of Yucatán while attending a six-week home stay and university exchange program through the University of Florida's summer abroad program in Spanish and anthropology at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán. UADY will also be presented.

Although educational reforms have been ongoing in Mexico, there are still many underlying issues in the educational system, which may benefit from structural reform other than fiscal and population concerns. The embodiment of a dichotomy in Mexico's formal education between indigenous and non-indigenous populations is formulated and arguments for further reform and decentralization are offered. A discussion of socio-economic data is analyzed in terms of its effect on educational success and the socio-political factors, which may have an impact on educational reform in Mexico. Concluding thoughts focus on the philosophical views and pragmatic realities that the future may hold for Mexico's educational initiatives.

Mexico leads the world with the highest population of Spanish speaking people, and has the second largest population in Latin America. Seventy percent, or so, of the people live in urbanizations. Many Mexicans travel from rural areas in search of employment opportunities. Most migration emerges from the less urbanized southern states, the over populated central plateau to the industrialized cities, and the developing areas along the U.S./Mexico border. It is estimated that the population of the surrounding area of Mexico City, (D.F.) Federal District, is about 20 million strong. This would make the area the highest concentrated population in the world. Today's fastest growing Mexico/U.S. border towns are Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez. Burgeoning cities in the central areas are Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Puebla (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 1999).

Overall Education

This population boom from Mexico's 31 states to its federal district (D.F.) and its major cities within these states have placed an undaunted pressure on the federal district's fiscal budgetary allocations. Education is one of the Mexican government's top priorities. As a result, the government has increased the education budget 7.2% over the 1996 budget up to \$15 billion for 1997. This sum is 25% of the total budget. Education in Mexico is in the process of decentralization from federal to state

authority for the improvement of accountability (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 1999).

Education, with mandatory attendance from ages 6 through 18 has seen a substantial increase in school enrollments in the past 20 years. Approximately 59% of the population of mandatory age enrolled in primary school in 1994, including public preschools. There was a significant increase in school enrollments from 1970 to 1994 from less than 10 million to 17.5 million respectively (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 1999).

Secondary public school matriculation levels surged from 1.4 million in 1972 to over 4.5 million in 1994. Higher education also swelled from 1959-1994 as enrollments were up more than 1.2 million to 62,000 students on Mexico's college campuses. Although students' spending on education has been steadily increasing, however, the government's per student expenditures have showed a net decline through the years. The Mexican Government reports that even though much progress has been attained, over 2 million children still do not have access to basic education. The Mexican Government admits that they had anticipated providing such access to at least 1 million children by the year 2000, but have fallen short of the mark (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 1999).

Popular Education

What follows in this section are on-site investigations about Mexico's educational system and personal interviews of various professors and everyday people, my continued interest in the field, papers, and field research.

Mexico's educational system was integrated with indigenous and mestizo arts, handicrafts found in popular folk culture, educational practices, and religious festivals during the presidency of Obregón. Interest on the display of artistic works about Mexico's national identity was founded in the 1920's. The importance of the work of Diego Rivera, Frieda Kahlo and other artists, sculptors, painters, and architects was commissioned by the Mexican government to focus on Mexico's heritage (UADY, 2000). Some of this artwork is on display in the local government museums and is evident in municipal architecture and city planning and design.

Although formal education may be important in certain sectors of Mexican culture and society, popular culture, is characterized as "non-traditional or non-ethnic happenings in a society" (Burns, 2000). Therefore, popular education, or that which is a part of the informal non-collegial forms of learning has been an integral part of Mexico's indigenous, rural, and mestizo society for decades. (Canclini, 1989). (Thomson, 2000).

Outside of the sphere of formal public education young people in Mexico engage in informal learning every day. The educational and anthropological project in the

Yucatán explores informal education and socialization processes. Through observations, interviews, and interactions investigations revealed how knowledge is transmitted inter-generationally in non-institutional arenas. Interviews focus on who "teaches," in what manner, what the kinship ties are, and how young people are recruited into a trade or profession. Research in the field reveals that the people studied have learned their trade by observing and being apprenticed by an 'expert' in the field they are pursuing. Mentors of artisans and craftsmen employ techniques appropriate for visual and tactile learners in a non-formal setting. This is a type of learning style which focuses on observing and doing while learning. The 'assessment' is also informal and may take the form of creating an item that receives praise, makes a sale, or simply develops a positive relationship with a family member or peer. This is unlike the more traditional teaching style often used in public schools (in the U.S. and other countries), which include a didactic lecture and written assignments and texts (Larragán Osceola & De Luca, 2000).

Other types of learning involve interpersonal communication, whether it be between parents and children, peer to peer, or mentor to mentee. It seems that the people interviewed were drawn to their trade/vocation/lifestyle as part of a process of connecting to other individual(s) for whom they had respect and or affection. It is important for teachers who intend to teach Mexican students in the U.S, or teachers who wish to teach in exchange programs in Mexico to understand how Mexican students acquire knowledge inside and outside of the classroom. The observations, interviews, experiences and research conducted in Yucatán, México have provided insight into Mexican students in general as to what strategies and methods to use when teaching a Mexican student in Mexico or the United States. (Larragán Osceola & De Luca, 2000).

Educational Administration

One of the main differences between the structure of Mexico's formal system of education and that of the United States' is that the curriculum in the Mexican educational system is centrally controlled by the Ministry of Public Education , or the Federal Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) La Secretaría de Educación Pública. The (SEP) provides supervision and coordination of educational programs from Kindergarten through University which may also offer health and welfare services in addition to educational activities. Additionally, each state in Mexico has a coordinator of public educational services with corresponding departments. There are three branches of education identified as sub-secretary: primary, secondary, and preparatory with each of the branches' composition consisting of a superintendent, principals and teachers (Levinson, 2001), (Guttek, 1993).

The sub-secretaries adhere to the national curricular plan, but can mandate changes in book selections and or subjects of study. Mexican symbols of identity and unification are emphasized across curriculum areas. Private schools offer the same basic curriculum, however they may also offer second languages (English) and religion as enrichment courses. While visiting a private school in Ticul, México

students were taught three languages: Spanish, English and Mayan. Traditional regional folk dances of popular music like the “Jarana” were included in the curriculum (Larragán Osceola, 2000), (Vargas Cetina, 2000).

Historically, Centros de Cooperación, federally hired and trained teachers in supervisory roles, traveled as monitors to oversee the implementation of teaching methods, pedagogy and curriculum materials throughout Mexico. This practice is still followed today. (Vaughn, 1997, 25, 27 & 31), (Bonfil, 1992, 181-190).

Pre-primary Education

Preprimary education enrollment in pre-school programs is optional and less common in México than in the U.S., It is more common in urban settings than in the rural settings of México. However, compared to other Latin American countries, México has a proportionately higher number of students participating in preschool programs. Children may be enrolled in pre-schools (guarderías) two to years prior to entering primary school. These programs, as is globally, strive to provide developmental, and social readiness skills young children need for entrance into primary school (Guttek, 1993, 149-150).

Primary Education

Students typically begin primary school (primaria/básica) at age six for six years. Although enrollment is open from the ages of 6 to 14, it is also compulsory in México. Gender parity is reached in the lower grades while in the upper grades there is an overrepresentation of boys. Rural areas may differ by the duration of education available and limited by the quality of education received. It would not be uncommon to encounter a multiage one-room schoolhouse setting. Uniforms are worn in all urban schools and the language of instruction is Spanish with more bilingual teachers: Spanish/Mayan and vernaculars recruited for more rural settings. The Mexican government avails students the use of free textbooks, but also frowns upon the use of non-approved materials for instruction. Primary level students are promoted by teacher evaluations and recommendation not standardized testing scores. Even with these measures, there is a high dropout rate in primaria among students-both urban and rural with the highest non-completion rates in more remote rural areas (Guttek, 152). (Larragán Osceola, 2000). This may be due to circumstances where children need to work in the fields to help make ends meet. Perhaps another reason may be the lack of bilingual teachers and access to materials in rural areas.

Secondary Education

Students enter secondary school for three years for their general education called middle basic in which English is mandatory, and three years in the upper level called middle superior. The educational level of Mexico’s secundaria has developed extensively through the incorporation of new social groups, which had been excluded prior to the 1970’s. Secundaria became part of the ‘obligatory’ (though, not

enforced) basic education plan in 1993. Students must choose between several very different options, including college preparatories, vocational schools, "business" courses, and such after completing *secundaria*. Indeed, the *secundaria* in Mexico serves as a kind of screening point of differentiation, separating students who are likely to continue on to higher educational levels from those who have just completed the mandatory cycle of primary school. This upper level of preparatory is termed "nivel media superior". Corresponding as it does to the period of "early adolescence," the *secundaria* is also an important crossroads for identity, career and aspiration formation (See Appendix A; Levinson, 7, 2001).

The career preparatory level is difficult for students because they must take entrance exams to qualify similar to Standardized Achievement Tests (SAT's) in the U.S. However, the exams are only offered once a year, and if students don't score high enough, or can't get accepted into a *colegio*, they must wait another year before being able to re-apply and retest. It is helpful to have connections or 'palanca' in order to get into the *colegio* of their choice (Larragán Osceola, 2000).

Superior

Students at this level must again take competitive entrance exams to rank and place into regular higher education, public universities and polytechnical institutes. These tests are offered yearly, and if one does not score high enough, unless private university, study in another district is possible or study abroad is an option, the students must wait another year to re-test. Public universities set quotas that limit enrollment and usually take the top students based on their test scores. (Larragán-Osceola, 2000).

Based on interviews this author conducted, the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán has maintained the same student quota for about 20-30 years. Thirty-five to seventy students were accepted from 1995-1999. The ratio for acceptance is about 3/10 that apply and take the yearly test. Some new private universities were built around 1995-1999, but acceptance and enrollment are based upon income. This does not facilitate equal education for all. Many schools are segregated although there is a movement to integrate, and to better prepare teachers for the rigors of education. At the college level much of the curriculum is research based and much of the readings require English reading comprehension skills. This leads to a deficit model of Mexican education at the university level because primary and secondary schools do not require English proficiency. One professor said: "*Educación da herramientas para la vida*" "*Education provides the tools needed for life.*" Preparation of Mexican students who attend the university is all based on students' primary and secondary education. The federal and state government funds public institutions. There is no fundraising, business partners or private donors to state universities. Departmental funds are not sufficient to purchase materials, and the fiscal budget is centralized with little or no input from the faculty. The goal is to

“minimize expenses and maximize learning.” “El agua encuentra su nivel” “Things find their balance.” (Larragán Osceola, 2000).

According to *El Diario de Yucatan*, May 8, 1999, only 3% of the children entering elementary school graduate from college. They show the dropout rate for primary schools to be 37%, 26% for secundaria, and 41% for preparatoria. Only 33% of Mexico's indigenous children complete primary school. Since the Mexican student dropout rate is so high, those who do complete high school are considered 'the cream of the crop' (Basurto, 1999).

Separate, But Not Equal

A dual system of education exists in the Federal Transferido, which is split into general education and indigenous education. Not all states in Mexico provide indigenous education. However there is a federal program called “Confe” which avails young children in rural areas that have no access to schools some form of education. This is made possible by peer tutors who have a secondary education. In turn these tutors are eligible for federal scholarships, which avail them to attend bachilleratos. Through this community action program found in Ticul, Mérida and Valladolid secondary students' educational opportunities are made possible. In rural areas where ejidos are farmed a “Comisario de Ejidal” has a type of schoolhouse education with one teacher for each school (Acevedo et al., 1996).

Another dichotomy is found at the three-year secondary level where the Federal Transferido governs basic or general education and technical education. In 1991, a “telesecundaria” program was established in communities where schools cannot be established, but where there is electricity. Through televising educational programs students are taught basic skills. However, many times the language used for education is Spanish and many of the rural population is Mayan speaking in the case of the Yucatán, Campeche, Quintana Roo and Nahuatl in other parts of central Mexico (Guemes Pineda, 2000), (Larragán Osceola, 2000).

The Instituto Nacional Indígena (INI) has been involved in teaching basic education to indigenous populations in rural areas in their native languages. However, formal education is virtually unavailable and materials in indigenous languages are still at a pilot level. There exist many opponents of first language and bilingual education for indigenous populations. More recently in 1994, (PARE) Programa de Apoyo de Resago Educativo was instituted with national support which offers educational assistance for indigenous populations (Bonfil, R.G. 1992).

The most oppressed and unequal segments of society in Mexico are the indigenous people and the poor, which is based on the household earnings of a family's income below 34,347 pesos. (Psacharopoulos, 1994). This is roughly between 3,000-4,000 dollars annually depending on the exchange rate of the dollar to peso and inflation,

which was estimated at 28% in 1996. (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 1999).

What factors have an impact on the inequity of educational access to Mexican children?

Mexico's effort to implement educational reforms has resulted in the Ministry of Education mediating as a negotiator to develop policies and legislation, but in actuality, any adaptations must be approved by the ruling political powers in the national legislature. This bureaucratic process stonewalls educational progress and resembles a method of implementing a 'programs for votes' to award funding revenues (Gershberg, 1999), (Quintanilla, 1996).

In 1992, The National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education (NAMBE), was ratified by 31 states' governors and gave 'de jure' control to the states to establish local secretariats of education. Although in many countries, parental involvement is voluntary. Mexico, in particular chooses to legislate their parental involvement. This governing body, in exchange, organized the school based Social Participation Council (Comité de Participación Social, ó CPS). The role of these community participant parties was as advisory boards, which have a limited or no political voice in the legislature at all. The group structure was fragmented; neither group works in collaboration and other established groups in each of the municipios. The Parental Association (PA's), an existing advisory group, competes for the same revenue pot. Government mandates establishing 'sanctioned' groups rather than offering legitimacy and funds to collaborative groups already formed has caused the factioning of advisory boards and a failure to establish successful funding and organization of these and other programs (Gershberg, 1999). This fragmentation results in disempowerment of parent leaders acting as a 'figurehead' in the educational arena.

Parents' educational level also plays an important role in the average amount of children's educational levels. The average educational level of a child increases with that of the mother's educational level e.g. secondary, or higher. This is compared with that of mothers with little or no educational level. The impact of the effects of parental education on children's educational achievement in Mexico is greatest in indigenous areas. (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 1994). (Dimmock, et.al. 1996)

Non-Indigenous Municipios in Mexico				Indigenous Municipios in Mexico		
Characteristic	Not in School			Not in School		
	In School	Working	Not Working	In School	Working	Not Working
Gender						
Male	7.1	6.0	5.7	5.3	4.7	4.6
Female	7.4	7.1	5.7	5.8	4.6*	4.0
Mother's Education						
None	5.9	5.0	4.3	4.6	4.1	3.6
Primary & Below	7.3	6.7	6.3	6.2	6.1*	4.9
Secondary and Above	8.3	9.4	8.3*	8.5*	0.0	0.0

Source: INEGI 1989.

Note: Sample for children aged 12 to 18. *Mean computed with less than 30 observations. 30 plus hours of labor define working weekly. "Non-indigenous" refers to *municipios* below 30 percent indigenous. "Indigenous" refers to *municipios* 30 percent and above indigenous.

Overall in all municipalities studied, the educational level of the mother played a crucial part in the educational achievement of her children. Also significant, is that those who were better educated were employed. Higher education is equated with higher pay of the individuals employed. It is important to note that women when compared with men of equal education nonetheless receive less pay than their male counterparts. (Pscharopoulos, 1996). However, this gender and pay disparity is not much different than that of the U.S.

In addition to parental involvement, indirect factors, including, but not limited to, frequency of a child's outings with parents, influence of family members and other adults; socio-economic status; and enrichment activities also affect the outcome of a child's success in school. Educators and governmental agencies must provide intergenerational literacy programs that emphasize the awareness of parent as first teacher for disadvantaged families (Larragán Osceola, 1999).

The Future

Looking toward the future of education and equity for Mexico's children, Alonso, 1989 predicts the following:

"Pensamos que si en el futuro se diversificase y flexibilizase el sistema político nacional, lo que parece político en político de continuidad democrática, el papel del Estado en la educación estará en un lugar cada vez más prominente del debate político. El Estado podría encontrarse en una posición de menor fortaleza que en el pasado para mantener el statu quo si, como todo parece apuntar, continúa abriendo espacios a la sociedad civil y, en particular, al sector privado" (325).

“We think that if in the future we diversify and make the nation’s political system flexible in what seems political in the political continuum of democracy-the role of the State in education will be hoisted on an ever increasing prominently higher plane than that of political debates. The State might find itself in a weakened position than in previous instances to maintain the “status quo” unless it takes aim on continuing to clear the path in civil society and in particular toward the private sector”(325).

Alonso foresees the political arena as the battle place for education and envisions the central government losing its grip on the educational agenda and the “status quo”. He sees the future of education in the hands of society, civilians, and in particular the private sector, business and industry. He calls on all the stakeholders to share in the vested interest of educating all Mexicans, from all walks of life, including the indigenous population and the poor. He advocates for marginalized people to have an opportunity to receive at least a basic education, not just one based in learning a trade, but to have access to libraries, information and secondary schools.

Alonso, urges the equal distribution of funds to all municipios, and points out that as long as corruption is rampant, quality education will not come to bear. It is a civil right of the populous to be cultured and the social responsibility of all to participate in the necessary task of socio-political reform in the name of education for Mexico.

...“México llegará en el futuro”...tan lejos como llegue la educación” (338),

...“Mexico will achieve its goals in the future as soon as education reaches it” (338)

One can agree with many of the predictions that Alonso makes as to the future of education in Mexico. Although he made those predictions and pleas in 1989, many still hold true in this day and age of the twenty-first century. Many of the same problems faced a decade ago are meandering in Mexican socio-political facets and impacting the educational sector. Stakeholders must participate willingly and knowingly. A commitment to progress via education as the future needs to be agreed upon by all the stakeholders. Education must be seen as a means to eliminate poverty, crime, and provide equity in society (Larragán Osceola, 2000). New innovative teaching venues are needed to reach and teach indigenous populations. Education needs to be extended into the secondary and higher realms of education, not just basic primary education. Education needs to have a life-long learning viewpoint, not merely a means to an end, such a job. (Larragán Osceola, 2000).

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APPENDIX A.

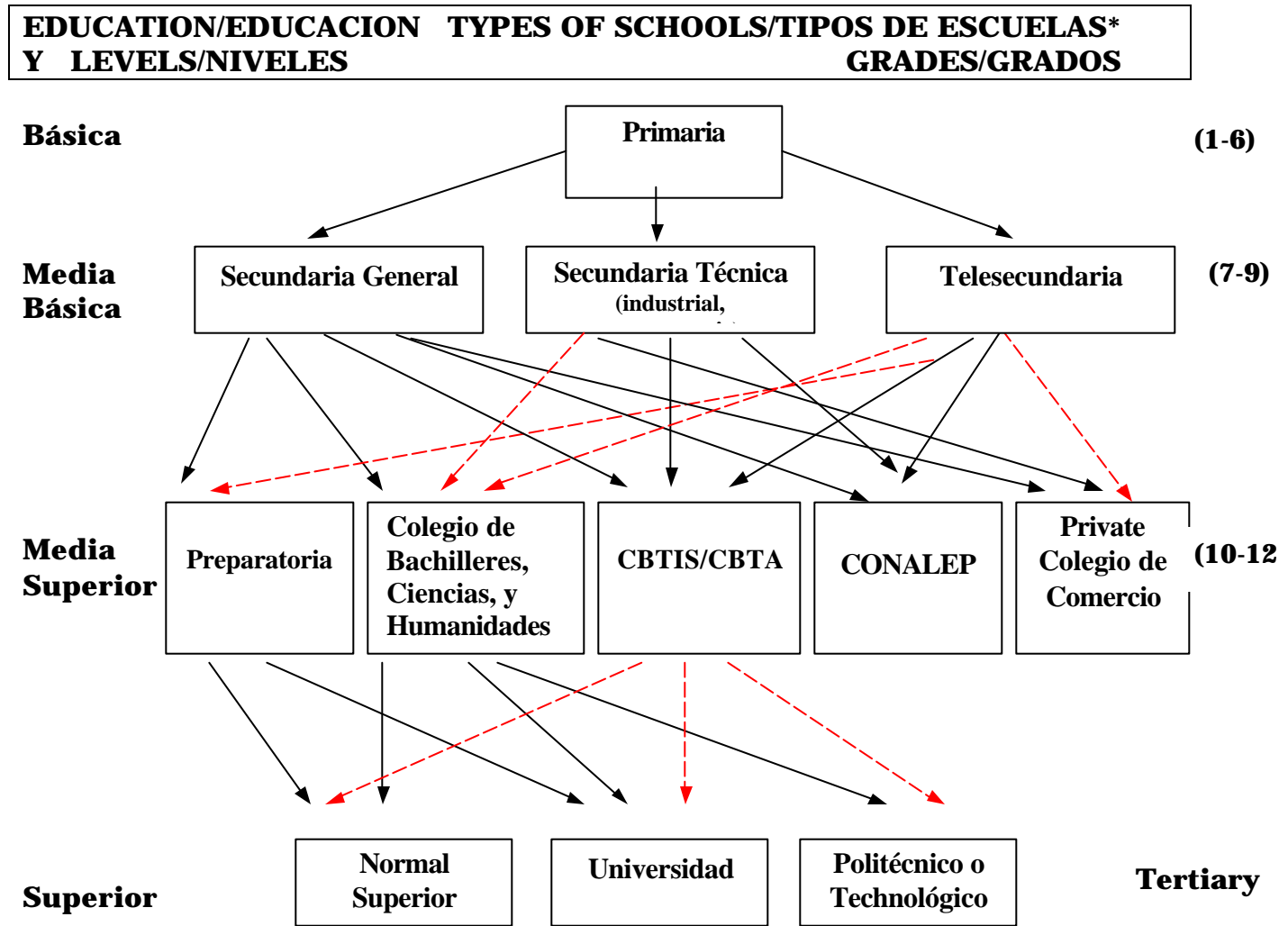
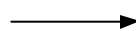


Fig. 1. "Major options and paths to schooling in Mexico" (1991)
 Source: Levinson, (2001)., We Are All Equal, 8.

CBTIS= Centro Bachillerato de Tecnología Industrial y Servicios



=Logical or expected route of succession

CBTA= Centro Bachillerato de Tecnología Agropecuaria



=Possible route of succession

CONALEP= Colegio Nacional de Educación Profesional Técnica

* **NOTE:** Re-printed with the Author's Permission.

Note: the above figure is not exhaustive of all possible paths.