

Mexican Immigrants Can Achieve In U.S. Schools

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One of the greatest strengths of the United States has been its free and equal access educational system. Historically, many sons and daughters of immigrants have pulled themselves out of poverty through education: in K-12, community college, and university. Our newest immigrants, South East Asians, have also taken advantage of this educational system.

Immigrants from Mexico, our closest neighbor, have access to the same educational system; yet, they fill our dropout rolls and are among the lowest achievers in our schools. They also comprise the largest minority group in the southwestern United States. From all indications, Mexican immigrants are in danger of becoming a permanent underclass.

The record of the performance of Mexican students in U.S. schools is abysmal. Deborah Mounts, in *The Binational Child*, a 1986 publication of the California Department of Migrant Education, records that it takes approximately 3 years for the average migrant student in California and Texas to move the one grade level from third to fourth grade. The migrant child has only a 40% chance of entering the ninth grade and a slim 11% chance of entering twelfth grade. Approximately 90% of migrants do not graduate from high school.

My own 11 years of research on 26 Mexico City schools show that this lack of achievement exists for three reasons. The first is economic: Mexican families come to the United States to survive. Second, the tradition of education found in many other countries is not as strong in Mexico. Third, educators are not aware of the differences between the processes of education in Mexico and the United States.

Causes of Lack of School Achievement

For the past 8 years, the Mexican economy has experienced runaway inflation with almost no growth in its gross national product. The accompanying unemployment/underemployment and low wages affect families, students, and their teachers. For example, from 1986-8, Mexican teachers in primary schools received raises, but,

because of inflation, their net buying power actually decreased 156%. My interview with officials from the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación in 1989 revealed that in 1979, a teacher could potentially buy 4.62 lbs of meat per month on a standard salary. By 1982, buying power had eroded to such an extent that 2.2 lbs represented 62.9% of a teacher's monthly salary. In February 1989, that same amount of meat represented 86% of a month's salary. The situation is the same for most occupations. Consequently, many Mexicans continue to move to the United States in search of jobs so that they can care for their families, with education taking a back seat to survival. Because of the concern for survival, immigrant children are under tremendous pressure to stay home and babysit younger members of the family or to drop out of school and take low paying jobs in the service industries or in agriculture.

The decision to drop out is much easier than to stay in school because Mexico lacks a tradition of education. The concept of universal education only started after the revolution and is less than 70 years old. Though a tremendous amount of time and effort has gone into organizing an educational system for the entire country, it was not until 1988 that President De la Madrid announced in his last state of the union message (reported in "Back to School," *Mexico Journal*, October 3, 1988) that there was sufficient education space available for all those who wanted it. Although he said no child who wanted a primary school education would be denied it, his statement ignored the many poor children who work to support families for whom education is a luxury they can not afford. The same economic factors and weak education tradition that influence the dropout rate of Mexicans in the United States cause similar problems in Mexico. According to the Secretaria de Educación Pública's 1988 publication, *Informe de Labores 1987-8*, almost 15 million students are in the primary schools, but only 4 million are in the secondary schools. A wall mural in the textbook commission building states that between 1964 and 1969, for every 1,000 students who entered a Mexican primary school, 615 would not finish sixth grade. In 1898, this number stood at 45%, according to *Quinto Informe de Gobierno*, a 1987 publication of the Presidencia de la República. Since these dropout students do not have the education to obtain the better jobs, many of them and their families move to the United States—and the cycle continues.

The third reason for the poor success in educating Mexican immigrants in U.S. schools is simply a lack of awareness of different learning processes between the educational system in Mexico and that of the United States. To succeed, immigrant children must understand and conform to our cultural and educational models. Language barriers, combined with a fundamental difference in learning models, create insurmountable obstacles for most immigrant students, who therefore fail in school and drop out.

Addressing the Problem of Poor Academic Achievement

The problem must be addressed at the national, state, local, and individual teacher level. Some programs are already in place; others need to be implemented if we are to help these students obtain a better education.

On August 17, 1990, Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos and Mexican Secretary of Public Education, Manuel Bartlett Diaz, signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing closer U.S.-Mexican ties on education issues and programs. The agreement remains in effect until December 31, 1991 with provision for successive 2-year extensions. The agreement provided for a border conference in the winter of 1991 to discuss the teaching of English in Mexico and Spanish in the United States, as well as teacher exchange, migrant education, educational administration, educational research and innovation, and improvement of intercultural understanding. Also, technological education, teacher education, and professional development were addressed.

The state of California has several programs to help Mexican immigrants. On September 27, 1990, seven trailer loads of Mexican adult education textbooks (153,715 books) arrived at the consulate in Los Angeles. This material is for a new program designed to provide 17,000 Mexican adults living in Los Angeles with access to literacy so they can complete their elementary or high school in Spanish. The students will have the option of getting their studies certified by the Mexican government. During the 1988-9 school year, the Department of International Relations of the Mexican Ministry of Education placed 25 teachers in Los Angeles and 29 in Louisiana. The Binational Project sponsored by the San Diego County Office of Education negotiated agreements between the States of Michoacan and Baja California concerning children who go to school in both Mexico and the United States. These agreements include allowing students to enroll in Mexican schools any time during the year, providing sixth grade certificates for those who complete sixth grade in the United States, free placement testing in areas close to towns where the students live, and officials to call on both sides of the border concerning implementation of the agreements.

While these programs are laudable, they service only a small proportion of the immigrant Mexican population. However, individual teachers can help students learn and achieve in U.S. schools.

First, the teacher must determine the student's home town and amount of schooling the student has received. Schools in Mexico are divided into three levels: grades 1-6, called *primaria*; grades 7-9, called *secundaria*; and grades 10-12, called *preparatoria*. (Mexicans talk of the first year of the *secundaria*, rather than of seventh grade, often causing confusion among U.S. teachers.) Only about 55% of the population graduates from the *secundaria*. Those students from the

cities who attend secundarias or preparatorias probably will be good students and will learn quite rapidly. These students have taken English as part of the curriculum in the secundaria and have developed higher order thinking skills. However, those students with fewer than 6 years of education and those from the countryside will find schoolwork a struggle.

If the student attended a public school in Mexico, the student will only know how to print. Also, most instruction is with the whole group; individualized instruction and the inquiry method are not commonly used in Mexico. Modeling is prevalent: The teacher writes the project on the board; one or two students do the work on the board, and then the rest of the class copies the board work in their notebooks. As a teacher in the United States, I use this information in two ways. In my beginning ESL classes, I often rewrite paragraphs and then have the students copy my paragraph on their papers. Whenever the students do not understand my directions, I model exactly what I want them to do. We may do the same type of assignment four or five times until the students understand my expectations.

Spelling is a major obstacle for those students who did not complete the primaria. Spanish has 27 letters and 24 sounds; thus it is very easy to spell Spanish words. English, on the other hand, has 26 letters and 41 sounds. Since spelling is a function of configuration and memorization, I have the students write a word three times on a paper. Next, they turn the paper over and write the word from memory. I do this until they know the words. Since sight reading is a major focus of the Mexican curriculum, students know how to memorize words.

Probably the most difficult aspect of dealing with Mexican immigrants is their attitudes towards education. As mentioned earlier, the concept of universal public education is only 70 years old. The students and their families often do not see school as vital to their livelihoods. Since family loyalty and solidarity are primary cultural values, students must often work to support the family or stay home to babysit younger children. This, of course, creates a high rate of absenteeism, often resulting in school failure.

As educators, we need to make our classrooms places where these students feel comfortable and want to be. We can do this by discussing aspects of Mexican culture in the classroom and by assignments that compare the Mexican way of life with that in the United States. In my classes, we publish a book called *Coming to California*, to which each ESL student contributes a story. The stories are created from three paragraphs: the day I left Mexico, the trip, and the first days in California. A copy of the book is bound and placed in the library. I then use the book to teach reading.

Summary

Because of the economic conditions in Mexico and the lack of a tradition of universal education, Mexican immigrants are faring poorly in U.S. schools. Federal and state-level programs are in place to help. However, classroom teachers can also promote learning. Educators must determine the level of schooling of the student and design a program accordingly. Next, teachers must be aware that students know only how to print, that modeling is the preferred style of teaching in Mexico, and that spelling may be a problem with many students. Lastly, activities in the classroom that involve both Mexico and the culture of the United States have a greater chance of being successful with these students. ■