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MEXICO PUTS ITS FAITH IN EDUCATION.

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A Mural Painting By Diego Rivera - Secretariat of Education.

## MEXICO PUTS ITS FAITH IN EDUCATION.

Dr. Puig Casauranc, the present Secretary of Education in Mexico, tells a story of how on one of his tours of inspection he stopped one day to visit the frontier town of Nogales in the State of Sonora. "My eye was caught", relates Dr. Casauranc, "by a splendid building in the process of construction on a little hill in the poorest and most miserable section of the town. When I enquired about this building, I was informed it was a school being built by the City Council. Most of the work, however, it later developed, was being done by the inhabitants of the little community around the school; for it was these poor people who carried the stones up the steep hill - working like peons, without pay or recompense of any sort. I immediately decided I must visit the school and talk to some of these volunteer workers. Among others, I met one old man almost seventy years of age. Don Isabel was his name, and he had come to Nogales from the State of Guanajuato. I started to compliment him for the work which he was doing for the school, but in the midst of my remarks, he stopped me and said: 'Señor, there is no reason for you to congratulate me; when I used to live in my 'pueblo' in Guanajuato, there also I carried many rocks and stones - but it was to build a church that I labored. Now I labor to build a school, for I have learned that when we Mexicans are obliged to cross the border into the United States in search of work, they do not ask us, if we know how to pray; they ask us, if we can read'."

Often it is the Don Isabels who express more clearly

than many a learned tome or column of statistics, the changes that are taking place in a country. And so it is in this case. Modern Mexico has put its faith in education. The Mexican nation is at the present time conducting an experiment in public education, unprecedented in the history of the country. Like old Don Isabel, Mexico is carrying rocks and stones up a hill to build a school.

The bill for public education in Mexico for the year 1926 was 49,576,166 pesos. Of this amount, 27,613,905 pesos was spent by the federal government; 19,923,560 pesos by the state governments; and 2,038,700 pesos by the municipal governments. For the federal government, this meant that 7.37% of the national budget was devoted to education. The average percentage of the state budgets devoted to educational purposes was 34.02%. Although the statistics for the current year (1927) have not yet been published, it is estimated that an even greater amount has been spent for public education in 1927 than in 1926. In other words, translating these figures into American dollars, Mexico is spending for public education at the present time approximately \$25,000,000 a year. With twenty five million dollars a year a goodly number of rocks can be carried up a goodly number of hills. It is the purpose of this article to survey briefly, first, the nature of the "hill" which Mexico is trying to climb, i.e. the nature of the educational problem; and, second, to describe in summary fashion what manner of "rocks" Mexico is building into the foundation of its new educational system.

In the narrower sense, the problem of education in

Mexico is a problem of illiteracy. The 1921 census gives the total population of Mexico as 14,334,780. Of this number, 6,879,348 or 65.27% of the population above 10 years of age cannot read or write. In several states the percentage of illiteracy of the population above 10 years of age rises as high as 80%, and even in the Federal District the percentage is 24.09%. To put the matter the other way around, out of a total population of 10,538,621 above 10 years of age, only 3,564,767, or a little over one third, are known to be able to read and write.

It would be difficult to imagine from the point of view of our modern standards in such matters, a worse state of affairs than these statistics disclose. But even figures, such as these, cannot give a true understanding of the real educational problem with which the Mexican government is faced. As a matter of fact, in any predominantly agricultural country the inability of a large per cent of the population to read and write might not be so important as it appears at first blush. The chief reason why the high percentage of illiteracy in Mexico at the present time is a matter of serious moment is that this percentage happens to be not only an index of the ability of the people to read and write, but, what is vastly more significant, an index of the standard of living of an overwhelming majority of the population.

In other words, the fact that 65% of the people of Mexico cannot read and write also corresponds with the fact that at least 65% (and probably more) of the population is living at a level where the most strenuous efforts barely suf-

fice to keep body and soul together. And although it is not to be denied that political, economic, and historical factors are partly responsible for this unfortunate condition, the modern educational leaders of Mexico are firmly convinced that at the root of the evil lies the ignorance of the people. That the people cannot read and write, is a minor matter compared with the fact that the majority of Mexico's rural population (and at least three fourths of the people are rural) is ignorant of all but the most primitive agricultural techniques; that the people are without knowledge of how to care for their physical well-being and innocent of hygiene; that they do not know how to use the natural resources lying at their very door steps; and that their homes, their clothes, their food are still of the crudest and most primitive type.

Lest it appear that the foregoing statement is only the reaction of a foreigner, let me quote from a report recently published by the Sub-Secretary of Education, Señor Moisés Sáenz, after an official tour through the mountainous regions of the State of Puebla.

"The climate of this region is varied...the rainfall very generous and the land, if well cultivated, of enormous fertility. The people are hard working...men, women, and children, <sup>toiling</sup> like ants from sun to sun. And yet, despite the fact that nature has been prodigious in its gifts...that the land is well distributed amongst the population, that they have peace and for some time past have had a benevolent government - still the standard of living of these people is of the very lowest type.... Using the methods of the neolithic age, the

Indians work their lands and gather its fruits. On the market day of the nearest "pueblcito" ('nearest' oftentimes means a whole day's walk) the men, the women, and even the poor little children come carrying on their shoulders the meager harvest... As did their fathers and their grandfathers and all their ancestors, so also do they; thus do they sow and reap, thus bargain and sell..."

"For the most part, they know of no other way to renew the fertility of their lands than to allow them periodically to rest. The year in which the land lies fallow, the family simply suffers more hunger. In one place, Zapotitlan, there was a man who cultivated his land very well... This man wished to teach the Indians his secret. They listened to him with their usual apathy, but when the harvest came and they witnessed again the miracle of his greater yield, forgetting the practical instruction which he had given them, they asked to what saint he prayed in order to obtain such an abundant harvest and to what priest he said his masses."

In order to get the full significance of this quotation, it must be remembered that its author is not describing conditions in the State of Chiapas or Oaxaca or any other region far removed from the center of activity and as yet relatively undeveloped. On the contrary, the State of Puebla is one of the richest of the central plateau region and as well equipped with means of communication as any other state in the Republic. The conditions which characterize the life of the inhabitants of the "sierras" of Puebla are not the exception in Mexico, but the rule. Since this is true, the problem of

education in Mexico is a social problem in the widest meaning of the term. The people need to be taught to read and write, but, more than this, they need to be shown a way of life. Literacy is only the first step; reading and writing only a means to achieving the higher end of raising the standard of living and "incorporating the masses of the people in the civilized life of the nation".

If the question which confronts the educational leaders of Mexico is, from one point of view, a matter of how the school can best aid the economic and material rehabilitation of the people, from another point of view, quite as important for the future of Mexico, it is a question of what part the school can play in creating a spirit of national unity and cultural homogeneity in a country where as yet these things are aspirations rather than accomplished facts. Mexico, in the words of a former Secretary of Education, José Vasconcelos, is a land of contrasts and differences. "Mexico's most striking feature is the extreme difference in the appearance of the inhabitants, the nature of the soil, in the climate of nearby sections, abysmal differences in the thought of the people and in the landscape of the country. Perhaps there is no nation on earth where you can find in the same accentuated form a coexistence of human types separated by centuries and even epochs of ethnographical development - people different in blood, race tradition and habits."

Geographically, racially, and culturally, Mexico is not one, but a half dozen different countries. In the south and in a relatively narrow strip along both coasts are the



"tierras calientes", with the excessive heat and torrential rains of the tropics. Rising gradually from the great Sonora desert in the north and attaining an elevation of 7,500 feet in the Valley of Mexico, is the great central plateau. The climate of this region varies from cool to very cold and, although for the most part semi-arid conditions prevail, when the land is properly irrigated, due the great elevation almost any product of the temperate and north temperate zone can be raised. Between the Great Central Plateau and either coast can be found on the slopes and in the valleys of the two great mountain ranges which traverse Mexico from north to south, almost any climate which may be desired. In the fourteen hour trip, for example, between Mexico City and Vera Cruz, you pass through as many varieties of climate as if you journeyed in the United States from Estes Park, Colorado, to Palm Beach, Florida.

Ethnologically, present day Mexico presents as heterogeneous a picture as it does geographically. Conventionally, Mexican population is divided into three classes: whites, Indians, and "mestizos" (i.e. the results of crosses between the indigenous groups and the whites). The 1921 census gives the following classification of the population:

Pure indigenous groups (Indians).....	4,179,449	or	29.16%
Mestizos.....	8,504,561	or	59.33%
Whites.....	1,404,718	or	9.80%
Race unknown and foreigners.....	246,052	or	1.71%
<hr/>			
Total population.....	14,334,780	or	100.0%

These statistics can, of course, be only approximately correct; but at least they serve to indicate the larger outlines of the racial composition of the population. When one stops to consider

that no one of the three major clauses indicated above represents a "pure" or homogenous racial stock, the picture becomes even more complex. The term "whites", for example, refers in the main, of course, to the Spanish conquerors and their descendants. But the Spanish, it must be remembered, are a hybridization of all the racial stocks of Europe plus whatever is represented ethnologically by the historical terms "Moors" and "Jews". On the other hand, what the Census lists as "pure indigenous" population, is made up of at least three widely different types of Indians, in turn divided into an undetermined number (probably fifty or more) sub-types. The mestizos are anything that cannot be put into one of the other two classes.

Considered in relation to the problem of education, the geographical and racial diversity which characterizes Mexico would not necessarily appear as a significant factor, were it not also true that levels and varieties of cultural development can be correlated with these geographical and biological differences. Without entering into the moot questions of geographical or racial determinism, one may simply state that there is in Mexico at the present time an almost one to one correspondence between cultural diversity and environmental and biological diversity.

For convenience, one may speak, for example, of the indigenous (Indian) population of Mexico as a single "race"; but one must be careful not to imply thereby a cultural unity which in reality does not exist. This "single race" includes over 49 well distinguished ethnical groups, speaking almost 100 different and distinct languages or dialects, and exhibiting

markedly different customs and habits of life. After four hundred years and more of domination by Spanish culture, there are still in Mexico some 2,000,000 Indians who cannot even speak the Spanish language. The cumulative effects of social isolation in a mountainous country without adequate means of communication plus the different types of adjustment called forth by the many varieties of geographical environment, have inevitably given rise to cultural differentiations which to this day characterize Mexico.

Another basis for estimating the extent of these "abysmal differences in thought" and levels of cultural development, may be gained by considering the following division of the population into "types of civilization" recently published by the Secretariat of Education:

Primitive or Indigenous Civilization

Indians.....	3,504,332
Mestizos.....	4,330,452

Intermediate Civilization

Including a small percentage of Indians... 4,000,000

European or Modern Civilization

Including a large percentage of Mestizos.. 1,556,799

Until more complete studies have been made, these figures may be accepted as a fairly adequate representation of the "cultural map" of Mexico.

With this brief survey before us, we are now in a position to understand why the problem of education in present day Mexico is not only one of how to improve the economic well-being of the people, but also a problem of how the schools may be used for the "integration of the nation". The unity of human

groups depends upon their possession of a common background of experience and tradition and their reaction to communally held symbols and collective representations. If Mexico is not a nation, it is because the symbols of nationhood do not yet possess any meaning or significance for the vast majority of the population. The flag, the national anthem, the national heroes have not entered into the experience of the people.

"The historical tradition, which imposes uniformity on the customs and aspirations of a people", writes the Mexican sociologist, Daniel Cosío Villegas, "properly speaking, does not exist in Mexico...There are no popular legends, no popular heroes...Even our great bull-fighters and our great bandits, heroes of the middle class, are known only to those few individuals who read the daily newspapers." The "gran familia nacional" is yet to be achieved in Mexico; the responsibility for its creation lies with the public schools.

Turning now from our consideration of the nature of the educational problem, let us review in summary fashion the means which have been devised for its solution. Specifically, let us see what kind of schools are being established, and what type of pedagogical procedure is being followed. In a word: what is Mexico doing in its schools to raise the standard of living of the masses of the people and to create a spirit of national unity and cultural homogeneity?

Before undertaking to answer these questions, it is necessary to state that in Mexico, public education is carried on by the federal, state and municipal governments. As a matter

of fact, however, at the present time, with the exception of a few of the larger cities, municipal schools are of little importance. Each state is autonomous in regard to its educational system and may develop its program from the kindergarten to the university. The federal government has charge of the schools in the federal district and in the territories and also has the right to establish schools in any state. This means that the federal school system, working under the direction of the Secretariat of Education functions independently of the state school system. Duplication of effort is avoided by a careful co-ordination of the federal and state programs.

Since what John Dewey has called "Mexico's educational renaissance" has been undoubtedly very largely due to the work of the national authorities, it is appropriate that we should devote our attention mainly to the achievements of the federal government in this field.

The educational efforts of the national government in the country at large outside of the federal district and the territories, dates from the year 1921. At this time Mexico faced an educational crisis. The thirty years dictatorship of Díaz was, to put it mildly, not distinguished for achievements in education, and during the years of revolution and social disorder following the downfall of that regime, the whole system had become completely disorganized. Almost an entire generation had grown up without advantages of public schools. In the larger cities, schools continued to operate after a fashion, but in the vast rural districts of Mexico, where 75% of the population lives and has its being, hardly a school was to be found. In the face of this situation, the federal government very wisely decided

to direct its first efforts to establishing educational centers in these neglected rural communities. Beginning with the Obregon administration in 1921, this work has proceeded rapidly. In October, 1927, the Secretary of Education was able to report that 2,952 federal rural schools had been established, with a total enrollment of 206,383 students, and 3,540 teachers. For rural schools alone, the national government spent in the year 1926-27 the sum of 3,001,590 pesos.

The program which is being followed in these federal rural schools is admirably adapted to the educational needs of the agrarian communities. Departing from the traditional three "R's", the authorities have placed the emphasis in the four year course upon teaching the children (and through them their parents) those things which will serve immediately to increase productivity and raise the standard of living. Accordingly, each school is equipped with a small plot of ground. Courses in farming, gardening, the care of chickens and rabbits, and courses in weaving, tanning, pottery making, the preservation of fruits and vegetables, and carpentry, bulk quite as large in the curriculum as reading, writing and arithmetic. Night classes are held for adults and every effort is put forth to make the school the center of the community life. In all the activities of the rural school, the principle of "acción" is in force. This means that the students are encouraged to "learn by doing" rather than relying, as in the past, upon books and the words of the teacher for the sources of their knowledge. No opportunity is neglected to propagate the spirit of nationalism and group unity. The Indians are being taught to speak Spanish, and the national anthem may be heard in

little mountain villages where, before the coming of the school, it is doubtful if even the meaning of the word "Mexico" was known. The states are following in the foot steps of the federal government and the last census reports the existence of 6,000 state supported rural schools.

In order to train teachers for the rural schools, besides establishing a series of regional normal schools (there are 9 of these now with a total enrollment of 625 students), the federal government has devised a most ingenious system of movable teachers' institutes, known as "Cultural Missions". These so-called "Cultural Missions" consist of a group of experts in education, agriculture, social work, small industries (weaving, carpentry, etc.) and physical culture. Six such groups are now at work in the various states of the Republic. A Mission remains in a given community for three weeks. During this time, the rural teachers of that district receive intensive training in the theory and practice of rural education. In 1926 and the first quarter of 1927, 44 such Missions or institutes were <sup>held</sup> in 13 different states. Approximately 3,000 teachers were reached at a total cost of 114,742 pesos or, on an average, 19,123 pesos (c. \$9,400) per year, per Mission.

A more specialized and advanced type of education is being offered in the new federal regional agricultural schools. During the administration of President Calles, "Escuelas Centrales Agrícolas" have been established in the States of Guanajuato, Michoacán, Hidalgo, and Durango. The average total cost of each one of these four schools is estimated at 1,000,000 pesos (c. \$500,000). At the present time, the enrollment totals

675 students or an average of 168 per school. These institutions are open to the sons of small farmers or "ejiditarios" (those who live in the villages that hold their land communally). Briefly, their purpose is to furnish a means whereby benighted Mexican peons can be transformed into self respecting intelligent farmers. Each school has a large tract of land, is stocked with high grade animals and equipped with modern farming and dairying machinery. It is no secret that the "Escuelas Centrales Agrícolas" are the apple of President Calles's eye, and, if present plans do not fail, three new institutions of this type will be established during the coming year. The agricultural banks, the partition of landed estates and the Central Agricultural Schools are the three major planks in the President's platform of agrarian reform. Next to the rural schools, the "Escuelas Centrales Agrícolas" represent the most important educational innovation of the present regime.

One other very interesting experiment which the national government is conducting in its general campaign to improve the conditions of the agrarian communities deserves to be mentioned. In 1925 there was inaugurated in Mexico City a school known as "La Casa del Estudiante Indígena" or "School for the Indigenous Student". This institution admits only "pure" Indians and has as its avowed purpose "the incorporation of the Indian as an integral part of the life of the nation." At the present writing there are enrolled some 200 Indian students, representing 21 states and 25 or more different tribal groups. As an experiment in racial psychology the institution has already proved a marked success, for it has shown once for all that the Mexican Indian



is equal not only in capacity to other racial groups, but that he possesses many virtues and gifts of unique value. The school hopes, by sending its graduates back "to leaven the loaf" in their native village, to become, in time, a great social force for reclaiming the Indians for Mexican national life.

It must not be concluded from the foregoing that Mexico's educational reawakening has been entirely in the interest of the rural districts. Both inside and outside the federal district, the Department of Education has carried on an intensive campaign for the improvement of the city schools. Part of this campaign has been to establish "Escuelas Típicas" or model primary schools in the capital of each state. Also, the government maintains some 30 industrial and commercial schools in various cities of the Republic. In the federal Capital, the institutions of higher learning - the National University and the Preparatory Schools - have been reorganized along more modern and more democratic lines, and in the field of primary education the 8 new "Escuelas al Aire Libre" (Open Air Schools), represent a most original and novel contribution to school architecture and pedagogical practice. If space permitted, it would be interesting to treat in detail these and other aspects of the work of the Department of Education. What has been set down here, however, is perhaps enough to reveal the major tendencies of the modern Mexican educational movement.

By way of summarizing the foregoing and balancing the books for Mexican education, the following facts may be rehearsed:

DEBITS.

65% of the population of Mexico above 10 years of age (over 6,800,000 people) cannot read or write.

Of the total school population of 2,750,000 children, over 1,500,000 are without any schools to go to.

Nearly 2,000,000 Indians cannot speak the Spanish language.

(out of approx. 14,000,000)

Nearly 8,000,000 people in Mexico are classed by the Department of Education as having a "primitive" standard of living.

The vast majority of the people are in urgent need of citizenship training, if Mexico is to become a unified, democratic nation.

#### CREDITS.

The federal government is spending 7.37% of its total budget or 27,613,905 pesos a year on public education.

The state governments are spending on an average of 37% of their yearly budgets for the same purpose.

In all, more than 49,500,000 pesos per year is being spent for public education in Mexico.

The federal government is at the present time maintaining over 3,574 schools of which 2,952 are rural.

The state and municipal governments are maintaining 9520 schools of which 6,232 are rural and 3,067 are primary schools.

The total number of schools in Mexico, public and private is 15,479.

The total enrollment in all schools is 1,183,333 students, of which number 1,165,405 are in public schools.

Surely, no nation was ever faced with a greater educational problem than is Mexico in the year of our Lord 1928. Not only must the nation struggle with ignorance and nescience on every side, but in education, as in every other public enterprise in Mexico, war has to be constantly waged against the age-old traditions of political graft and incompetence. There is an ever-present temptation to sacrifice the funds, so badly needed for education, to other and less worthy objects.

What for convenience we have called here the "problem of education in Mexico" is only one aspect of that much larger

and more difficult job which the revolutionary governments have tackled - the social reconstruction of the whole nation. It would be naive and even foolish to hope that in any educational program, of whatever kind, Mexico will find the solution of all the social ills to which it is heir. But if the present activities of the state and federal governments are ~~an~~ earnest for the future, it is clear that Mexico is determined to give education a fair chance to do its part in creating the new nation. The rest lies in the lap of the gods. "It must be recognized and said very loud and very clear", wrote the Secretary of Education in 1924, "that the work of popular redemption is now securely launched, and that it has its roots deep in the conscience and heart of Mexico". If this was true in 1924, it is doubly true in 1928. Mexico has put its faith in education!