



## EDUCATION IN TEPOZTLÁN

A Letter from James G. Maddox

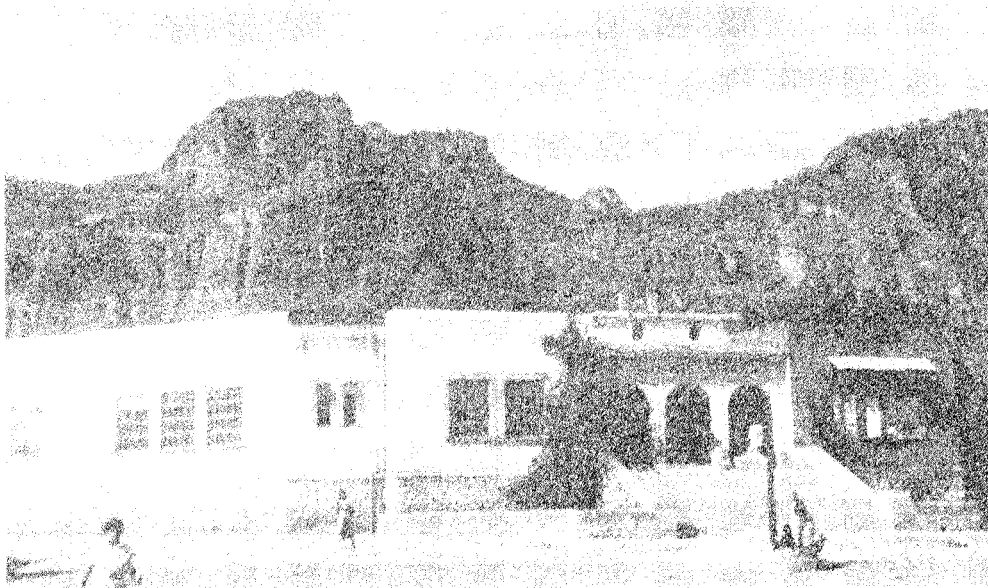
Mexico, D.F.  
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At 8:30 Friday evening, November 25--exactly one-half hour behind schedule--the formal graduation festivities began. They were to celebrate the end of the year in Federal Primary School "Escuadrón 201" in the village of Tepoztlán, Mexico. Two hours later, 41 boys and 16 girls had received certificates which informed the world that they had finished the requirements of legally-approved primary schools in Mexico and were entitled to enter a secondary school of their choice. The following Tuesday evening, 16 boys and 10 girls were graduated by the secondary school in the same village. These were big and important days in the lives of pupils, teachers, and parents.

Throughout Mexico, similar ceremonies were being held. Let's take a closer look at the graduation exercises in Tepoztlán, and ask ourselves a few questions about their significance.

When we walked through the entrance of Primary School "Escuadrón 201," we were certainly not prepared for the scene that met our eyes. I had previously talked to a couple of the teachers, a few pupils, and three or four parents. I had assured my wife and sixteen-year-old daughter, who accompanied me to the fiesta, as it was called locally, that this would be a dull, uncomfortable affair. I had visions of being crammed into one of the classrooms, along with a bunch of nervous, boisterous children and a few parents. Instead, we found ourselves in a large open patio--the playground for the school--which had been especially decorated for the occasion. A tremendous aid to the artificial flowers and crepe-paper streamers which constituted the decorations was a bright, beautiful moon overhead. It gave almost as much light as the three dozen 40-watt bulbs that had been strung across the playground and which received only intermittent surges of "juice" from a portable generator out in the street. Benches from the schoolrooms had been placed four rows deep around a rectangular area in the center of the courtyard which, with its more brilliant lighting and numerous streamers of crepe paper hanging from overhead wires, was obviously the stage where the festivities of the evening were to take place.

More surprising than the bedecked and moonlit patio was the large number of people present. By the time the program was



PRIMARY SCHOOL AT TEPOZTLÁN

Enrollment in this school in 1955 totaled 693 village children



THE PATIO

Principal of the primary school (with magazine) and two teachers in the patio where graduation exercises were held

ready to begin, there were at least 1,000 people on hand. I made several counts of various sections of the crowd, and tried to estimate the total. This was difficult, however, because the courtyard was soon overflowing, and scores of men and teen-age boys were seated on a little parcel of hillside which slopes gently up from the courtyard wall. It is possible that those in attendance included one-third of the 5,000 residents of Tepoztlán. A few persons came from neighboring villages.

The first row of seats around three sides of the rectangle was reserved for the members of the graduating class. At one end was the speaker's table and about a dozen chairs for visiting dignitaries, most of whom were faculty members from nearby schools or officials from the Department of Education offices in Cuernavaca, the capital city of the state of Morelos in which Tepoztlán is located. The Maddox's, however, were soon escorted to three of these chairs, when the principal of the school noticed that we were becoming the center of attention. Numerous youngsters were pressing in from all sides to get a close look at the strange gringos. Women with children in their arms and grandmothers had first priority on the seats immediately behind the graduates and the visiting dignitaries. Squeezed in among them were the four- to eight-year-olds. Then came a mixed layer made up of godparents of the graduates, a few elderly men, a sprinkling of well-dressed women in their twenties who had obviously returned from the city to see a younger brother or sister graduate, and other close friends and relatives of the class of 1955. These took most of the available seats. Behind them stood the men, each of whom was wearing his newest white straw hat.

It was these hats, as they reflected the soft light of a full moon and formed a wide moving border around the crowd that was seated in the patio, which awakened me to the obvious: we were deep in the earthy heart of Mexico. We were no longer part of sophisticated modern Western culture. Yet neither were we among the Aztecs. We were in rural central Mexico: one of those hazy cultural zones, where the modern and rational is interacting with the traditional. We were seeing a part of what Cline calls "the third world," that great stratum of population which is culturally somewhere between the "modern" and the "Indian."<sup>1</sup> Everything around us was typically Mexican--the dirt-floored patio, from which a light breeze would occasionally pick up swirls of dust and deposit it on the crowd; the artificial flowers and crepe-paper streamers decorating the courtyard, when a half-mile away there were small fields of the most beautiful gladioli and daisies that one would want to see; the dozens of barefoot women, each with a long dark shawl around her shoulders which was folded in front to form a small hammock for the ever-present baby; the multitude of children hanging on to the loose flowing skirts of their mothers; the sprinkling of overdressed young women; and the men in the shadowy background with their white straw hats so

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<sup>1</sup>The United States and Mexico, by Howard F. Cline. Harvard University Press, 1953.

heavily filled with starch that the salesmen in the local markets fit them to the buyers' heads by pounding them to the desired shape with a hammer and a small circular piece of iron held inside the crown. This was rural Mexico--a crazy quilt of the old and the new--and this cross section of it was assembled in the patio of a school, the important local institution which is theoretically trying to merge the two cultures, but which is very probably one of the most potent forces for destroying the old and enthroning the new.

When the nine-piece student band, just a few feet behind us, started to blare out the national anthem, the graduating class marched briskly into the open rectangle. In the forefront was the tallest girl in the class, carrying the Mexican flag. The color guard was made up of five boys, dressed in blue serge trousers and white shirts. About ten paces behind came the column of classmates. The girls were dressed in ballerina-length evening gowns, which my wife said were orchid-colored. I would have called them a hybrid of old-rose and purple. They glistened in the light, and created an atmosphere completely foreign to the sleepy rural village of Tepoztlán. The blue serge trousers and white shirts of the boys were more in keeping with the local setting. The girls' dresses had all been made by the same dressmaker in Cuernavaca. Literally, they were not a part of this world, that is, the world of Tepoztlán. They were specks of that brisk new modern culture which one finds around Mexico City and a few other urban centers in the nation. The cost of these dresses represented a real sacrifice to the barefoot shawl-covered mothers and white-hatted fathers, who were seated a few feet away, beaming with pride at the splendid appearance of their offspring. Here was the Old and the New in bold contrast. Moreover, the New was of the very newest, and it was unmistakably the center of attention.

Much of the program reminded me of graduation exercises in the United States--a short speech of farewell to the outgoing graduates by one of the teachers; several songs, dances, and recitations by youngsters from each of the six grades in the school; a good-by speech by a member of the graduating class; a lengthy report by the principal of the school, in which she took a lot of time to say that 1955 had been a good year but that much remains to be done to make "Escuadrón 201" the kind of institution that Tepoztlán deserves, and of course admonished the graduates to continue their education by attending a secondary school. After this, a district inspector of the Department of Education spoke, and finally the youngsters were given their certificates. It was a touching scene. As each youngster's name was called, he came to the speaker's table where he received his certificate, and as he returned to his seat he was met midway by one of his godparents who presented him with a gift and a huge bouquet of flowers and embraced him with the feeling which only a Latino can put into the abracijo. This was a real show of affection. It was one of those little niceties of life which North Americans rarely expect from people who live in extreme poverty, and who often appear to neglect the material welfare of their children. Yet the public demonstration of affection and giving of gifts were

characteristic; Mexican peasants unquestionably have strong affection for children, and they also must show that they are keeping up with their neighbors.

The exercises at the secondary school, four nights later, were essentially the same as those held for the primary grades. The girls wore beautiful ballerina-length bluish-green evening dresses that had been made in Cuernavaca. About half of the boys wore blue serge trousers and white shirts, while the others wore blue serge suits. I was told that the parents of all of the boys had bought them suits for the occasion, but "some of the boys were just too stubborn to wear a coat and a tie as they were supposed to do." The speeches were a little shorter; the songs and dances were a little better; and representatives of the Lions Club in Cuernavaca were on hand to present a medal to the graduate who had the highest grades. Otherwise, the program was a replica of the one at the primary school. Here too, each graduate received from one of his godparents a present, a bouquet, and a hug. The effect, however, was somewhat less touching, because the graduates were virtually full-grown men and women, and they obviously were not as thrilled to receive presents and flowers as the younger ones had been.

Following the formal graduation exercises, both at the primary school and at the secondary school, the seats and chairs were hastily pushed out of the way, a local orchestra set up its instruments, and a dance was soon under way. I wilted at about midnight and did not stay for the end of either affair. I was told, however, that at the primary school dancing continued until two o'clock in the morning, and that it lasted an hour longer at the secondary school. It is commonly said that Mexicans dance whenever there is the slightest opportunity, and this, no doubt, is one explanation of why so many people attended these festivities. It is also clear that the schools are not blind to the need for good public relations. The teachers looked on the dance as one way of "winning the hearts of the people." Few teachers, however, have a clear-cut, practical concept of how the schools might be made effective institutions for contributing something to the community beyond teaching the children the regular routine subjects.

This brings us to a fundamental question: how well prepared are the graduates of the Tepoztlán schools to face the life ahead of them? The question is not easy to answer, but one thing is clear. The curriculums of the Tepoztlán schools are not designed to train the students for the life of small farmers and shopkeepers in a rural setting such as the village of Tepoztlán. The schools and the courses of study they offer seem to be set apart from the village community, where the overcrowded adobe houses lack running water and electric lights and have so little furniture that sometimes there are not even beds. The schools have done little to foster home and community sanitation in a village where pigs, chickens, and dogs freely run in and out of many of the houses, and the toilet facilities of a house usually amount to no more than a half-hidden nook in the corner of the yard or adjoining

corral. Nor is there anything in the curriculums that would help a graduate to make a better living on one of the 5- to 15-acre farms on which most of the families depend for the major part of their income.

The first four years of the primary school are, of necessity, devoted mainly to teaching the simple skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. In the sixth and final year, the basic curriculum is as follows:

Spanish.....	5	hours	per	week
Arithmetic and geometry.....	5	"	"	"
Natural sciences.....	5	"	"	"
Geography.....	3	"	"	"
World history.....	3	"	"	"
Civil government.....	2	"	"	"
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Total.....	23	"	"	"

In addition, at least three hours per week are given to such subjects as vocational studies, drawing, music, and sports. The vocational studies include a little sewing, cooking, and child-care for girls, and carpentry, painting, and some horticulture for boys. These are the types of activities which might be closely related to the way of life in Tepoztlán, and which could conceivably make a real improvement in the level of living of the community. In reality, however, they are of little significance. The children of the primary school are too young to be taught very much in the way of vocational skills; the equipment for teaching is almost nil; and the teachers are short of ideas for constructive projects geared to local ways of living.

In the secondary school, which consists of three years beyond the first six years of primary instruction, the curriculum is as follows:

Spanish literature.....	3	years	World History.....	2	years
Mathematics.....	3	"	History of Mexico.....	2	"
Biology.....	3	"	Drawing and modeling...	3	"
Geography.....	3	"	Carpentry and printing.	1	year
English.....	3	"	Sports and music.....	3	years
Chemistry and physics.	2	"			

There are 30 hours of classes each week, and the school year is 36 weeks, when allowances are made for vacations and holidays. Most of the subjects are taught three times each week for a 50-minute period, but in a few courses there are classes every day, with the result that others are cut to one or two class periods per week. There are no laboratories; the carpentry shop is practically without tools; and the printing press--the smallest I have ever seen--is about the size of my portable typewriter. Clearly, nobody can learn to be either a carpenter or a printer with the equipment and material available. Biology is taught by a local doctor--there are also several other part-time teachers--but from

what I could learn it is mainly "textbook teaching." There are rare trips to the surrounding countryside so that students can become acquainted with local plants and animals, but these usually are in the nature of "excursions" away from the tedium of the classroom. By and large, the school is something apart from the village and fields of Tepoztlán. It is only distantly related to the myriads of rustic, almost primitive, activities in which both the children and the parents are customarily engaged. The school is a place where city ideas (maybe they are cosmopolitan ideas) prevail. Mexico does not yet have an organized and respected body of rural knowledge, nor a corps of trained instructors to teach agricultural and allied sciences to the children of farm families.

It would be easy for those who cherish rural values, and who believe that education should be functional and utilitarian in content, to be highly critical of the schools in Tepoztlán. The cultural gulf between the schoolroom and the community gives rise to a situation that is far from ideal. At the same time, those of us from the United States need to look closely in our own backyards to determine just how well we have related education to our processes of living and making a living before we express too much disappointment in regard to our neighbors. To a person like me--reared in an isolated backwoods area of southern Arkansas; with vivid memories of the one-room schoolhouse in which I finished ten grades; and with even clearer recollections of the three-teacher high school where five subjects were taught (English, History, Mathematics, Latin, and one year of Physics), where a converted clothes closet doubled as both laboratory and library, and where "book l'arnin'" was definitely suspect by a large proportion of the parents--the schools of Tepoztlán look pretty good. That my memories are four decades old is of little importance. It was not until the early 1920's that the people of Mexico really gained control of their educational institutions, and forced the Federal Government to take major responsibility for them. Since that time, tremendous progress has been made. This is not the place to review the whole story of the struggles, strifes, and sacrifices that have gone into the national effort to promote education in Mexico, but one can easily get a distorted picture of the situation in both Tepoztlán and the nation if he does not recognize that this effort is only a generation old, and that it has had all sorts of handicaps--ranging from the general poverty of the country through a gamut of factors, such as lack of teachers, lackadaisical attitudes of parents, romantic ideals of leaders, and outright opposition of some conservative elements in society. As I read the history of this effort, I am surprised that the schools of Tepoztlán are doing as well as they are.

That they are making progress is attested by the steady increase in physical facilities, as well as by the growth in enrollment. It was not until the middle 1930's that Tepoztlán had a primary school which went beyond the fourth grade. Now it has a kindergarten, four primary schools--three of which are small and teach only the first two grades--and a secondary school. The latter is only three years old. If, therefore, one looks at the

past 20 years, there has been a decided increase in educational facilities. Enrollment in the central primary school in 1955 was 693. This was almost 30 per cent higher than ten years earlier, although the three new primary schools had been opened in the meantime. The secondary school had an enrollment of 129 in 1955, and a larger number is expected next year. It is obvious that only a small proportion of the students who finish the primary grades continue their education in secondary school. However, the principal of the primary school proudly points out that enrollment in the secondary school is not a good index of the number who continue their studies: a goodly number, she says, enter professional schools to become secretaries, bookkeepers, or teachers. A few go to Cuernavaca, or other cities, to continue their secondary education. She estimates that 95 per cent of the children in Tepoztlán between 6 and 16 years old were enrolled in school in 1955. This figure may be a bit high, and it is certain that attendance was far from perfect. Nevertheless, all the evidence points to the conclusion that the schools of the village are significant institutions of growing importance. They are far outdistancing other local organizations, such as the Church and the municipal government, in bringing new ideas and broader visions to Tepoztlán.

Their teachers, most of whom receive salaries of only \$50 to \$75 per month, are dedicated public servants. Their training is not always the best (although 10 of the 14 teachers in the primary school have finished their studies at a recognized normal school) and their equipment is meager. Nevertheless, in the village they represent one of the strongest forces for cultural change. And the pressure they exert will almost surely have a cumulative effect. As of the present, the barefoot, shawl-covered, white-hatted peasants--many of whom can neither read nor write--dominate the local scene, but their days are numbered. Their faces beamed too brightly at the recent graduation exercises, and their sacrifices for those fancy dresses were too great. Their commitments to the schools are deep. They can't turn their backs on them now, and yet the schools are potent forces for destroying some of the most cherished values of the man under the white hat and the woman in the blue shawl.<sup>2</sup>

James G. Maddy

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<sup>2</sup> For those interested in a comprehensive account of Tepoztlán, see: Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlan Restudied, by Oscar Lewis, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1951.