

## **John Dewey's Influence in Mexico: Rural Schooling, 'Community,' and the Vitality of Context**

by Deron Boyles

### **English Abstract**

This paper shows that the contexts of rural Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s (unintentionally) provided the conditions for which Dewey's philosophy was relevant and useful. This work also problematizes the degree to which it can be said that Dewey was a primary or central figure in Mexico's revolutionary efforts to transform education and schooling. While there is evidence of Dewey's influence primarily because of his connections to two of his students, Moisés Sáenz and Rafael Ramirez, a more powerful influential figure, José Vasconcelos, complicates the matter. Add to this complication the varied and tumultuous transactions in commerce, politics, and religion, and the importance of contexts and connections becomes clear.

### **Resumen en español**

Este documento se muestran que los contextos de las zonas rurales de México en los años 1920 y 1930 (involuntariamente) siempre y cuando las condiciones para que Dewey la filosofía era pertinente y útil. Este trabajo también cuestionar el grado en que se puede decir que Dewey fue una de las principales o figura central en México revolucionario de los esfuerzos para transformar la educación y a la escuela. Si bien hay pruebas de Dewey la influencia, principalmente debido a sus conexiones para dos de sus estudiantes, Moisés Sáenz y Rafael Ramírez, una más potente e influyente figura, José Vasconcelos, complica el asunto. Añadir a esta complicación el variado y tumultuosa las transacciones en el comercio, política y religión, y la importancia de los contextos y conexiones queda claro.

### **Resumo em português**

Este papel mostrará que os contextos de México rural nos 1920 e 1930 (involuntariamente) forneceram as condições para que a filosofia do Dewey era relevante e útil. Este trabalho irá também problematize que o grau a que pode ser dito que Dewey era uma figura primária ou central nos esforços revolucionários do México transformar educação e instrução. Enquanto há evidência da influência do Dewey, principalmente por causa das suas conexões a dois dos seus estudantes, Moisés Sáenz e Rafael Ramirez, um mais poderosa e figura influente, José Vasconcelos, complica-se a questão. Adicione a esta complicação as transações variadas e tumultuosos em comércio, política, e religião, e a importância de contextos e conexões torna-se claro.

"[T]here is no educational movement in the world which exhibits more of the spirit of intimate union of school activities with those of the community than is found in this Mexican development." [1]  
John Dewey, 1926

This article argues that John Dewey's philosophy of education is seen in practice in rural schools in Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s. While Dewey's philosophy applied to schools in the U.S. was unevenly applied, misapplied, or decidedly not applied, I argue that there is evidence in Mexico of the successful application of his educational theories. This is so for two likely reasons: contexts and connections. This paper shows that the contexts of rural Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s (unintentionally) provided the conditions for which Dewey's philosophy was relevant and useful. This work also problematizes the degree to which it can be said that Dewey was a primary or central figure in Mexico's revolutionary efforts to transform education and schooling. While there is evidence of Dewey's influence, primarily because of his connections to two of his students, Moisés Sáenz and Rafael Ramirez, a more powerful and influential figure, José Vasconcelos, complicates the matter. Add to this complication the varied and tumultuous transactions in commerce, politics, and religion, and the importance of contexts and connections becomes clear.

The article proceeds in three parts. Part One is dedicated to an abbreviated history leading up to the time period for which this paper ultimately focuses. Part Two is dedicated to an exploration of the key connections and contexts in Mexico that both complicate and support the application of Dewey's philosophy in rural Mexican school practice. Part Three discusses the successes and limitations of Dewey's influence, both for the historical time frame under consideration, but also for contemporary schools in Mexico and the U.S.

I

A brief overview of the relevant history is included here as background for the specific educational initiatives that are the specific focus of this paper.[2] As George I. Sanchez puts it, the history of Mexico is a *mêlée*. [3] Well before the Spaniards arrived in 1519, Mexico's problems "have roots in the pre-Columbian contacts and conflicts of Indian groups." [4] With the emergence of *criollos*, Mexican-born Spanish, and the growth of the *mestizos*, a mix of Spanish-Indian people, and native *indios*, indigenous groups, there developed a tug-of-war between and among groups by cultural background, region, and religion. Catholic influences, specifically, only added to long-simmering strife and posturing for power, particularly given that the church is reported to have eventually owned an estimated one-third of all of the land in the country by the middle of the nineteenth century. [5]

As Sanchez also points out, there is a long history of educational innovation in Mexico. On his view, and regardless of later critiques of the Catholic Church, religious figures featured prominently—if not totally successfully—in developing colonial schools as early as 1523 when Pedro de Gante established a “school of action” in the village of Texcoco.[6] That school led to the establishment of the Indian school of San José, in 1526, in which a thousand children were instructed “through physical activities, through music and processions, by the use of pictorial illustrations and hieroglyphics, and through the medium of their own language.”[7] It was at San José, at the convent of San Francisco, “two hundred years before Pestalozzi, three hundred years before Fröebel, and four hundred years before Dewey,” that there was “an activity school, a school based on life.”[8] Consequently, the origins of the kind of schools that might be attributed to the influence of Dewey’s philosophy actually pre-date Dewey. This does not mean that Dewey had no influence in the post-Porfirian era, but it is an important reminder of the value of the long history of Mexico and Mexican education.

A significant element in that history is the Catholic Church. While Pedro de Gante established schools of action in the 16th century, George Kneller indicates that the 17th century held a very different reality for schooling. He notes that “the church’s interest in education was subservient to the economic demands of landlordism; it neglected the training of the native peoples to concentrate on the education of an aristocracy which would exercise continued control.”[9] Beyond the 17th century, the church continued to exert immense control and such control only added to a long history of discord and contestation in the country. Sanchez is worth quoting at length on this historical strife:

The smouldering mass that has been Mexico has lacked unity, has lacked vision. The motley hordes that flocked to the standards of revolt have been driven to arms and rebellion by inarticulate hopes—by a blind and purely emotional search for release. The *pelado* (poor man) wanted lands, the *indio* (Indian) wanted justice, the *cura* (priest) wanted converts and power, the *politico* (politician) wanted autonomy...the Mexican people did not know what they wanted. In fact, the Mexicans as a People have not existed! That is the crux of the problem that was Mexico—that is the basic cause for turmoil of yesterday.[10]

Add to such tension the exploitation of foreign business interests (particularly in the petroleum and mining industries) and the fierce political jockeying for power and control of Mexican politicians and military leaders, and we see a country ready for the very revolution that occurred in 1910.[11] To be clear, the revolution was not the first, nor was it waged for explicitly clear reasons. Mexico gained independence from Spain in September of 1810. In 1822, Spain finally recognized the independence of Mexico. In the intervening 100 years, there was no bucolic calm or sustained lack of animus. On the contrary, Mexico’s 1824 Constitution was conservative in nature and was met with varying degrees of resistance. The result was a series of dramatic fluctuations between federalism and centralism: in 1836 there was a decidedly centralized government under the *Siete Leyes* (Seven Laws), followed by the *Bases Orgánicas*, which were even more

centralized than the Seven Laws. After 1853, when Santa Anna completed his last term, Mexico saw a return to federalism under the Constitution of 1857.[12]

Regarding Mexico's history of education during this period, there was broad diversity. Regional, tribal, federal, and centralized efforts were all in evidence. Kneller notes that the "various governments needed schools in which to disseminate the prevailing political ideals and to provide as solid a front as possible for Mexico's newly won sovereignty." [13] In 1829, schooling was completely secularized—formally, at least, since in practice, it was the Catholic Church that primarily supported schools. In 1833, Gómez Farías instituted the first Department of Public Education, though it was criticized for providing avenues for local leaders to siphon funds and insert pamphlets advocating their own viewpoints.[14] Under the Reform Laws of 1867, Mexico ostensibly took total control of schooling. *Ley Orgánica de Instrucción* (Organic Law of Education) dictated that elementary schooling must be free as well as compulsory. By 1894, there were a handful of advanced institutes (19 schools of law, 9 medical schools, 8 engineering schools, etc.) and, because of the 1867 Organic Law, a number of primary and elementary schools. On Sanchez' view, however, by 1910 little had changed educationally. "The public schools that existed," he writes, "made education and the imparting of knowledge an end in itself and in no sense did they relate their instruction to the needs of the country." [15]

Given the vast differences in geography, culture, language, and prosperity experienced by Mexicans during this historical time frame, a general purpose of the 1910 conflict was a form of unification, if not assimilation. As Sanchez notes, "[T]he Revolution of 1910 found Mexicans no better off than they were one hundred years before. *Los de abajo*, the masses, were still in a condition of oppression and subjugation .... The failure of the colonial schools and the schools of independent Mexico was a failure of colonial government and of Mexican government. The humanitarian theories and practices of the educational pioneers did not have the financial and political power needed to overcome indifference and corruption in Church-State government. It required the passage of almost four centuries before the nation was ready to shoulder the responsibility of popular education." [16] Of particular interest for this paper, again, is the revolution from 1910-1920 and specifically what followed for schooling. The revolution was a bloody and drawn-out, disorganized affair that featured assassinations, imprisonment (and breakouts), coups, and rank instability that nonetheless represented a shift away from landed gentry, political graft, and certain forms of colonization. As Louise Schoenhals characterizes it, the revolution shifted Mexico from a form of high-minded nationalism associated with the former leader, Porfirio Díaz, and "Europeanizing the upper classes to raising the masses from their abject poverty and morass of ignorance and illiteracy." [17] In short, the revolution emboldened the masses and countered long-standing objectification and exploitation by ruling elites of both indios and certain rural mestizos.

## II

Much like the tumultuous history of Mexico itself, the various educational leaders in that history also varied dramatically. For the purpose of this paper, I restrict the focus of this section to three key figures of the post-1910 revolutionary period: José Vasconcelos, Moisés Sáenz, and Rafael Ramírez.[18] Vasconcelos, Sáenz, and Ramírez each worked for the Ministry of Education. Beginning in the early 1920s, Vasconcelos was regarded as a “prophet” of the new movement,[19] Sáenz was the primary administrator of the movement (drawing up “the leading lines on which [the movement] could be pursued”), and Ramírez was “the business director and organizer of the movement [who] worked out the details of its application.”[20] The three held both similar and divergent views regarding education and schooling, particularly for rural populations. This point is important to the present topic because Sáenz and Ramírez, graduate students of Dewey's, are credited as being the connections through which Dewey's influence can most clearly be seen.[21] I intend to trouble this conclusion shortly, but first will outline some of the significant similarities as well as differences between Vasconcelos, Sáenz, and Ramírez. In comparing and contrasting their work and their views, some questions emerge regarding the degree to which Dewey was, and was not, a major influence in Mexican education.

José Vasconcelos was variously described as a conservative perennialist,[22] an anti-positivist,[23] a pro-Spain and Catholic advocate,[24] innovator of public education,[25] and pro-peasantry socialist.[26] Regardless of the moniker, Vasconcelos' efforts to improve the educational achievement of masses of Mexican citizens cannot be doubted. In the midst of constant upheaval in the political spectrum of Mexico, Vasconcelos, like many of his contemporaries, had to contend with the risky uncertainties of power grabs and violent overthrows of Mexican leaders.[27] In the various transitions between Porfirio Díaz, Francisco Madero, Victoriano Huerta, Venustiano Carranza, Alvaro Obregón, and Plutarco Elias Calles, Vasconcelos variously fled to places like New York, Texas, California, Peru, and France. During these exiles, he enhanced his understanding of philosophy, deepening his already substantial knowledge of Plato, Hegel, Kant, and Nietzsche, among many other thinkers and classical works. His aesthetics indicates his commitment to universals. As Brightman notes, “Vasconcelos ... believes that the aesthetic a priori is unique in that it sets forth rules of composition of spiritually organized wholes .... Movement toward such wholes is ‘an orientation ... toward the state of divinity in which the Absolute is realized.’”[28]

It is with this understanding that Vasconcelos' work as the Minister of Education in Mexico is perhaps better understood. He is credited with establishing the new Ministry of Education, developing early and primary schooling, advancing technological education, and supporting the arts. All of these initiatives and positions, however, must also be understood through the lens of classicism. Vasconcelos was, unapologetically, a vocal proponent of classical education. He built libraries in parts of Mexico that had never had them, but he stocked those libraries with works like *Don Quixote* and *Ulysses*. As Hilton indicates, “[H]e could have added to the work of Homer the works of

Shakespeare, Göethe, Danté, and the other luminaries of Western culture.”[29] He disliked the idea of “arts for arts’ sake,” instead wishing to turn “Indianist” nationalism into German-staffed pottery factories. In one of several ironies, he is also credited with establishing the *Escuelas de Pintura al Aire Libre*, or “Open Air Art Schools,” that advanced the work of muralists like Diego Rivera, even though Rivera resented everything Vasconcelos is said to have valued. As Rick A. López notes, “In a panel known as *Los sabios* from [Rivera’s] mural cycle in the Ministry of Education...the artist depicted his patron Vasconcelos as an effete pen-wielding pedant perched on an Oriental elephant. Rivera thus portrays Vasconcelos as distracted by elitist art and philosophy, with his back turned against the real struggles and aspirations of the largely indigenous masses hungry for justice ([and] who fill the next panel in the cycle).”[30] At the same time, also ironically, he was a leader in establishing *Escuelas Industriales para Mujeres*, places for the teaching of home economics, though for different reasons than Dewey’s advocacy of the same general field of study.

Vasconcelos was, by his own admission, an assimilationist—not that he used the term, specifically, but he was interested in raising the level of education of “peasants” to idealized, classical ends, regardless of context.[31] As López characterizes it, the “Mexican masses, in Vasconcelos’ estimation, were incapable of changing their retrograde mindset on their own. Their uplift had to be managed by their moral and racial superiors, motivated by a desire to avert the threat of being overrun by ignorant rapidly reproducing, inferior hordes.”[32] According to Redfield, “Vasconcelos was uninterested in the study of native customs as a basis for social action, distrusted North American collaboration, and relied on the support of literary and artistic people rather than upon that of anthropologists.”[33] Similarly, according to Hilton, “Vasconcelos has always been ... a fearless critic of pragmatism in education and its practical consequences. He dislikes its lack of discipline (in the best sense of the word), its disrespect for the great tradition of the West, its incomprehension of European education, its scorn of classical literature, its religious agnosticism, and the petty ... localism to which the stress on environment leads.”[34] He was not interested in what might today be called “grass roots” movements, even though (ironically) the Ministry he established arguably came about from a very organic, “grass roots” revolution itself, i.e., the Revolution begun in 1910.[35]

Pedagogically, Vasconcelos could not be further from Dewey either. He held that the teacher is the center of learning, not the child’s interests, and that metaphysical and moral principles exist *a priori*. “Education,” wrote Vasconcelos, “above and beyond all technical training, is to establish and cultivate the vital continuity with the creative efforts of past centuries by awakening in man the supernatural gifts of his conscience.”[36] Curriculum is therefore centralized and based on perennialist assumptions of universal content and themes. Children are to be reared for a future life, not of industrial or menial labor, but with an eye toward a humanizing leisure. School is thus preparation for future life, where that “life” has already been identified (and stratified). Vasconcelos is clear in his disdain for Dewey:

It is in reading certain North American authors that we learn to pity the individual who from the days of his childhood has become so accustomed to using his energies only pragmatically, to keeping his hands constantly busy, that in the hour of leisure he is no longer able to use his free will .... The importation of the Dewey system into Mexico is ... of graver consequence than the distribution of opium and alcohol which has been practised [sic] in the case of other colonial peoples.[37]

Given Vasconcelos's stated concern about the "Dewey system," we find evidence that Dewey did have a presence in the debates over "new" schooling—particularly rural schooling—and Vasconcelos was having none of it. Sáenz and Ramirez, however, were advocates of Dewey's views.[38] What is fascinating is that Vasconcelos's clear disdain for Dewey existed at the same time that he headed the Ministry of Education under which Dewey's two former students were employed. Furthermore, it was Vasconcelos's Ministry of Education (as well as the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* [SEP] and its magazine *El Maestro Rural*) that set out some of the programs associated with Deweyan philosophy of education in rural Mexico. Recall the following summary achievements of Vasconcelos's five years as Minister of Education: 1) created the new Ministry; 2) developed primary education; 3) developed technical education/training; 4) advocated classical education; 5) advanced the arts (e.g. Diego Rivera's muralist movement, though not unproblematically); 6) advanced classical music; 7) defended the Spanish Catholic tradition; 8) advocated a broader understanding of Mexico's culture as "Spanish American;" and 9) established cultural missions for the assimilation of *indios*. [39] With qualifications, 2), 3), and 5) could be interpreted as goals similar to Dewey's, even if Vasconcelos' distaste for Dewey was as evident as it appears to have been. Might a version of these three initiatives provide enough "cover" for two of Dewey's students to make Deweyan "headway" in these areas? Perhaps there was enough "cover," but only if the contexts and connections allowed for variation from Vasconcelos' overall vision.

### III

In 1921 Sáenz, with Vasconcelos, had at least three primary goals for schools in Mexico: a) to reorganize schools under a cohesive federal system; b) provide teacher training; and c) "revise programs in rural" areas.[40] The first goal was concomitant with a change in the Constitution, led first by Carranza and then, after his assassination, by Obregón, providing control over all education in Mexico. With this change came increased funding, increased building, and an increase in a movement called "cultural missions." These missions were essentially itinerant teacher training sites that were intended to yield teachers in rural villages, with Ramirez responsible for the first formally established mission at Zacualtipán in 1923. Groups of teachers would be, according to Kenneth Grubb, "sent through the country. They founded no schools, but simply travelled from one village to another, giving the people a picture of what education could mean to them." [41] According to Grubb:

Ramirez and Saenz ... set out to rectify the current conceptions regarding the significance of the Indians of Mexico. It was claimed that though, for the present, since they lacked education, the Indian masses might have to look for leaders outside their own class, in the long run the Mexican peasant was the Indian peasant. But until recently the prevalent thought was this: "We the governing classes must incorporate the Indian." In adopting that attitude they completely overlooked the fact that, throughout Latin America, the Indian has shown himself practically impervious to that kind of penetration. The present approach to the problem is that the basis of Mexico is the Indian element and into it must be incorporated all the other currents of thought and activity and manners of living. The Government has accordingly undertaken the establishment of rural schools. These represent only a fraction of the educational programme, but they will be the principal factor in the future. Three or four village schools are co-ordinated into an educational circuit and one of them is made the central school. Up to 1930 the Revolutionary Government had created nearly 2500 rural schools divided into over 700 circuits. These schools were attended by 97,000 children, and evening classes were attended by 48,000 parents of these children.[42]

Sáenz and Ramirez, arguably differently from Vasconcelos, were not interested in foisting a pre-conceived "elite model" for education onto the rural *indios*. Rather, these missions were envisioned as organic outgrowths of local customs and traditions, perhaps similar in kind to Paulo Freire's "literacy campaigns" in Brazilian villages.[43] These missions also were carried out, at least initially, apparently with the approval of Vasconcelos. The difference here is, however, stark. On the view that Sáenz and Ramirez advocated a Deweyan view of community, their vision would be far more organic, emergent, varied, and democratic than Vasconcelos' elitism allowed.

Community, for Dewey, meant varieties of individual groupings: family, religious order, fraternal group, etc. But the aims and interests of the individual groupings are ultimately conjoint. They are part of the social project of overcoming narrowness, division, and hyper-specialization. Schools, accordingly, are steadying influences wherein diverse topics open up what would otherwise be restrictive repetitions of tradition—what Dewey termed "the dead wood from the past." [44] "The school has the function...of coordinating within the disposition of each individual the diverse influences of the various social environments into which he enters." [45] Schools broaden understanding. Schools enlarge possibilities. Schools provide the space where individuals transactionally construct social and intellectual contexts of inquiry.

Whether Dewey's notion of community directly influenced Sáenz and Ramirez might be questioned. In reading Ramirez' characterization of the work of rural schools, however, there does appear to be a link:

[Rural] schools are working to improve the homes, the food, and the clothing of the peasants; their individual and collective health; their methods of work, to the end of obtaining greater production; they are working to give the people entertainment and recreation, since life in the rural communities is dismal and monotonous .... Only after they have set the former activities going, will you see

them starting the work of teaching reading, writing, arithmetic and other subjects that are the fundamental concern of the traditional schools.[46]

In reading Grubb's characterization of the rural teacher who came out of the missions established by Sáenz and Ramirez, there also appears to be a link between Dewey's understanding of the merged notion of school as society or school as community. Grubb, at length:

The rural teacher is not just a teacher .... He is a government official but the friend of the community. The school itself is not merely an academic institution. Nearly all have a little theatre for the performance of Indian dramas, twenty acres of land, a small farm, a small carpenter's shop, and so on. The development of adult education is encouraged and the rural school teacher pays almost as much attention to the parents as to the children. He is also expected to guide the organisation [sic] of a co-operative, so that it can be worked alongside the school and the community can market its produce co-operatively and buy its necessities co-operatively.[47]

Mary Kay Vaughn reinterprets these cooperatives and indicates the importance of the contexts at the same time as she reveals differing agendas within what developed out of the Ministry of Education and the SEP. On one hand, "the government" (as with Vasconcelos) was committed to order and control. On the other hand, (as with Sáenz and Ramirez) "rural missionaries and teachers often confronted a political power structure reflecting an allocation of resources in conflict with the school's goal of improving the lot of the peasant." [48] As Sáenz and Priestley explain, there was a muddling of governmental order and control, but with Deweyan goals in mind. They write, "Out of a clear sky, a bulletin came forth from the Department of Education ordering all teachers in federal public schools to adopt the project method, to leave behind the old-fashioned ways, and to become modern." [49] How are we to make sense of an order to be democratic or an edict to be organic? For Sáenz, it was initially a problem, but he explained that "it has not turned out so badly after all." [50] In this sense, I question whether the ends and means are conjoint or if the ends justify the means as separate elements in institutional progress. It might be the case that the messy transactions of human exchange sometimes require the kind of starting point to which Sáenz admits. The legitimacy of this point must be determined, however, by the degree to which the individuals in community context actually engage in solving problems they identify—even if the methods employed differ from externally mandated or approved procedures. In other words, to separate the methods from the problems and the problems from the people/community is to make a fatal philosophical mistake.

In an address to physicians in 1927, Dewey lamented the degree to which educational reform repeatedly circles back onto itself without progress, without intelligent action in solving social problems.[51] As though perpetually searching for a short cut around the difficult task that constitutes human learning, schools separate mind and body and reduce complex ideas to formulae and procedures. Dewey is prescient in warning us against adopting so-called "best practices."

A significant weakness of this paper is that I am not fluent in Spanish and, accordingly, have not accessed key original documents, like *El Maestro Rural* or other archival information from the Ministry of Education, to tease out more of the links between Sáenz, Ramirez, and Dewey. Further work should be done to explore the degree to which Ramirez' role heading the Ministry of Education would provide detailed evidence of Dewey's direct influence.[52] I am still struck by the role of Vasconcelos and, given his clear disdain for Dewey, how he would have been supportive of Sáenz and Ramirez if they were promoting Dewey's ideas under his leadership. In an oft-cited passage from Sáenz, we have a record of Dewey's influence on the part of Sáenz:

John Dewey has gone to Mexico. He was first carried there by his pupils at Columbia; he went later in his book—*The School and Society* is a book well known and loved in Mexico. And now he is going there personally. When John Dewey gets to Mexico, he will find his ideas at work in our schools. Motivation, respect for personality, self-expression, vitalization of school work, the project method, learning by doing, democracy in education—all of Dewey is there. Not, indeed, as an accomplished fact, but certainly as a poignant tendency.[53]

Sáenz provides a poetic overview of Dewey's influence, but with one significant caveat: it is not an "accomplished fact." We might read this point as on-going inquiry—as a Deweyan conception of progress as not finished or static. We might also read this point as an admission that the effort was evidenced, but the result was not. It would be hard to fault Sáenz and Ramirez for not "accomplishing" a total transformation of rural schools. Their tenure in the Ministry of Education was relatively short, given that Sáenz and Ramirez resigned in 1934 after Narciso Bassols took over the leadership of the SEP, and the varying contexts make "accomplishment" a false goal anyway.[54] Still, I want to trouble the idea that Dewey was as influential as Sáenz and Ramirez appear to indicate he was. As Palacios notes,

[I]t is difficult to tell to what extent the ideas and concepts put forward by relatively unknown rural teachers were extracted from Sáenz's [and Ramirez's] thinking, or whether it was the other way round, or occurred in a circular process. It may be valid to suggest that Sáenz's [and Ramirez's] work captured and systematised ideas which were in the air, which then became a kind of collective reflection, a discourse in the semiological sense.[55]

By extension, Dewey's influence can also be questioned. In questioning, I am not suggesting he had no influence, but I wonder, with Palacios, how any such influence in rural schooling is demonstrably linked directly to Dewey (or via Sáenz and Ramirez). On the positive side of this point, one can argue that the concept of "community," prominently featured in Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, is evidenced in rural schools. On the more critical side of the argument, correlation is not the same as causation. Dewey's views were certainly known by the three key figures explored in this paper. Vasconcelos, Sáenz, and Ramirez were more than familiar with Dewey's philosophy, even if they differed on its value.[56]

Of all of the passages within this research that stand out for the present day, I cannot get out of my mind the suggestion that teacher training in Deweyan methods can be ordered and successfully carried out. By noting that I cannot get it out of my mind, I do not suggest that it is not possible, but it seems at least inconsistent if not incoherent. How can teacher training, for example, be Deweyan by fiat? Dewey specifically eschewed any primary focus on teacher training and the imposition of external truisms. [57] In relating this point to the concept of community, Dewey argues that "local face-to-face community has been invaded by forces so vast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so complexly indirect in operation that they are, from the standpoint of the members of local social units, unknown." [58]

In the U.S., there is a long history of this sort of external imposition divorced from community and context. Whether it dates to the Sputnik era of cold war competition to *A Nation at Risk* era of global economic competition, from *No Child Left Behind* to *Race to the Top*, Dewey would be greatly disappointed in the lack of communitarian progressivism for which he long argued. [59] It appears Mexico has faced and is facing a similar situation, though different in terms of teacher union strength in the face of increasingly centralized decision-making. [60] The key to changing both the U.S. and Mexican contexts is to reformulate Dewey's idea of democratic community, so that, according to Dewey, "Democracy differs as to its means .... this unity of purpose ... in devotion to the interests of the social organism, is not to be put into man from without. It must begin in the man himself [sic], however much the good and wise of society contribute. Personal responsibility, individual initiation, these are the notes of democracy." [61]

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## Notes

[1] John Dewey, "Mexico, 1926," in William W. Brickman, *John Dewey's Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World: Mexico-China-Turkey, 1929* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University Press, 1964), 124.

[2] Moisés Sáenz and Herbert I. Priestley, *Some Mexican Problems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926) and George I. Sánchez, *Mexico: A Revolution by Education* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936). Other key sources include Frank

Tannenbaum, *Peace by Revolution: An Interpretation of Mexico* (New York: Ayer Company Publishers 1933/1971); Moisés Sáenz and Guy Stevens, *The Mexican Situation* (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1929); José Vasconcelos and Manuel Gamio, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926); Louise Schoenhals, "Mexico Experiments in Rural and Primary Education: 1921-1930," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 44, no. 1 (Feb., 1964): 22-43; George F. Kneller, *The Education of the Mexican Nation* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973; and Regina Cortina, "Globalization, Social Movements, and Education," *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 6 (June 2011): 1196-1213. I mention the brevity of the relevant history because there are many detailed histories of Mexico and Mexican education that go well beyond the scope of this paper. See, for example, Rick A. López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Michael J. Gonzales, *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2002); William H. Beezley and Michael C. Meyer, eds., *The Oxford History of Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Kenneth Grubb, "The Political and Religious Situation in Mexico," *International Affairs*, 14, no. 5 (September-October, 1935): 674-94; Guillermo Palacios, "Postrevolutionary Intellectuals, Rural Readings, and the Shaping of the 'Peasant Problem' in Mexico: *El Maestro Rural, 1932-1934*," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30, no. 2 (May, 1998): 309-39; and John A. Britton, "Urban Education and Social Change in the Mexican Revolution, 1931-1940," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 5, no. 2 (November, 1973): 233-45.

[3] Sanchez, *Mexico*, 3.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Grubb, 675.

[6] Sanchez, *Mexico*, 37. The point here is that individual priests innovated within communities, while the Church as a whole had different, more institutional and parochial goals in mind for schooling.

[7] Ibid. Such schools became predecessors to elementary schools and were closely associated with establishing churches. Literacy, for *indios*, was a means to conversion. Here is where, at least in part, the complexities of context matter most. Individual clerics have been revered by some, because even though they were missionaries for the Catholic Church, a different understanding of Catholicism in Mexico is important for understanding the country and the educational institutions on which this paper focuses.

[8] Ibid., 38.

[9] George F. Kneller, *The Education of the Mexican Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 30.

[10] Ibid., 5.

[11] See, also, John Dewey, "Imperialism is Easy," *New Republic* 50 (1927): 133-34.

[12] Kneller, 33-36. For more on the differences between federalism and centralism in Mexican history, see Michael P. Costeloe, "Federalism to Centralism in Mexico: The Conservative Case for Change, 1834-1835," *The Americas* 45, no. 2 (October, 1988): 173-185; Jaime E. Rodríguez O., "The Struggle for the Nation: The

First Centralist-Federalist Conflict in Mexico," *The Americas* 49, no. 1 (July, 1992): 1-22; and J. Lloyd Mecham, "The Origins of Federalism in Mexico," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 18, no. 2 (May, 1938): 164-182.

[13] Kneller, 36.

[14] *Ibid.* See, also, Sanchez, 50.

[15] Sanchez, 51. One nineteenth century example of a pre-Deweyan experimentalist is the Swiss educator Enrique Rébsamen. His work was seen in the State of Veracruz just prior to the 1890s and in many ways reflected the Swiss theorist Johann Pestalozzi. Sanchez suggests that Rébsamen should be credited with establishing the foundation for the 20th century initiatives that are the primary focus of this paper. He also laments that Rébsamen's work was restricted because of the limits large numbers of people in metropolitan areas represented as boundaries for wider influence. See Sanchez, 51-2. Differently, as David Hansen has questioned, what role do schools play in building a nation-state versus organically developing themselves around the social purposes that originate from their contexts? See Cortina, 1200.

[16] Sanchez, 53.

[17] Schoenhals, 22.

[18] See, also, Jaime Nubiola, "Dewey's Influence in Spain and Latin America," in Larry A. Hickman and Giuseppe Spadafora, eds., *John Dewey's Educational Philosophy in International Perspective: A New Democracy for the Twenty-First Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009): 143-158, 150.

[19] Grubb, 682.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] See, for example, Regina Cortina, "Globalization, Social Movements, and Education," *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 6 (June 2011): 1196-1213; Alexander S. Dawson, "From Models for the Nation to Model Citizens: Indigenismo and the 'Revindication' of the Mexican Indian, 1920-1940," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30, no. 2 (May 1998): 279-308, 300; Alexander S. Dawson, "Wild Indians, 'Mexican Gentleman,' and the Lessons Learned in the *Casa del Estudiante Indígena*, 1926-1932," *The Americas* 57, no. 3 (January, 2001): 329-61; and Schoenhals, *op. cit.*

[22] Stanley D. Ivie, "A Comparison in Educational Philosophy: Jose Vasconcelos and John Dewey," *Comparative Education Review* 10, no. 3 (October, 1966): 404-17, 406ff.

[23] Patrick Romanell, "Bergson in Mexico: A Tribute to José Vasconcelos," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 21, no. 4 (June, 1961): 501-13, 503.

[24] Ronald Hilton, "José Vasconcelos," *The Americas* 7, no. 4 (April, 1951): 395-412, 395.

[25] Robert Redfield, "The Indian in Mexico," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 208 (March, 1940): 132-43, 141.

[26] Britton, 243.

[27] The sheer number of times Vasconcelos fled the country, returned, and fled again would take too many pages in this paper. While he was far from alone in facing this sort of upheaval, his story may provide some insight into his ultimate conservative turn in favor of universals and stability over the vicissitudes of progressivism. See, for example, Hilton, *op. cit.*

[28] Edgar Sheffield Brightman, "Don José Vasconcelos," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 7, no. 3 (March, 1947): 453-60, 456. Brightman is quoting Vasconcelos' *Lógica Orgánica* (México City: El Colegio National, 1945), 218.

[29] Hilton, 401. For a more complete treatment of Vasconcelos' philosophy, see Romanell, Brightman, and Ivie, *op. cit.*

[30] López, 135. Continuing the variety of ironies, López further notes that an "irony of Rivera's critique is that it was Vasconcelos's criticisms of Rivera's earlier art as insufficiently Mexican that had spurred (and paid) the artist to look more closely at the land and people so that he might develop a new aesthetic language for expressing *mexicanidad*." (135)

[31] José Vasconcelos and Manuel Gamio, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (Chicago, 1926); and José Vasconcelos, *El Desastre* (Mexico City, 1938).

[32] López, 134. See, also, 75-107.

[33] Redfield, 141. Emphasis added.

[34] Hilton, 401.

[35] As Romanell notes, "Whatever misgivings we may have about the later Vasconcelos for his conservative turn of mind, there is no doubt that the early Vasconcelos became in 1910, with his *Grito del Ateneo* against Positivism, the Father Hidalgo of Mexican Philosophy." (503) The problem with identifying Dewey as a positivist is that it is simply mistaken. Dewey's view of science was as a tool for problem-solving, not the elevation of science to scientism qua positivism. See, for example, David L. Hildebrandt, *Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism: John Dewey and the Neopragmatists* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003): 8-40; Peter T. Manicas, "Pragmatic Philosophy of Science and the Charge of Scientism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 24, no. 4 (1988): 179-222; and Benjamin Baez and Deron Boyles, *The Politics of Inquiry: Education, Research, and the "Culture of Science"* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009): 35-69.

[36] José Vasconcelos, *From Robinson to Ulysses*, quoted in Reinhardt, 330, but without full citation.

[37] José Vasconcelos, *The Danger of Dewey*, quoted in Reinhardt, 331, but without full citation.

[38] While it may be beyond the scope of this paper, it seems that Vasconcelos concludes too hastily that Dewey actually advocated busy hands as preparation for industrial tasks. Dewey did not argue for the kind of vocationalism that results in mere job training. Dewey argued for "occupations," in the general sense of "projects," but not as a narrow, myopically-focused careerism. These "occupations" were generative inquiries out of which came solutions to actual problems, begetting more problems and more solutions, etc. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916): 180-276. For more on the possible link to Dewey and the International Institute of Teachers College, Columbia, see Liping Bu, "International Activism and Comparative Education: Pioneering Efforts of the International Institute of Teachers College, Columbia University," *Comparative Education Review* 41, no. 4 (November, 1997): 413-34.

[39] For an even more critical interpretation of Vasconcelos's efforts, see Mary Kay Vaughn, "Education and Class in the Mexican Revolution," *Latin American Perspectives* 2, no. 2 (Summer, 1975): 17-33, 23ff.

[40] Kneller, 46. There is some confusion in the literature regarding the specific date of Vasconcelos's ascendancy to the Ministry of Education. Hilton notes that the "university scene was too small for so restless and imaginative man [as Vasconcelos], and in 1919 he left the university to become the first Minister of Education, a post he held until 1924." Hilton, 400. Kneller notes 1921 as the beginning. See Kneller, 46. Sáenz and Priestly indicate that "the central government started its nation-wide program of schools in 1920." (64)

[41] Grubb, 683.

[42] *Ibid.* Grubb also notes that "In 1928 the total number of primary schools in Mexico was 17,453; to-day [1935] the total number is in the neighborhood of 20,000. The number of pupils has risen since 1928 by nearly 400,000. Twenty-three per cent [sic] of the schools in 1928 depended directly on the Federal Government, to-day the figure is thirty-nine per cent. In 1910 seventy per cent of the population was illiterate, in 1930 the figure was said to have dropped to fifty-nine per cent." (684) See, also, Sáenz and Priestley, 79-84.

[43] See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1973/1990): 28-56.

[44] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 24.

[45] *Ibid.*, 22.

[46] Rafael Ramirez, "Mexico and Certain Aspects of Its Rural and Indian Education," address before the Columbia University Field Course in Mexico, August 15, 1935, quoted in Alethea H. Washington, "The American Problem of Rural Education," *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 3 (July, 1936): 422-29, 425.

[47] Grubb, 684. Grubb goes on to judge, in a biased way, the limitation of such a co-operative: "The co-operatives are the weakest part of the whole scheme," he determines, "because moral stamina is required to run them, and this is not very prevalent in Latin America." Such an overgeneralization is partly what Sáenz and Ramirez were working against—instead championing the possibility of cooperation in community context, racial and social bias was a substantial hurdle to overcome.

[48] Mary Kay Vaughn, "Education and Class in the Mexican Revolution," *Latin American Perspectives* 2, no. 2 (Summer, 1975): 17-33, 28. "Moisés Sáenz, who played a key role in the Calles era, was a proponent of the applied social sciences and the delineator of the notion of the ... school of socialization with a bourgeois framework." (29)

[49] Sáenz and Priestley, 79.

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] John Dewey, "Body and Mind," *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 4 (1928): 3-19.

[52] This point was convincingly made by Guillermo Hurtado, Director of El Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, at the John Dewey in Mexico Conference, January 13, 2012.

[53] Sáenz and Priestley, 76. This passage is repeatedly noted in the literature as an indication of Dewey's influence. See, for example, Nubiola, 150; and Cortina, 1200.

[54] For a more detailed account, see Guillermo Palacios, "Postrevolutionary Intellectuals, Rural Readings and the Shaping of the 'Peasant Problem' in Mexico: *El Maestro Rural*, 1932-1934, op. cit. According to Hurtado, Ramirez ascended to the head of the Ministry after Bassols.

[55] Guillermo Palacios, "Postrevolutionary Intellectuals, Rural Readings and the Shaping of the 'Peasant Problem' in Mexico: *El Maestro Rural*, 1932-1934, 314.

[56] Palacios suggests that Sáenz was deeply influenced by the "anarchic-populist writings of R. Flores Magón." See Palacios, "Postrevolutionary Intellectuals," 326n.

[57] Dewey wrote that "Professional education has its results limited and twisted because of the general state of education. Surveying that, it appears that its improvement cannot be made merely by better training of teachers. Parents, school officials, taxpayers have the last word, and the character of that work is dependent upon their education. They may and do block or deflect the best laid plans. That is the circle in which education moves .... It is as if no one could be educated in the full sense until everyone is developed beyond the reach of prejudice, stupidity, and apathy." See Dewey, "Mind and Body," 17-18.

[58] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), 131.

[59] See David E. Price, "Community and Control: Critical Democratic Theory in the Progressive Period," *The American Political Science Review* 68, no. 4 (December, 1974): 1663-78, esp. 1671ff.

[60] Lucrecia Santibañez, Georges Vernez, and Paula Razquin, *Education in Mexico: Challenges and Opportunities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005).

[61] John Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy," in *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882-1898*, vol. 1, ed., Jo Ann Boydson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969): 227-49, 243-44; Axel Honneth and John M. M. Farrell, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of the Democracy Today," *Political Theory* 26, no. 6 (December, 1998): 763-783; and Gerald L. Steibel, "Education: Now and to Come: John Dewey and the Belief in Communication," *The Antioch Review* 15, no. 3 (Autumn, 1955): 286-99.