



Student Culture

and Identity

at a Mexican

WE ARE ALL EQUAL

Bradley A. U. Levinson

Secondary School,

1988–1998

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which constitutes an extension of the copyright page.

To Joan Pearl Levinson,

Arcadia Rangel, Ofelia Hernández,

and Debra Susan Unger Levinson—

strong and heartfelt women, across

cultures and generations

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PREFACE

My mother's hand has always moved with special grace when pointing or waving; she would have made a fine parade queen or even First Lady. Not long ago, I rediscovered this technique of hers while watching a video compilation of my family's early super-eight home movies. She was in her late teens, on vacation with her father and stepmother, strutting around a varied Mexican landscape: here she overlooks a broad bay (Acapulco? Puerto Vallarta?), pointing toward a large ship; there she stands in a Mexico City square, drawing attention to what seems to be an Aztec revival dance, Indians chanting and swaying; there again she stalks the great pyramids at Teotihuacán, her broad smile and motioning hand shadowed by the Temple of the Sun.

These images of my young mother came as something of a shock. Sure, she had occasionally mentioned her trip to Mexico. Sure, she had worked for several years as a bilingual teacher's aide at an elementary school, keeping her basic Spanish intact. And yes, a part of my *father's* extended family had lived briefly in northern Mexico—our cousins fluent in Spanish because of an unforeseen immigration detour. And yes, finally, I had my own fleeting history of contact with Mexico: quick family trips to Baja California, the somber Spanish cadences of our housecleaner's weekly visit, a few Mexican kids in my high school and baseball league with whom I made passing acquaintance. I had nevertheless persisted in

my convenient self-image: the thirty-something cultural anthropologist whose specialization in Mexican studies served as a symbolic rupture with his suburban Jewish California roots.

My family emigrated from Eastern Europe, my grandmothers arriving from Ukraine as very young girls. Immigration officials at Ellis Island had bestowed my great-grandfather the last name of Gibbons because, so the story goes, he misunderstood when they asked for his last name and could only think to give the name of his cousin's street in Denver—his final destination. At home and in the synagogue, I adopted the tale of the Jews as a diasporic people destined to build a life from the ground up wherever we might land. In the histories of Europe and elsewhere, we were one of the great cultural “others,” perennially condemned to a life on the persecuted margins or else a long struggle to “pass” into the center. Yet in the home video, I recognized another dimension of this history: an image of the Jew as triumphant, confident consumer of other cultural worlds. The filmed trip to Mexico was for me an important sign that my grandfather had made it to the center and thereby acquired a key privilege of U.S. citizenship: the right to consume the Other symbolically. And there was my mother, sweet charm aside, casting too this imperial gaze. To what extent was my own personal journey, then, the outcome rather than the antithesis of this historical-cultural trajectory? What was I trying to learn about myself, what awareness was I questioning or consolidating, as I set out to encounter the “otherness” of a Mexican school?

This book is the product of my long familiarity with a Mexican secondary school (*secundaria*) and its surrounding community. I first met some of the teachers and students at this school in 1985, and I have conducted ethnographic research there on and off since 1988, for a total of some two years of residence and observation. Yet rather than starting with the school itself, I've chosen to present personal vignettes that both provide the reader with a sense of the author and present emblematic issues in the book: self versus other, sameness versus difference, justice versus privilege, personal advancement versus collective solidarity, nationalism versus globalization. As I explore the ways such issues play themselves out in the lives of different Mexican secondary school students, I also examine my own relation to them.

I've often fancied myself an activist for progressive causes concerned with peace and social justice. In high school, I wrote anguished poetry and

worried about the Bomb and world hunger. In college, I protested the 1982 invasion of Grenada and canvassed homes for the nuclear freeze movement. Between classes and Buddhist meditation sittings, I volunteered at the Resource Center for Nonviolence in Santa Cruz, California, and gathered signatures on behalf of Mexican farmworkers in the southern part of the county (victims of excessive work and pesticide poisoning). As a protest against the use of Central American beef, whose production is still responsible for the ongoing decimation of primary rain forest, I even helped launch a graphic form of guerrilla theater in front of a local Burger King: we mocked up a two-person beef steer that walked around eating leaves and crapping Whoppers. In all of this I expressed my political ideals, my horror at the shortsighted selfishness and crass individualism of U.S. society, and my hope for a more just world.

April 1995: I am teaching an upper-division anthropology of education course at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. My students have read *Learning Capitalist Culture* by Douglas Foley and *Jocks and Burnouts* by Penelope Eckert. These books describe the painful factionalism of U.S. high school student culture, the class- and race-inflected divisions that often seal the fates of educational careers. Today, we are discussing a draft of my article that describes the “culture of equality” at a Mexican secondary school, with its emphasis on unity and solidarity (see chapter 4). The students surprise me by condemning the uniformity and, as they put it, “pressure to conform” in the school; they think the Mexican school has taken away students’ freedom of choice and expression. In light of the prior readings, I had expected a more sympathetic reception to the Mexican teachers’ and students’ attempts to transcend their differences. Yet my students challenge my obviously admiring, perhaps romantic portrait of Mexican solidarity; they see it as an apology for heavy-handed limits on self-expression.

April 1998: I am a special visitor at an ethnically diverse, lower-income junior high school class in Chula Vista, California, near San Diego. The school has decided just this year to institute a uniform policy: dark blue pants with white tops and a dark sweater or jacket. To begin a conversation about Mexican schools and students, I ask these students what they think about the new rules at their own school. Most of them grumble about having to wear uniforms, and when I probe further, one girl says in tones of great exasperation, “They keep us from expressing ourselves.” The

students seem incredulous that their Mexican counterparts would want to wear uniforms in order to keep costs down and minimize the perception of differences among their classmates.

November 1996: I have been asked to participate as a discussant at a small Indianapolis conference on the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement since its inception in 1993. My panel is on “national identity and cultural perceptions.” I share some of the data I’ve collected on summer field trips in 1993 and 1995, especially those that reflect parents’ and teachers’ concerns over the influx of U.S. values through the media. Mexican youth in the region where I do my research have increasingly raised challenges to parental and school authority. Adults seem worried that youth have little allegiance to the Mexican nation, little interest in working for the common good. In the course of my presentation I must have made reference to the negative influence of “American individualism” because, at the break, an older man comes over to confront me. He asks if I’m a cultural anthropologist, and I confirm this. Then he wonders aloud how I can so easily sacrifice my “objectivity” about U.S. society and culture. He scolds me for abandoning the anthropological standard of cultural relativism for my own society, for making clear my critique of individualism. “Did it really come across that way?” I ask. “Your sympathies? Yes, loud and clear, loud and clear,” he replies. I begin to consider what kind of personal and political drama I’m playing out through my Mexican research, why I so readily identify with Mexicans’ emphasis on family and group loyalty, and their worries about U.S. individualism. I also reflect on whether my interlocutor is right: Have I conveniently abandoned the principle of cultural relativism, or have I merely suspended it in order to evaluate more critically my “own” culture and thereby take a stand in a contentious world of multiple differences? As the day wears on, however, I’m less inclined to lament my own contradictions. I surmise from his other comments that far from being “objective” himself, this man has an ideological ax to grind. His is a free enterprise dream that assumes the fittest cultural ideas will survive in the global marketplace. From this frankly neoliberal perspective, U.S. individualism represents the freedom all humanity desires; its diffusion will be the liberal linchpin sweeping away the archaic and authoritarian structures of the past.

When ordinary Mexicans hear about my research, they often solicit my assessment of their educational system: How are our schools doing? they

inquire. Are we far behind the United States? I give varying responses, presenting myself as a sociologist interested in social relations, not quite qualified to pass judgment on curricular or pedagogical matters (anthropologists in Mexico, as elsewhere perhaps, are typically perceived as experts only on matters of folklore, and indigenous and prehistoric cultures). When they press me, I tell them it depends on the school, the subject, and the teacher, but in world history and geography, it seems, Mexicans are well beyond the United States. In mathematics and language, they may be equal; in the natural sciences, perhaps behind. These are all gross speculations. I suggest that the social and aesthetic components of education are much richer in Mexico. There is a greater concern with educating the whole person in the *secundaria*. Students learn more about the art of getting along and appreciating the world. In the United States, subject matter reigns supreme. Most Mexicans nod knowingly at this message, smiling and taking pride, but they still worry about the level of educational quality. They've been told that the global economy requires a higher-caliber education. They sense themselves now in a competitive system, and they want to know about their chances for survival in the new world order.

When U.S. citizens hear about my research, they tend to assert rather than ask: Things are kind of backward down there, huh?

Ethnography refers to the research process originally developed by anthropologists—long-term participant observation and interviewing designed to understand local social relations and cultural worlds. The kind of work represented in this book can best be called “critical ethnography,” and one important component of any critical ethnography is a high degree of reflexivity about the process of doing research. In ethnographic work, specifically, reflexivity implies awareness of the ethnographer's self in the social order and in the construction of knowledge about that order (Shacklock and Smyth 1998). Some critics suggest that too much reflexivity threatens to occlude the real subject of our research, and I have thus sought a balance between self-disclosure and analytic description (see Foley 1998). Following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, I am wary of overly personalistic forms of reflexivity that fail to examine the social *position* of the researcher, and the intellectual presuppositions that make possible certain forms of analysis and critique (Wacquant 1992, 36–41). Yet I also believe that field research calls forth rather more idiosyncratic attributes that are not entirely reducible to a social position. Thus, I have

attempted to be honest about how my prior ideological and political commitments led me to “select” the field and might still lead me to favor certain interpretations of the data over others. I have also tried to allow the emerging relationships, insights, and dynamics of the fieldwork itself guide my interpretations (Levinson 1998c). Like the ethnographers I admire most, I have endeavored to let the field surprise me. Rather than provide a separate account of my “fieldwork journey” (Lareau and Schultz 1996), I write myself into the many surprises the field offered up.

What does it mean to do ethnography in a critical way? In the field of educational studies alone, this question has occasioned quite a discussion, a whole politics of “the critical.”¹ Whatever definition they espouse, most scholars would agree that critical ethnography denotes a research method *informed* by a critical theory of some sort, *committed* to an analysis of domination and the search for an alternative project of social justice, and *enacted* through a constantly reflexive approach to the practice of gathering data and generating knowledge.² My own practice draws from a variety of theoretical sources. I eschew the rigid distinction between so-called emancipatory and hermeneutic knowledge, preferring instead to adopt an eclectic stance I call “critical interpretivism.”³

The challenge of writing and reading such a text bears some mention. In any work of cultural interpretation, the author must remain faithful to the situated meanings of his/her subjects’ lives, yet render those meanings intelligible, perhaps even sympathetic, to a broader audience. This act of translation carries numerous risks. It becomes especially problematic when the potential audience includes an enormous variety of readers (such as schoolteachers, university students, and professional academic colleagues) in several different countries (including Mexico). Even among my colleagues, I aspire to build conceptual bridges across disciplines and discursive fields that frequently do not meet—anthropology, sociology, comparative education, cultural studies, and Latin American studies. How to write a compelling, edifying account for these many readers? How to build “theory”—a way of conceptualizing the world—into the flow of the text? Here again I have sought to strike a balance. Some readers may resent the abundance of scholarly quotes and citations, but they are necessary to make conceptual connections. The level of discourse may shift at times, but generally I have sacrificed the subtler points of scholarly exposition for a more fluid, engaging narrative. Most of the explicit theoretical discussion has been set apart in the concluding chapter and a substantial appendix. The careful reader, of course, will note that theory is woven

throughout the text. For instance, the regular mention of the “past” in an ethnographic study of the “present” advances an implicit theory of historical conditioning and cultural particularity. Such historical grounding is often absent in studies of U.S. or European student culture, where so many of the cultural assumptions historically sedimented in contemporary institutions are taken for granted (Varenne and McDermott 1998). Likewise, a theory about the relation between institutional structure and forms of subjectivity is exemplified, indeed made manifest, in the very titles of the chapters and the order of my historical-ethnographic narrative.

A mention may be necessary about a few other textual devices I’ve seen fit to employ. First, in order to protect my informants, I have given pseudonyms to the school, the city where it is located, and all the persons comprising my research. Such anonymity may seem unusual to some historians and anthropologists, though it is customary practice in most educational research. Many of my Mexican informants found it unusual as well. No doubt this strategy has required me to jettison a good deal of local historical and cultural detail in my account, a loss I do not take lightly. Still, this research was originally conducted under the supervision of the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, for whom I submitted a research design emphasizing confidentiality. During the fieldwork itself, I always assured participants that their responses would remain confidential. Few could imagine what harm might come to them should such a promise be breached, yet education is a politically and emotionally charged field in Mexico. Some of the statements and actions I report here can be controversial indeed, and might damage careers or reputations if they were to be associated with specific persons. Thus, I have chosen to maintain their anonymity.

I had also originally hoped to provide bilingual readers with much of the original Spanish from interviews and observations so they might independently assess my translations and interpretations. In the end, such a strategy made the manuscript too costly and cumbersome. Nonetheless, I have retained the original Spanish for a number of phrases and quotes, especially those given by students themselves, in cases where the use of language is either difficult to translate or significant for my analysis of discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

Questions and Methods

for a Study of Student Culture

Todos somos iguales. We are all equal. How many times had the students spoken some version of this phrase to me, and in how many different contexts? In my early fieldwork at this secondary school, I dutifully noted it down, but not until about halfway through the research did I realize just how pervasive the phrase was.

How, when, and where did this phrase crop up? In many cases, students asserted *todos somos iguales* in response to some prompt of mine. They brought it up in discussions I initiated about group dynamics, teacher favoritism, or a number of other school-related topics. I was struck by the way the students unanimously and vehemently rejected my suggestions that teachers might discriminate against students by ethnicity, class, or gender. Sometimes the students smuggled the words in obliquely, to mask how certain students appeared to be rejected by their classmates or to justify wearing the same school uniform every day. Sometimes they used the expression spontaneously, in heated conversation with other students or in explaining something when I had not even broached the subject. In every case, students said it with a kind of insistence, an urgency, that always caught my attention. It was as if they were trying to convince themselves and their classmates, as well as me, that it were true. It was as if they were at once affirming and ordering their experience.

The rhetorical assertion of equality required me to rethink many of the

expectations I had carried into the field. I would be forced to work things out, as my Mexican friends might say, *sobre la marcha*—as I went along. After all, I had come to this Mexican secondary school expecting to find deep class and racial divisions reflected in student talk and action. I was on the lookout for discourses of difference, and thought such discourses would privilege certain students. I was expecting student subcultures to be structured around these notions of difference and to channel some students' aspirations while squelching others. Instead, the assertion of equality gave me a figurative slap in the face. I looked more closely and found that students valued their similarities more than their differences. Even as some students formed exclusive friendship groups and made occasionally disparaging comments toward fellow students, the discourse of equality continued to undermine the dynamics of social division.

What I had discovered were some of the key symbolic resources for students to play what I call a cultural "game" of equality. Students appropriated teachers' discourses on equality, and organizational structures of solidarity, to produce their own strategic solidarity and identification, often directed toward specific material and ideological ends in the classroom. Students also took up these discourses in an effort to maneuver about in the sea of social differences among themselves. Mostly as individuals, but sometimes as members of informal friendship groups, students negotiated their positions in the game of equality, embracing, modifying, or even rejecting its rules along the way. The play of *todos somos iguales* probably acted to forestall or arrest the emergence of distinct and oppositional student subcultures. It provided students with an important common idiom through which to position their identities.¹

How and why does this culture, this game of equality, arise at a provincial Mexican secondary school, and how and why does it help create common identifications among students across significant social differences? What are the organizational and discursive resources students appropriate to construct this culture? What is its power and influence relative to the moral forces of family, church, workplace, and other sites of adult authority? To what extent and in what manner does the school-based culture become part of students' broader identities and aspirations, playing a part in the trajectories their lives take? How, then, does the school as an institution participate in structuring students' life opportunities and positions? Such questions emerge most pointedly out of a body of scholarly literature known as social and cultural reproduction theory in education (see appendix A for details). Reproduction theory has

sought to explain how schools in modern class societies contribute to the perpetuation—the “reproduction”—of structured inequalities between groups defined by class, race, gender, or other characteristics. Early studies in reproduction theory emphasized the work the school accomplishes in unjustly sorting students and preparing them differentially for their existing places in life. More recent research has shown the complexities and contradictions in how schools “work,” and has highlighted the way students creatively respond to the contexts of school. Students make meaning out of their schooling experience; through interaction with parents, teachers, and other students, they construct aspirations and enduring identities. In addition to the subject matter, they learn to be certain kinds of persons, and this learning carries over into their subsequent lives.

Here, I pay particular attention to the dynamics of class, ethnicity, and gender in Mexico. I show how school practices in turn both differentiate and unify students according to such characteristics. The work of the school is indeed complex, and is perhaps poorly accounted for by reproduction theory. Yet more crucial still is the creative student response. Students draw on existing class, ethnic, and gender identities to make sense of school, but they also form new kinds of identities within, and sometimes against, school structures and discourses. The cultural game of equality becomes an important crucible for students to work out their position vis-à-vis school, hence their position in society more generally.

This book attempts to account for the sociocultural world in which the phrase *todos somos iguales* has great meaning. It is an account of how relations are structured at a Mexican secondary school such that equality is a major concern to its many participants. I aim to show not that *todos somos iguales* is necessarily true or false but that it circulates as a normative claim within a broad economy of meanings, and therefore enters into students’ identities and aspirations. Equality becomes part of a strategic and serious “game” students play, a purposeful practice that draws together students’ social backgrounds and personal goals in a field of power and identity.² Like the anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1996, 12–16), I view Escuela Secundaria Federal (ESF) students as historical actors involved in “serious games.” In attempting to overcome the binarism of previous theories of structure and agency, Ortner coins this phrase to show

that social life is culturally organized and constructed, in terms of defining categories of actors, rules and goals of the games, and so forth; that social life is precisely social, consisting of webs of relationship and

interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous “agents”; and yet at the same time there is “agency,” that is, actors play with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence. The idea that the game is “serious” is meant to add into the equation the idea that power and inequality pervade the games of life in multiple ways, and that, while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes of these games are often very high. (12)

Theorists like Norbert Elias (in Goudsblom and Mennell 1998) and Pierre Bourdieu (1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) have also employed the metaphor of games to conceptualize practice.³ The metaphor of playing a game is especially appropriate for the adolescent context of the Mexican *secundaria*, where highjinks and humor permeate daily life. Yet the game of equality is, in an important sense, also the game of life in the town of San Pablo—the intersubjective positioning of self in and around the local school, and the ensuing consequences for personal careers and socio-economic trajectories. The rules and resources of the game both enable and constrain (see Giddens 1979; Varenne and McDermott 1998), and the immediate play of identity in the contexts of school life is inexorably linked to the broader temporal and spatial structures of political economy.

In this ethnography of Mexican student culture and identity formation, the scene shifts quite frequently, ranging from microanalyses of classroom and street interactions to the national educational bureaucracy and global flows of popular culture. My primary concern is with students’ forms of action and self-expression in the context of the school and the community where it is located, as well as later in the students’ lives, in circumstances as disparate as law school or an agricultural field in the state of Oregon. Yet before I can focus my analysis squarely on the students, I must situate them geographically, historically, structurally, and institutionally.

Thus, in the first part of the book, I chart the broad historical, political, and institutional contexts for discourses of equality and solidarity. I try to account for the Mexican State’s involvement in providing such symbolic resources for student culture. In chapter 1, I undertake a history of the Mexican *secundaria* in relation to Mexican political economy, educational philosophy, and state formation. The chapter charts the central importance of shifting concepts of adolescence, solidarity, and equality in the development of the *secundaria*, and ends with a brief historical sketch of the region of San Pablo and the school, *ESF*, where I did my fieldwork.

Chapter 2 tells the story of my own journey to San Pablo: my first visit in 1985, subsequent ones in 1988 and 1989—when I began formulating the research project—and my arrival in 1990 for a full year of fieldwork. I also discuss pertinent aspects of the history of the region around San Pablo, and describe the school, city, and region in terms of social class, economy, and population growth. Chapter 3 picks up from the historical account of ESF and continues the ethnographic journey through the beginning of the school year to see just what kind of institution the students encountered. What did teachers say and do, and how was the school week and year organized? What kinds of contexts made up the institutional structure—the concrete practices and discourses framing students’ experience in the school? Among other things, I examine what the school looks and feels like to incoming students; how and why teachers form students into socially and academically diverse cohorts (*grupos escolares*) that stay together for most classes and activities through all three years of secondary study; the school’s layout, and regular round of rituals and routines; the patterns of curriculum, evaluation, and pedagogical practice among teachers; and the components of the school’s “gender regime” given by teacher example and expectation.

Having set the ethnographic scene, and rendered intelligible the historical and institutional contexts for student action, in chapter 4 I shift to the ethnographic account of such action. The narrative focuses on how and why students constructed a “cultural game of equality” in the *grupo escolar*. I describe what life was like in each of the four *grupos* I chose for intensive study. Then I demonstrate the means and effects of a *grupo*-based cultural game of equality, including a powerful “ethic of solidarity,” and cultural forms like “passing homework” (*pasando la tarea*) and “goofing off” (*echando relajo*). In chapter 5, I provide a profile of socialization sites and patterns outside the school in order to give the reader a clearer sense of the range of social differences converging in the school. Then the discussion shifts back to the school, where I examine how the construction of *grupo* identity and solidarity complements a *school* identification, produced in relation to other local schools, as well as a *schooled* identity, produced in relation to the relatively unschooled. The remainder of the chapter presents ethnographic descriptions of how the schooled identity works to structure relationships, aspirations, and desires in and out of school. Chapter 6 highlights the tensions and contradictions in students’ appropriations and uses of the meanings of solidarity and equality. The chapter opens with portraits of several students and their friend-

ship groups, and moves on to analyze the way notions of equality and solidarity limit, but do not prohibit, the expression of class, ethnic, gender, and age differences in student culture. I present evidence of an emerging youth culture based on the consumption of cultural media, and show how this youth culture provides yet another arena for the structuring of equality and difference among students. Finally, I end the chapter with a specific focus on female students' orientations to school achievement and romantic attachment, and their correspondingly ambiguous strategies for social empowerment. Because structures of gender inequality continue to privilege men over women in Mexico, the analysis of gender relations must especially account for how and why young women struggle to carve out meaningful life options for themselves.

Chapter 7 shifts gears and extends the temporal range of the study. It opens with observations about the changes that San Pablo has undergone in the six years from 1991 to 1997, especially the deepening economic crisis. It then moves on to an update of the twenty-two focal students in the study, developing in-depth portraits of eight focal students, four males and four females. In chapter 8, I weave together a synopsis of my findings with prior work in the field, proposing new formulations of the relation between student subjectivity and school structure, and modifying cultural reproduction theory for the unique Mexican case. In so doing, I answer the questions posed earlier and provide an account of the contingencies that influenced students' trajectories after their secundaria years. Finally, I stress the comparative importance of the case, and the illumination it provides for questions of education and identity not only in Mexico but elsewhere, too.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODS AND SCHOOL SITE

I wanted to do a single study of difference in state schooling, so it was imperative that I find a school significantly heterogeneous in class, ethnic, and gender terms. This only seemed possible in a small city like San Pablo, since secundarias in both the larger metropolises and smaller towns tend to greater homogeneity. Because there was no high-quality private alternative in San Pablo, and because there were no geographic restrictions on enrollment, ESF had a rather heterogeneous student body. Students from the wealthiest and poorest families alike clamored to enroll at ESF, which boasted a regional prominence and longevity (since 1941) no other local secundaria could match.

Like most urban schools in Mexico, ESF was divided into morning and afternoon shifts (*turnos*) that shared the same principal and several of the same teachers, but that effectively functioned as two separate schools. I concentrated my efforts on the morning shift, whose class composition tended to be more heterogeneous than either the afternoon shift at ESF or the other two public secundarias in town, where the lower classes prevailed. The morning shift at ESF included children from San Pablo's monied, professional, skilled, and unskilled working classes, as well as some 13 percent who lived in outlying towns and villages, and so traveled daily to attend school. In addition, the morning shift had a higher proportion of girls to boys than any other public secundaria.

I chose to focus my research on the secundaria and not some other educational level for several reasons. The secundaria—or the level of schooling called *educación media básica* in Mexico—expanded drastically in the 1960s and 1970s, incorporating new social groups that had been previously excluded. Yet there has always been a high drop out rate between the first and third years of secundaria, and in recent years, overall enrollment has been declining in some areas, including the one where I did the study. Secundaria is also the last point in the Mexican “basic education” cycle.⁴ After secundaria, students must choose between several different options, including college preparatories, vocational schools, “business” courses (*comercio*), and secretarial or cosmetological schools (see figure 1). Finally, most authors in the literature on student cultures have identified early adolescence as the period when strong subcultural identification often begins to develop. Social psychological processes of identity formation at this age encourage students to define themselves as members of distinct groups, over and against other groups (Woods 1990; Eckert 1989). This is crucial for understanding what students make of social difference in the school.

Of all the students in the school, I focused especially on the third graders, in their last year of secundaria (ninth grade in U.S. terms). I did this for two reasons. First, by their third year, students were likely to have gained a high degree of social competence in, and a high level of knowledge about, the rules and meanings of secondary schooling. Students were formed into *grupos escolares* that remained together in virtually every class period for all three years (see chapters 3 and 4). Thus, by their third and final year, students were likely to have developed well-defined strategies for negotiating the maze of requirements, expectations, and rules constituting the institutional structure of the school. They came to know

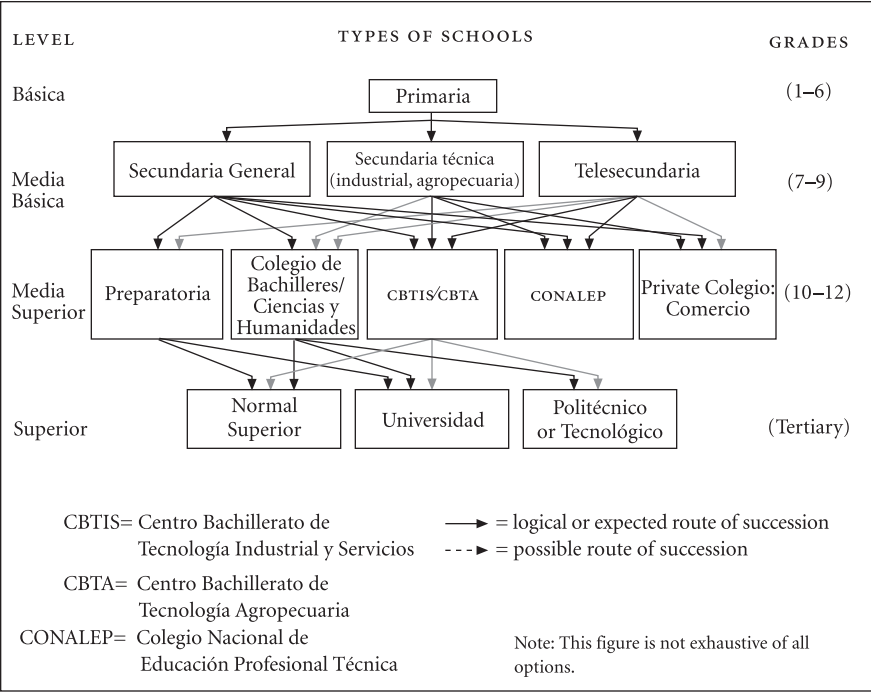


Fig. 1. Major options and paths in Mexican schooling, 1991

individual teachers well, and had learned the limits of accepted behavior for each one of them, as well as for the school more generally. Perhaps most important of all, third-year students, organized into *grupos escolares*, had come to know their fellow classmates in some intimate detail.

The second reason I chose to concentrate on third-year students was the imminence of rather difficult and determining decisions. Because they had to soon decide whether to continue studying, and if so, at what type of school, the third year was pivotal for these students (Mir 1979, 107). I expected the dynamics of identity and cultural production to have a strong impact on the formation of educational and occupational aspirations.

After two previous brief research forays (a total of five weeks during June and July of 1988; another four weeks during September and October of 1989), I arrived in San Pablo in the early summer of 1990 and took up residence in the home of two teachers from ESF. During most of the summer, I sought to make contact with students I had met during the previous trips. In August, when all the teachers were returning for administrative tasks and students were coming to enroll, I began spending more time around the school, observing parent-teacher interactions, attending

teacher meetings, and sitting in on special exams for the previous year's failed students. Because of my familiarity with the community and previous research clearance with school authorities, I was allowed virtually unconstrained access to all facets of school life, including classrooms, office dynamics, teacher union meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. I was also given access to all relevant school and student records, and collected a number of site documents, such as exams, informational flyers, memos, and political pamphlets. I also gathered what material I could about the school's social and institutional history, and interviewed several teachers about the same.

For most of the school year, from late August to late June, I was engaged in participant observation at the school. This chiefly involved classroom and playground observations, where I paid special attention to four of the six third-year grupos escolares (chapter 4). I also participated in extracurricular activities, attending parties, dances, church services, sports events, civic ceremonies, and study groups.

By early October, after more than a month of participant observation, I began choosing some twenty focal students for the study. I tried to select students I had met during previous trips, or who had shown some interest or confidence in me when I began my observations. In some cases, I sought to deliberately cultivate trust with those students I initially judged interesting or problematic. These twenty students ultimately represented a full range of backgrounds, dispositions, and academic records in the school. Ten were girls and ten were boys; some were judged by teachers and their peers to be "good" students, others "bad," still others "average"; some were clearly rebellious, constantly challenging teachers' authority, while others seemed more compliant; some were poor, others moderately comfortable, others part of a local elite. Moreover, the twenty were fairly evenly distributed across the four grupos escolares I had decided to study. Over the course of the year, I extensively interviewed each of these students at least twice, sometimes three times. I asked them questions about their personal and educational histories, and encouraged them to discuss their experiences since the last time we had spoken. My aim here was to fathom what events or experiences were salient to them in their young lives. Besides the interviews, I made particular note of these students during my observations. The observations provided an important angle on student concerns, and thus complemented the perspectives that emerged in interviews.

It must be said that as the year progressed, some of these relationships

fared better than others. To be sure, a few students became more reticent during and after the first interview than I had anticipated. Perhaps it was not what they had expected (beyond the chance to skip part of a class for the interview) or perhaps the novelty soon wore off. (In some cases, I conducted the first interviews in the presence of a friend in order to lighten the atmosphere.) A few of these students successfully stonewalled my persistent attempts to visit their homes and interview their families. On the other hand, some students I had not initially expected to become focal subjects turned out to be rather insightful and forthcoming, and I found myself bringing them into the study anyway. I did visit the homes of most of the focal students and interviewed one or more of their parents in an extended, taped format. In a few instances, I developed an ongoing relationship with the families, visiting frequently throughout the year. I also interviewed all the teachers of these twenty focal students. In the end, the exact number of focal students fluctuated (I include twenty-two in the final analysis, chapters 4–7), and the group did not evenly represent the social class proportions in the school. Certainly I came to know best those students from more socially and economically stable families. Having said this, I don't believe my experience was unusually skewed, either. As will become clear, I did get to know students and families across the whole range.

At the beginning of the school year, I conducted a short socioeconomic survey of all registered students at the school ($n = 667$), and toward the end of the school year, I did a much more detailed survey of nearly all third graders in the morning shift ($n = 190$) as well as most of those in the afternoon shift ($n = 92$; see results in chapter 2). Beyond establishing a basic student body profile, my aim here was to provide a broader grounding for some of my initial analyses emerging from the qualitative data. To understand differences between schools in San Pablo, I administered the same survey to several groups of third-year students at both another public secundaria in town ($n = 69$) and a private secundaria ($n = 42$). I also visited every other secundaria and high school-level (*educación media superior*) school in town, speaking briefly with administrators and secretaries, and collecting information about programs, enrollment, and curricula. Aside from the surveys, I left San Pablo in July of 1991 with well over 3,000 single-spaced pages of field notes and interview transcripts. Chapters 3 through 6 present the better part of my analysis of that data.

In the summers of 1993 and 1995, and again in the spring of 1997, I returned to San Pablo for periods of three to six weeks. During that time, I

visited with teachers and families, collected documents, and most important, sought out my focal students for chats and interviews. Chapter 7 depicts the story of San Pablo and those students between the years 1991 and 1998.

The cultural game that ESF students created—the meanings they produced—had both sources and repercussions well beyond the immediate ambit of school. In order to understand what happened inside the school in 1990, one must examine the historical antecedents of contemporary Mexican education as well as the biographical details students brought from their families and communities. Then, in order to grasp the subsequent impact of what happened inside the school in 1990, one must follow the students' lives and pay close attention to their words. This book tells their stories, in and out of school, from 1988 through 1998. Yet before we rejoin their stories we must better situate them amid the others that make theirs possible: stories of the nation, the city, the school, and the anthropologist who writes them.

**1. Historical Contexts: The Adolescent,
the Nation, and the Secundaria, 1923–1993**

How does history inform the way persons and institutions act in the present? Ethnographers have become increasingly sensitive to this question, and have tried to develop theories, methods, and styles of writing to answer it.¹ In the field of Latin American studies, there has been an especially vital exchange between anthropologists and historians in recent years (Joseph and Nugent 1994; Levine 1993). Perhaps this is so in part because Latin American societies typically maintain such a keen historical awareness of themselves. After all, it is one thing to affirm the analytic importance of recognizing historical patterns and discourses in the structuring of everyday life; such affirmation should apply even to those most amnesiac of societies—like the United States—that fancy themselves reinvented on a regular basis. It is another thing, and perhaps therefore doubly significant, to recognize and theorize history in Latin America, where the past asserts itself vigorously and people frequently articulate everyday practice in terms of the past.

The field of Mexican education provides a rich case. Schools in Mexico are imbued with a strong sense of history. Civic ceremonies often invoke events and persons of the past, textbooks and teachers highlight the knowledge of history, and the federal State continues to articulate educational policy in terms of a revolutionary legacy that now covers nearly a century. The themes of equality and solidarity that are of concern in this

book figure prominently in such historical trends. Conquests, revolutions, population movements, community cultures, economic shifts, and presidential regimes supply the broadest contexts for such themes. My aim in this chapter is to provide an account of those historical contexts that bear most forcefully on the concerns that animated student life at ESF in 1990, especially those involving equality and solidarity.

I must also explore the interconnected meanings of adolescence as they touch on themes of equality. From the outset of my research, I was struck by the frequent use of the word *adolescencia* (*adolescencia*). Teachers and parents wielded the term in 1990 to explain the behavior of their charges or exhort students to a certain standard of conduct. A few brief examples will suffice to illustrate: A parent at one meeting referred to what the “doctors” say about the hormonally driven caprice of adolescence, while in another discussion, a parent expressed an oft-heard adult sentiment when she characterized adolescence as *una etapa siempre difícil* (always a difficult phase), because her daughter had become obsessively attuned to peer-based interaction and correspondingly truculent at home. Then, during one of our chats, the school’s principal admitted he did not have sufficient resources (doctors, social workers, or vocational counselors) to deal with the “special problems” of adolescents, even though the secundaria had been specifically designed for such duty. Another teacher lamented the decrease in kids’ respect for elders, saying:

It’s obvious, they’re adolescents. . . . They show one side of themselves with you as teacher, another with you as friend, and another with you as parent. They utilize and wield their hypocrisy a lot. . . . The adolescent is waking up now but only for his [*sic*] own purposes (*para su propia conveniencia*). He doesn’t respect the teacher or parent anymore, he only has his own goals and attitudes in mind.

Other teachers and parents often expressed a similar concern about adolescents’ selfish impulses, wondering if they would continue to cooperate (*jalar*) with the best interests of the family or school group.

These meanings of *adolescencia* highlighted the problematic and contentious nature of the transition to adulthood, its emotional volatility and heightened sensitivity to generational difference. Such notions would probably be familiar to most U.S. or European parents and teachers (Finders 1997; Lesko 1996, 454; White 1993, 31). Not all was storm and stress, however. Coexisting with this rather dire portrait of adolescence was a praiseful one. Many teachers portrayed the adolescent years as the

happiest and most carefree the students were likely to encounter, generally identifying this period exclusively with the *secundaria*. In one classroom session toward the end of the year, a teacher told his group of soon-to-graduate students:

So I have seen how you all have changed, from childhood to adolescence, a very beautiful change. . . . [B]ut kids, when you enter the *preparatoria* [high school–level college preparatory] you’re going to see that the *secundaria* was unique . . . because over there in the *preparatoria* things are very different; there’s no longer the same togetherness (*convivencia*) in the group, and the students don’t get to know each other as well.

This was only one of many occasions when I witnessed a teacher prompting this kind of future nostalgia. Teachers tended to extol the virtues of group solidarity and *convivencia*, suggesting that the adolescent years were relatively carefree. Adolescence was conceived of as a safe and insulated training ground for adult roles and responsibilities. Kids could still feel free to be kids, to have fun with abandon, and postpone the more serious decisions about life and career. All this would presumably end when they graduated from the *secundaria*. Of course, teachers spoke implicitly to those students, around 70 percent of the student body, who would probably continue some formal studies. According to their cultural logic, it was as if a summer of inevitable fate would suddenly transform these adolescents into youth (*jóvenes*).

Most striking of all were the ways the students took up the term *adolescencia* themselves. Familiar with U.S. adolescents’ use of *kids* or *teenagers* to describe themselves (Danesi 1994), I expected Mexican students to employ some homologue, conceding *adolescente* to adult use only. Yet they frequently used it as a label for themselves, as a way to explain or justify their own behavior. The greater contact and permeability between youth and adult cultures in Mexico, and the occasional adult use of *adolescente* as a term of address, clearly encouraged this appropriation. My field notes record many instances: One time, Leticia and her friends, obviously bored with recess, asked me what I might do if I were an *adolescente* at school that day. Not long after, I discovered another girl, my introspective friend Rosita, actually reading a book on adolescents when I stopped by her house to visit. She said she wanted to learn more from the “experts” about the emotional turmoil she was going through. Franco, a laconic boy with a seemingly permanent sheepish grin, once told me that the most impor-

tant thing he had done in his short life was to serve as a Catholic altar boy and attend the priest's talks given especially for adolescents. And students also equated adolescence with their years in the *secundaria*. For example, in a taped conversation toward the end of the school year, Iván and Héctor briefly suspended their jokester personae to confess that the transition they would soon make to the *preparatoria* was a momentous one:

IVÁN: In the *prepa* one passes on from being an adolescent to a youth [*joven*] who should be responsible in his way of being, his way of doing things for himself. One has to be more responsible in studying, and to be serious with the girls, not just to be thinking about nothing but sex, but to seriously conduct a nice friendship.

HÉCTOR: Because in the *prepa* it's already about having a little more responsibility. . . . [T]he federal (ESF) is like a, how should I say it? like a little review, something to teach yourself, but in the *prepa* it really depends on you. . . . Here (at ESF) one is still small and over there in the *prepa* one gets more savvy [*agarra más mentalidad*].

Frequently enough, students chatting with me would explain their laziness, indecision, or misconduct with reference to their adolescent nature. They clearly appropriated the term from parents, teachers, and the popular media, applying it to an understanding of their own educational experience.² One could even say, as Linda Christian-Smith (1997, ix) comments on the subjects of Margaret Finders's study, that "students stage[d] behaviors to meet assumptions about adolescence."

The foregoing illustrations demonstrate the importance of concepts of adolescence for understanding and regulating the social life of youth in contemporary Mexico. They also hint at the active traffic in meanings between adult and youth uses of the term. The complexity of local articulations of *adolescencia*, and their association with the *secundaria*, has its roots in Mexican educational philosophy and policy as these have evolved over the course of the twentieth century.

EDUCATING ADOLESCENTS: THE MEXICAN SECUNDARIA

In Mexico, the concept of adolescence has always been a key point of reference in programs for the *secundaria*. Periodic reforms have often been articulated around the interrelated needs of adolescents and national development. The Mexican *secundaria* was created in 1923, quickly evol-

ing to accommodate the adolescent life stage as this was variously conceived. For nearly seventy years, the *secundaria* served as an optional continuation of “basic” primary studies and developed a strong vocational component. For fifty of those years, the overwhelming majority of Mexican students sought merely to complete the six years of primary education. Only those who envisioned a professional career typically continued beyond primary school, using the *secundaria* as a stepping-stone to further studies in urban areas at a college-linked preparatoria. By the 1970s, however, *secundaria* enrollments had increased exponentially, and it was not uncommon to find students terminating their studies after completing this level. The increased accessibility of these schools and a labor market grown accustomed to workers with a secondary-level education, among other things, contributed to the popularity of secondary studies.³

Still, it was not until 1993, in the context of broad administrative reforms, that the Mexican Constitution was amended to mandate compulsory secondary schooling. This was an unprecedented political move. Compulsory secondary education had long been the dream of some reformers,⁴ and by 1990, the Secretariat of Public Education had made great strides in providing communities with various options for secondary schooling.⁵ Few thought the provision of secondary schooling could be extended to the entire population of school-age youth though. Indeed, many primary schools were still overcrowded or, in some remote rural communities, nonexistent. Moreover, few resources could be dedicated to the enforcement of the compulsory rule, and after ten years of economic crisis, many families were in no condition to support their children’s ongoing studies.⁶ Most observers agreed, then, that the constitutional amendment was primarily a symbolic measure, meant to signal Mexico’s commitment to an advanced, so-called “modern” education for the further economic development of the country. Ironically, the amendment coincided with the ongoing stagnation of teacher salaries and an increasingly combative movement for political change in relations between teachers and the State.⁷ Many educational actors had become critical of the State’s efforts at educational modernization, seeing in them a neo-liberal program to dismantle the progressive social reforms of prior epochs.⁸ The year 1993 thus marked a watershed in Mexican educational policy and statecraft.

My primary fieldwork period, from 1990 to 1991, witnessed the rumblings of such change, but they did not fundamentally alter the historical

patterns in place at ESF. I concentrate, then, on the pre-1993 historical contexts, postponing a discussion of more recent transformations to the final chapters of the book.

DILEMMAS OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND POLICY IN MEXICO

Carlos Ornelas (1995, 49) echoes the observations many contemporary educational scholars make of other nations in describing the fundamentally “paradoxical” character of the Mexican educational system: its two primary mandates are to form citizens and human capital. These mandates imply rather different kinds of educational priorities that have not been easily melded into a coherent educational policy.⁹ Annette Santos del Real (1996a, 1) and Yolanda Navarro (1996) have noted, moreover, that the Mexican *secundaria*, adamantly opposed to differentiated academic tracking, still attempts to reconcile two related yet distinct goals: preparing youth for the immediate demands of the labor market and for professional studies. Insofar as secondary education is thus conceived of as both formative and vocational, both preparatory and terminal, it attempts to navigate a difficult middle course.

The dilemmas of Mexican education at its present level of development and differentiation are not unlike those encountered in many other parts of the world. Secondary structures and curricula around the globe attempt to address diverse educational goals. In former colonial nations, especially, the postprimary years are often utilized to accomplish both work training and advanced academic preparation. What makes Mexico different, perhaps unique? In Mexico, three distinct cultural formations, which have tugged and pulled at one another throughout the modern period, can be identified. Following Larissa Adler Lomnitz, Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, and Ilya Adler (1993), I would call one the “hierarchical holism” of the Mexican political body, traceable to the Spanish colonial state, but perhaps best represented by the “Conservative” political tradition of the early nineteenth century. Hierarchical holism describes a social system in which proper relations of authority, rooted ultimately in ecclesiastical and patriarchal imperatives, sustain the organic hierarchy of the “body” of God and his earthly appointments. While this formation typifies the Spanish colonial structure, it also draws from the hierarchical model of the largest indigenous pre-Hispanic polities.¹⁰ Another cultural formation would be that which emerged from the “Liberal” political tradition, with its principles of private property, individual initiative, ra-

tional progress, and formal equality before the law (Hale 1972; Mallon 1995). The third, in effect a kind of uneasy synthesis of the other two, would be the tradition of revolutionary nationalism forged in the early part of the twentieth century, with its emphasis on collective solidarity and substantive equality.¹¹ Revolutionary nationalism, itself the product of ongoing negotiations between the postrevolutionary State and local forces (Joseph and Nugent 1994; Mallon 1995; Vaughan 1997), has in turn undergone numerous permutations. One place that the evolving expression of revolutionary nationalism can be charted is in the structure and philosophy of the national school system.

As in so many other modern national contexts, notions of equality have suffused educational practice in Mexico. Yet the complex articulation of Mexico's cultural formations gives these notions a distinct cast. On the one hand, Mexico has adapted from the Liberal tradition conceptions of equal opportunity, rationality, and mobility that accompanied the expansion of capitalist relations and growth of anticlericalism. These conceptions dictate that schooling should free people from superstition and vice, while giving them equal opportunities to improve their material lives and enter into the "productive" sphere of society. The Liberal model also designates schooling as a key instrument of meritocracy—a fair, equitable means of selecting the best people, based on their aptitude, for the best positions within a technical division of labor. Citizens are allegedly equal in that they share the same, basic qualities of humanity, such as the capacity for reflexive thought and moral action. Citizens are not, however, equal in the sense of having the same kind or level of aptitudes. As Liberal positivism at the turn of the twentieth century would have it, citizens compete as individuals within the same social space, on the same level playing field, allowing the supposedly natural hierarchy of ability to best serve the social interest.¹²

The rationalist, meritocratic model of education had become predominant by the end of the nineteenth century, when the Liberal hegemony in Mexico had been consolidated. It was not until after 1910, with the explosion of social revolution in Mexico, that new forms of educational ideology and practice were regrafted onto the Liberal base. A renewed stress on cooperation, solidarity, and the collective good, oriented toward the construction of a national identity and culture, took its place alongside the Liberal model of individualism (Vaughan 1997). The collectivist emphasis, coupled with a corporatist political structure, drew on already existing practices and discourses of solidarity in popular and

indigenous cultures, attempting to articulate their local, community-oriented focus to a hegemonic national project (Lomnitz-Adler 1992; Alonso 1995; Nugent 1993).

Why is the *secundaria* important in this framework of State and nation formation? In modernizing and urbanizing Mexico, as elsewhere, the growth of industrialization and expansion of secondary education exerted reciprocal effects on one another, creating the conditions for the salience of adolescence as a sociocultural category (Neubauer 1992, 6). Moreover, the transitional stage known as adolescence has become a crucible for forging enduring identities and allegiances, and the *secundaria* corresponds to this phase. Children and youth now form an extremely high percentage of Mexico's population, and educational authorities must design a *secundaria* that accommodates and channels youth for productive places in society.¹³ The nationalist ideology of equality is also likely to be expressed more urgently in the socially differentiated *secundaria*. Indeed, at least since 1944, the *secundaria* appears to have been explicitly invested with this homogenizing function (Santos del Real 1996a, 8). Finally, the *secundaria* seems to have crystallized in the very structure and rationale of its curriculum the tension between Liberal individualism and nationalist collectivism, between effort for personal advancement and technical mastery, on the one hand, and effort for group welfare and selfless citizenship, on the other. How did this come to be?

POLITICS, IDEOLOGY, AND CURRICULUM:

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MEXICAN SECUNDARIA

Like so many contemporary Mexican institutions, the *secundaria* is a direct child of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1921), which was fought by many different factions, and for a variety of principles and causes. The great peasant uprisings, such as the one led by Emiliano Zapata south of Mexico City, sought to reinstate a more equitable distribution of land among a society of communal freeholders. Yet the northern military movements—associated with leaders like Venustiano Carranza, Álvaro Obregón, and Francisco Villa—pursued other agendas. They mostly represented a Liberal alliance of professionals, businesspeople, and small property holders. As they fought to break the stranglehold of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship, they also channeled the grievances of a variety of disaffected groups, from ranch hands to poorly paid mineworkers. The northern factions ultimately triumphed in the revolution, and their bour-

geois interests largely determined the development of the new State. Still, because the revolution had energized enormous popular hopes, the developing institutions of the State would have to respond to local forces and conditions. Although the State emerging from the Mexican Revolution reinstated most features of the capitalist model of development fostered by the Díaz dictatorship, it did so under radically changed social and ideological conditions (Meyer 1991; Brachet-Márquez 1994; Joseph and Nugent 1994). Now more than ever, it was necessary for the State to attend to the great range of class, ethnic, and regional differences that divided the nation, and schooling was an obvious choice for accomplishing this feat of national integration. With the revolution, the first material bases for a genuinely popular public schooling would be established, and the question of equality and social difference moved to the forefront.

Soon after the definitive triumph of the revolution in 1921, President Álvaro Obregón appointed José Vasconcelos to serve as founding head of a new federal Secretariat of Public Education. Vasconcelos articulated a vision of revolutionary cultural action that, for perhaps the first time in the country's independence, explicitly valorized the contributions of popular and indigenous cultures. Perhaps paradoxically, he also laid the groundwork for a system of schooling that would be oriented toward *homogenizing* the customs and values of all Mexicans in the service of two predominant statist imperatives: national unity, and the material and spiritual redemption, or so-called elevation, of popular classes.¹⁴

The development of federal schooling, especially in rural areas, had already begun during the Díaz years, but the revolution infused schooling with new energy and focus because it responded at least to a number of popular demands. The idea of rural schools as *casas del pueblo* (houses of the people), first conceived by Vasconcelos and then elaborated by the great educator Moisés Sáenz, was received enthusiastically in many villages. This rural school model had been influenced by the active, participatory pedagogy of John Dewey, with whom Sáenz had studied at Columbia University. Rural schoolteachers were much more than instructors of literacy and mathematics. Rather, teachers were conceived of as moral, social, and technical “apostles” of modernity, as it were, guiding their communities to practical and spiritual liberation—and integration into national life (Vaughan 1997). In addition to the schools themselves, “cultural missions” were created at strategic locations in rural parts of the country. These missions were intended to serve as resource centers for teachers and other interested citizens, who could consult with materials

and master pedagogues in order to more effectively teach villagers the latest skills. The intense cultural action of the revolutionary State was thus double-edged. While education responded to rural needs and demands, it deepened the power of state rule as well.

As a result, many authors have called attention to the way postrevolutionary schools were charged with creating, or in some cases reinforcing, a unified national identity (Raby 1987; Taboada 1985; Vaughan 1997). The regional and local identifications that had inspired diverse revolutionary movements constantly threatened the integrity of the postrevolutionary State. In effect, the penetration of State-sponsored schooling into previously neglected local communities represented an attempt to link such communities to the State and thereby consolidate the rule of revolutionary elites (Raby 1987, 308; Córdova 1984; Taboada 1985, 54). What occurred during this period was also an attempt to identify the nation in cultural terms with the groups comprising the State (Monsiváis 1992, 448). The nationalist concept of equality as a collective good was especially highlighted during the so-called period of national unity (post-1940), which followed the contentious era of socialist agitation under President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940). Even the language of a federal education law in 1941, which reflected the constitutional article regarding education that was revised in 1946, sketched the relationship between equality and national identity:

[Education] should tend to create and affirm in students concepts and feelings of solidarity and the preeminence of collective interests over private or individual interests, with the goal of lessening social and economic inequalities. . . . Through instruction and school activities, [education] will contribute to the development and consolidation of national unity, thereby excluding all political, social, and sectarian influences contrary or inimical to the country, and affirming in students the love of country (*patria*) and national traditions. . . . Special attention will be given to the study of the country's economy, environment, and social conditions in order to achieve the most equitable use of its natural resources.¹⁵

Indeed, if a “new Mexican” was created in revolutionary discourses on equality, it was a cultural subject oriented toward the collective (read: national) good (Bartra 1987).

It was into this political and ideological environment that the Mexican *secundaria* was born. Though the public *secundaria* was officially created

by law in 1915, it was not until 1923 that the *secundaria* received serious attention. Until that time, Mexico had followed the classical European tradition of combining secondary education with college preparatory studies. Secondary education was, in effect, part of a program of professional studies that emphasized specialization and encyclopedic knowledge. In 1923, Bernardo Gastélum, subsecretary of education, proposed a reorganization of college preparatory studies by clearly distinguishing a phase of secondary education as an extension of the primary school. In this manner, the *secundaria* would still retain some of the subject matter and specialization characteristic of preparatory studies, but would now continue the “basic” cultural and ideological functions of the *primaria*. To understand these developments, it is important to highlight the ongoing struggle between the Catholic Church and postrevolutionary State for the hearts and minds of local subjects. Following the Liberal imperative to wrest power from the church and assign the task of moral socialization to the State, the *secundaria* would now focus on a formative *education* of the character rather than the mere *instruction* of specialized knowledge.¹⁶

Donald Mabry (1985, 222) suggests that the idea of the *secundaria* was borrowed from the United States, and thus fiercely resisted by some traditionalists who wished to preserve a strict separation between primary and advanced education, and feared the incursion of “foreign” educational philosophies. Raúl Mejía Zuñiga (1981, 225) goes further in saying that the Secretaría de Educación Pública founded the *secundaria* with the “pedagogical mold of the German secondary school and the democratic postulates of the U.S. secondary school, both adjusted to the popular needs and aspirations of Mexico.” Clearly, by 1923, some key components of the new plan for secondary education responded to the uniquely Mexican post-revolutionary ethos. The four central goals of the new *secundaria* were to:

- 1) carry forth the task of correcting defects and sponsoring the general development of students begun in the *primaria*, 2) strengthen in each student the sense of solidarity with others, 3) create habits of unity (*cohesión*) and social cooperation, and 4) offer all students a great variety of activities, exercises, and teachings so that each one might discover a vocation and be able to dedicate him/herself to cultivating it. (Meneses Morales 1986, 408)

The *secundaria*’s goals of correcting “defects” (that is, superstition and blind faith) while fostering solidarity and cooperation were consonant