

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS
and
INSTRUCTIONAL
GUIDELINES
for
TEACHING AND LEARNING
ABOUT MEXICO

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Task Force on Mexico in the K-12 Curriculum

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Center for Latin American Studies
San Diego State University
1991

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

From the time of the earliest Spanish colonies in Florida, Louisiana and the American Southwest to the current sharing of a 2,000 mile border with Mexico, United States history, culture and economy have been profoundly affected by relations with our Latin American neighbors. A significant portion of our country - including parts of the states of California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas - were once Mexican.

Today, the linkages between the United States and Mexico are greater than ever. People of Mexican descent represent the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States. Issues such as Mexico's foreign debt, the development of a North American Free Trade Zone, "off-shore" industries, foreign policy, immigration, drugs, cross-border pollution and usage rights to water and maritime resources are bilateral problems that can only be resolved in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect for each other's history, culture, problems, strengths and perspectives. Indeed, the increasingly multiethnic nature of our own society mandates that our citizens be knowledgeable regarding Mexican culture and society. U.S. public images of Mexico cannot be clearly separated from public images of and reactions to persons of Mexican origin residing within our borders.

Yet the required understanding, knowledge and respect are in short supply. Over and over again, many perceptions of Mexico prevalent in the United States are not borne out by reality. In its 1989 report, *The Challenge of Interdependence: Mexico and the United States*, the Bilateral Commission on the Future of U.S.-Mexican Relations noted that the primary public image of Mexico in the United States remains that of an exotic, inexpensive tourist haven. Little understanding exists of Mexican perspectives on foreign policy matters, and U.S. citizens harbor a negative view of Mexican politics, government and society that is untempered by familiarity with Mexican history and culture. Without more accurate knowledge and understanding of our neighbor to the south, it will be impossible for Mexico and the United States to forge the strong partnership necessary to move peacefully and productively into the 20th century.

The Response

A major factor contributing to U.S. ignorance and misperception is the conspicuous neglect of accurate, substantive and on-going study of Mexico at the elementary and secondary school levels. Responding to the Bilateral Commission's call for a concerted effort to improve teaching materials and practices regarding Mexico in U.S. public schools, the *Task Force on Mexico in the K-12 Curriculum* was established in the spring of 1989.

The Task Force seeks to improve the quality and quantity of classroom instruction on Mexico-related issues by focusing on three different but closely related instructional goals:

- Students should learn about and understand Mexico as a sovereign nation with a rich and unique history and cultural heritage;
- Students should examine Mexico-United States bilateral relations and policy issues; and
- Students should develop an understanding of and appreciation for the history and culture of persons of Mexican descent residing in the United States, and their role in American society.

The weaknesses and shortcomings of current treatment of Mexico-related subjects in textbooks, in supplementary instructional materials and in classroom instruction itself have been amply documented by numerous scholars. What is needed now is a clear vision of what *ought to be*, a clear statement of what students need to know and understand, and a clear set of guidelines for assisting teachers in instructing students in such a manner that these learning objectives will, indeed, be achieved.

The following *Key Understandings and Instructional Guidelines for Teaching and Learning about Mexico* represent an attempt by the Task Force to outline the essential elements of a quality Mexico-related curriculum at the elementary and secondary school levels. The **Key Understandings** encapsulate the higher-level generalizations that students should develop as a result of instruction. They also provide examples of the types of data that can be utilized by teachers and students in building and supporting these understandings. The **Instructional Guidelines** offer specific recommendations and guiding questions regarding content, focus and tone that educators can utilize in evaluating and designing instructional programs and materials.

Teaching about Mexico in a balanced, even-handed manner poses some difficult issues for U.S. educators. The emphasis on Mexico's "problems" found so frequently in textbooks and curriculum guides only serves to reinforce an image of Mexico as having little positive to offer the world. On the other hand, the desire to counteract the inaccurate, simplistic, and often negative stereotypes which students bring with them into the classroom sometimes results in an overly rosy portrayal, bordering on boosterism, which ignores the complex issues and difficult challenges facing the Mexican people. A strong emphasis on history can help provide a context within which discussion of contemporary problems will be more meaningful and productive. The Task Force has attempted to reflect this approach in the following *Key Understandings and Instructional Guidelines*, noting the importance of historical developments and acknowledging the serious challenges facing Mexico today, while maintaining an emphasis on Mexico's active search for solutions.

The *Key Understandings and Instructional Guidelines* have been designed for use by a wide audience, including classroom teachers, school, district and state text materials adoption committees; staff and curriculum development projects; textbook and supplementary materials authors and publishers - in short, anyone and everyone responsible in some degree for the content and quality of student instruction regarding Mexico and Mexico-related topics.

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

For Teaching and Learning About Mexico

Mexico is a nation that plays important economic and political roles in today's world.

I. Mexico's role in the world today is significant in its own right.

As a middle-range power with a strong industrial base, Mexico is a major actor in a variety of international forums. Mexico has the world's 12th largest economy, is the world's fifth largest oil producer and is the third largest trading partner of the United States. It is a key player in the development of the North American free trade zone. An innovator in approaches to international debt negotiations, Mexico is also a major contributor to international law on sovereignty and non-intervention and a prominent leader in the inter-American system.

Mexico is a diverse, complex and changing society.

II. Mexico is a country of extraordinary regional diversity.

Mexico's physical geography is characterized by highly diverse land-forms and climates, including eight different physiographic zones. Culturally, its regional diversity is no less remarkable. Distinct pre-Columbian cultures combined with significant post-European contact differences in economic and political developments to produce varying regional histories and regional identities. Today, as the world's largest Spanish-speaking country, Mexico remains home to over 100 different languages and dialects. A country that is 70% urbanized, Mexico has a capital city (Mexico, D.F.) that is the largest in the world, with many regional urban centers of significant size.

III. Mexico is a country undergoing significant social, economic and political changes.

Mexico today must contend with the social and economic effects of rapid population growth, accelerated urbanization, a young and growing labor force characterized by increasing levels of female participation, and a developing economy undergoing significant transformations in its agricultural and industrial structures. These changes, together with a continuing high level of poverty, present Mexico with serious challenges in such areas as health, education, employment, population growth and environmental protection. Efforts to address these economic and societal changes are being accompanied by changes in the nature and degree of political participation, manifest both in the growing role of minority parties as well as in popular mobilization around issues such as environment, neighborhood improvement and education.

Mexican national identity reflects a strong and enduring sense of history.

IV. Mexican culture is a unique blend of thousands of years of human interaction.

Advanced indigenous civilizations produced highly-organized empires characterized by large cities and impressive achievements in art, architecture, science and social organization. This heritage played an important role in the subsequent development of Mexican culture, despite the dramatic demographic decline and the subjugation of indigenous peoples in the years following European contact. The formative significance of the colonial period was reinforced by Mexico's role as Spain's most important colony in the Western Hemisphere, serving for 400 years as a colonial center of trade and Hispanic civilization. The important role of the Catholic Church during this period is reflected in a contemporary population that is 90% catholic. The Mexican colonial period produced some of the oldest educational institutions in the Americas, exceptional secular and religious architecture, and gave rise to a long tradition of literary, artistic and intellectual accomplishment that continues today in internationally acclaimed modern art, mural painting, architecture, literature and philosophy.

V. Mexican perspectives are rooted in a past which represents "another American experience," significantly different from that of much of the United States.

The initial encounter of indigenous and European populations as well as the subsequent Colonial Period were fundamentally dissimilar in the two countries. Following independence, Mexico experienced repeated foreign interventions and the loss of over half of its territory to the United States in the conflict that Mexicans refer to as "the war of the North American Invasion." In significant contrast to the U.S. experience, the achievement of Mexican independence in 1821 was not accompanied by revolutionary changes in the distribution of political power. The ongoing struggles of the 19th century to reform the political and economic structures established during the Colonial Period culminated in the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the first of the great 20th Century revolutions. Today, Mexico continues to grapple with the societal and political tensions that result from the continuing quest for social and economic equality.

Mexico and the United States are linked together in a historic and ongoing relationship.

IV. Mexico's influence on U.S. history and society has been and will continue to be, significant.

The Mexican legacy is part of the historical experience of the nearly half of the united States that was once Mexican territory. Hispanic settlement in what is now the United States pre-dates the arrival of the Mayflower. U.S. law codes in the

Western states regarding land, water and property right were shaped in significant degree by the Mexican legal system. Today one of the largest ethnic groups in the United States, people of Mexican origin continue to contribute significantly to U.S. culture, language and society. American English is enriched by Spanish vocabulary and American arts, music, cuisine and sports are influenced by Mexican culture. People of Mexican origin continue to make significant contributions to the U.S. labor force and consumer market, and are becoming an increasingly important political constituency.

VII. Mexico and the United States are partners in an increasingly important bilateral relationship.

A shared 2,000 mile border and growing linkages between our two economies and societies generate a wide range of issues of mutual concern. Immigration, environmental protection and management, economic trade and investment, control of illicit drug trafficking, foreign debt, tourism and border development all involve both costs and benefits to each society. Working toward mutually acceptable solutions to these challenges provides opportunities for enhanced relationships and enrichment of the peoples of both nations. In all instances, our growing interconnectedness requires a commitments to bilateral cooperation and conflict management.

INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDELINES

For Achieving the Key Understandings

Instruction should portray Mexico as playing important economic and political roles in today's world.

- I. Instruction should portray Mexico's role in the world today as significant in its own right.

Does instruction portray Mexico as a developing, industrialized nation?

Does instruction acknowledge the size and importance of Mexico's economy?

Does instruction portray Mexico as an autonomous, sovereign nation?

Does instruction acknowledge Mexico's role as a regional leader in Western Hemispheric relations?

Instruction should avoid treating Mexico only in relationship to U.S. issues and concerns.

Instruction should portray Mexico as a diverse, complex and changing society.

- II. Instruction should portray Mexico as a country of extraordinary regional diversity.

Does instruction portray Mexico as a nation of rich regional diversity?

Does instruction portray Mexico's:

- geographic diversity?
- cultural diversity?
- linguistic diversity?

Does instruction portray the predominantly urban life-style of the majority of Mexico's population?

Instruction should avoid portraying Mexico as a homogeneous, static universally traditional society.

- III. Instruction should portray Mexico as a country undergoing significant changes in society, economy and politics.

Does instruction convey the changes and transformations affecting Mexican society?

Does instruction realistically focus on the challenges and problems facing Mexico?

Does instruction acknowledge the efforts being made to address Mexico's problems?

Instruction should avoid portraying problems without discussion of the larger historical context and Mexico's efforts at solutions.

Instruction should portray Mexican national identity as reflecting a strong and enduring sense of history.

IV. Instruction should portray Mexico's cultural experience as a unique blend of hundreds of years of human interaction.

Does instruction portray Mexico's contemporary society as a melding of indigenous, colonial and modern experiences?

Does instruction portray the richness of Mexico's indigenous, colonial and contemporary civilizations?

Does instruction highlight the contributions Mexicans have made and continue to make in education, literature and the arts?

Does instruction convey the pride which Mexicans take in their unique cultural heritage?

Instruction should avoid portraying Mexico as a culturally impoverished nation devoid of intellectual tradition.

V. **Instruction should acknowledge that Mexican national identity and perspective are rooted in an historical experience different from our own.**

Does instruction provide students with an understanding of Mexican history and how it differs from that of the United States?

Does instruction acknowledge that Mexican perspectives reflect their own historic and cultural experiences?

Does instruction avoid focusing exclusively on U.S. perspectives?

Does instruction present the diversity of perspectives that exists among Mexicans themselves?

Instruction should avoid dismissing Mexican perspectives as irrelevant and invalid.

Instruction should acknowledge the historic and ongoing relationship between Mexico and the United States.

VI. Instruction should acknowledge the important influence which Mexico has had on U.S. history and society.

Does instruction acknowledge the sometimes conflictual, sometimes cooperative historical relationship between Mexico and the United States.

Does instruction acknowledge that ongoing cultural exchange between Mexico and the United States has contributed to the richness and diversity of both societies?

Does instruction give credit to the significant economic, political and cultural contributions that persons of Mexican descent make to U.S. society?

Instruction should avoid presenting the benefits of cultural exchange as only flowing in one direction.

VII. Instruction should portray Mexico and the United States as partners in an increasingly significant bilateral relationship.

Does instruction present the growing importance of economic linkages between Mexico and the United States?

Does instruction present the benefits, as well as the costs of the relationship between the two countries?

Does instruction acknowledge the complexity of bilateral issues and problems?

Does instruction reinforce the need for conflict management and collaboration on a wide range of issues of mutual concern?

Instruction should avoid presenting bilateral issues and problems as capable of unilateral solution by the United States.

Instruction should strengthen students' capacity to acknowledge the existence of other perspectives; engage in thoughtful, reflective decision making; and actively participate in collaborative problem solving.

Acknowledgments

The Task Force would like to thank the following people who provided critical feedback and editorial advice in the development of the *Key Understandings and Instructional Guidelines*. Their comments and insights were invaluable and many of their recommendations have been incorporated into this document. However, the final version does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the individuals listed below. Ultimate responsibility for the contents of this document lie with the members of the Task Force on Mexico in the K-12 Curriculum.

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Participants in the “Teaching and Learning About Mexico” session at the National Council for the Social Studies, Anaheim, CA.

Publication of the *Key Understandings and Instructional Guidelines* was made possible by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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