

Children of the harvest: schooling, class and race

Children of migrant cotton field workers from Oklahoma (Source: Library of Congress)

I've just come across a fascinating article about the schooling of migrant children during the Great Depression era in the US West Coast states. The authors, Paul Theobald and Rubén Donato, tell a fascinating tale of the manipulation of schooling as an efficient way to perpetuate class relationships. By comparing two groups of rural migrants the article also offers an illuminating analysis of the intersections of class and ethnicity. The two groups are external migrants from Mexico and internal migrants from the dust bowl of the Great Plains states. The latter group came to be collectively known by the disparaging term 'Okies,' and is epitomized by the Joad family in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In California, schooling for Mexicans had developed in the 19th century in a way that systematically segregated Mexican children although Mexicans were not included in the legal provisions for segregation that applied to Asians, Blacks and Native Americans. In 1920, for instance, eighty percent of all Mexican children attended separate 'Mexican schools' or 'Mexican classrooms.' The justification for segregation was that Mexican students were 'problem students': they were stereotyped as slow learners with a language problem and un-American habits and values. Their racial status was also frequently debated and there were a number of efforts to have Mexicans classified as 'Indian,' which would have legalized their segregation.

Efforts to legalize the segregation of Mexicans were never successful and so their segregation was achieved through other means such as the construction of 'Mexican' schools, the gerrymandering of school attendance zones, and internal segregation through tracking. Segregation coupled with the irregular attendance of families who were seasonal agricultural workers resulted in very early dropout, and most Mexican children left school without having learnt how to read and write.



(Source: Library of Congress)

In the early 1930s around 250,000 Mexicans, including US citizens, were deported to Mexico. This created a labor void, which desperate dust bowl migrants were eager to fill. Like Mexicans, Okies were despised because

of their poverty and the burden they were seen to place on the taxpayer. In contrast to Mexicans, there was no readily-available ideology that would justify their segregation: they were white and English-speaking.

Okies disrupted the logic of agricultural work and segregation in California because here were white Americans doing 'non-white' work. This meant that the 'inferior' ethnicity of agricultural workers could no longer be used to justify their low wages and abominable working conditions. Theoretically, there were two options to deal with this dilemma:

Either the conditions and circumstances of agricultural labor would have to improve to meet white standards, or the Okies would have to be shown to be as inferior as Mexican migrants. Regrettably, there was (and is) no place like school for defining inferiority. (Theobald & Donato 1990, p. 34)

Although race and language were not available as rationales for segregation, the low quality of schooling in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas was. A 1939 survey found that ten percent of Okie migrant children were as far as four years behind their non-mobile Californian peers. Another twenty percent were three years behind and forty percent were two years behind. As a result school authorities felt compelled to institute 'special' classes for Okie children.

The result was the same as it was for Mexican children: poor attendance, early drop-out and dismal outcomes. A contemporary account explains the inferiority complex schooling instilled in Okie children:

Year by year, as they grow older, the embarrassment of their ignorance increases; held back sometimes four and five grades, when they enter new schools tall youths of 13 are out of place in classes with small-fry of 7. Bashful at their own backwardness and ashamed of their clothes or "foreign" accent, they stand out as easy targets for the venomous barbs of their richer and settled schoolmates. "He's from the country camp, that's what they said of my child on the school ground. Don't you see how it hurts?" one transient mother explained. (Quoted in Theobald & Donato 1990, p. 35)



That the low quality of schooling in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas was nothing but a pretext for segregation is most apparent from the experience of children from the states of the northern Plains. Dust bowl migrants from the Dakotas entered predominantly Oregon and Washington. These two states had no history of segregation because agriculture was not yet industrialized and therefore there were few Mexican (or Asian) agricultural

workers. Furthermore, the schooling system in the Dakotas was superior to that of Oregon and Washington. Even so, segregated schooling for Okie children developed in the Pacific Northwest, too.

The authors conclude that schooling during the period was designed to perpetuate the subordination of agricultural labor. When language and ethnicity fell away as ways to legitimize the processing of Mexican children into cheap labor, other legitimation strategies such as 'educational backwardness' were found.

It is also worth noting that the animosity towards Mexicans and Okies during the Great Depression was justified with their poverty, with the fact that they were a drain on the public purse. However, the segregated schooling instituted for these two groups was a more expensive educational option than integration would have been. Segregation involved the provision of separate buildings and the hiring of extra teachers.

If the maintenance of a docile, inexpensive labor system required social distance between the children of property owners and the children of harvest laborers, then a slightly inflated budget at the local school was, seemingly, a small price to pay. (Theobald & Donato 1990, p. 36)

It is also instructive to consider what happened after the Great Depression and the Second World War: Okies were integrated into the mainstream and took up jobs in production and industry. In fact, today even the term 'Okie' itself has disappeared as a social category. By contrast, Mexicans were forced back into agriculture and segregated schooling for Mexicans continued into the 1960s.



The class position of Okies took precedence over ethnicity during a time of economic crisis. However, when the crisis was over, Okies were not barred from class mobility in the same way that Mexicans were. This means that class in the United States is most restrictive when it is defined by ethnicity. But in whichever way class is circumscribed, schooling plays a crucial role in legitimizing class inequality because the basic principles of school finance, educational objectives and student evaluation are defined by those in power.

The authors conclude by asking what the enduring lessons of migrant schooling during the Great Depression might be:

Rural schools can either play the traditional role of agent in the solution of the legitimation crisis of the state, or they can begin to work to expose the unethical nature of America's treatment of the countryside. (Theobald & Donato 1990, p. 43)



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