

# The Role of 'Traditions and Uses' in Mexican Primary Schools: Implications for Institutional Change

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## Abstract

A qualitative approach is used to define some of the most common traditions and uses ("usos y costumbres") in institutional practices in Mexican schools. Traditions and uses are defined as actions accepted, tolerated or expected by teachers and authorities in daily school functioning which are not contemplated within the norms, or are frankly contrary to regulations. This is the first attempt to document these practices pervasive to Mexican public schools, and to analyze their role in regard to educational change.

*Keywords:* <Customs and traditions> <primary schools> <Mexico>

## Sinopsis

Se utiliza un enfoque cualitativo para definir algunos de los usos y costumbres más comunes en las prácticas institucionales de escuelas mexicanas. Se definen los usos y costumbres como acciones aceptadas, toleradas o esperadas por los maestros y autoridades en el funcionamiento escolar diario, las cuáles no están contempladas dentro de las normas o que son francamente contrarias a los reglamentos. Este es el primer intento de documentar estas prácticas comunes en las escuelas públicas mexicanas y de analizar el papel que juegan en lo concerniente al cambio educativo.

*Términos clave:* <Costumbres y tradiciones> <escuelas primarias> <México>

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The role of 'customary rights and traditions' in Mexican primary schools: Implications for educational change

'Customary rights and traditions' (usos y costumbres) is a concept widely used in Mexican public primary schools to describe a number of habits, patterns of institutional behavior and actions frequently taken by teachers or administrators which are not contemplated in current regulations, distort existing norms, or may even be frankly contrary to regulations.

The justification of actions by appealing to 'usos y costumbres' is a frequent tactic used by union leaders, teachers in conflict with authorities and even by some administrators to justify a number of irregular behaviors accepted, tolerated and even expected in daily life within the public schools.

This paper is the first formal attempt to document these practices, pervasive in Mexican public schools, and to analyze their role in a system clearly in need of change.

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To describe some common 'customary rights and traditions' (usos y costumbres) in Mexican Primary schools.
2. To depict the perspective of teachers and authorities in regard to these actions.
3. To evaluate the impact of these actions for school organization and functioning and institutional change.

#### *Framework*

In general, research on the primary school in Mexico is scarce and notoriously detached from the events of typical daily life. The majority of the studies, as judged by Consejo Mexicano de Investigación Educativa (COMIE, 2003), are carried out from sociological, anthropological or philosophical perspectives. Thus, evidence is lacking in the Mexican literature about day to

day common school practices.

Indeed, there is relatively little published about the problems and challenges of the nearly 8,000 primary public schools across Mexico. According to Weiss (2003), most research on the primary school in Mexico has approached political, financial, demographic and curriculum issues on the national scale.

Despite some manuscripts that depict the views and perspectives of Mexican teachers (Monroy, 2000), their belief systems (Rodrigo, Rodríguez and Marrero, 1993), and their practical thinking (Pérez and Gimeno, 1992), little is reported about the informal, 'taken for granted' ways of negotiating the formal requirements of being a teacher, or the effects of these on the routine of the school.

#### *Institutional Change*

The need for institutional change in Mexican primary schools is broadly recognized by the Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa (INEE), and it is patently depicted in statistics reporting, for example, an average of 7.5 years of formal education in the country. Nine percent of adults are reported as illiterate, a probable underestimate, while only 18% of the population completed high school, and a mere 10% of Mexicans earned a college degree (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática: INEGI, 2006).

Such figures clearly demonstrate the need for institutional change that requires, at a minimum, the adoption of new norms and regulations that will provide a vision for transformation of school functioning. However, implementation of such regulations is not enough in a system in which customary rights and traditions are a powerful motor of behavior. Such actions are embedded in the culture of work; they are an important descriptor of

the identity of the teacher as a worker in the public basic education system, and they need to be evaluated for their potential as barriers or opportunities for institutional change. Indeed, in many instances customary rights and traditions are stronger determinants of organizational behavior than rules and regulations. As Bruner (2000) warns, some patterns of organizational behavior are not easily changed once they become institutionalized. As part of their socialization into the profession, new teachers learn, unconsciously, habits and procedures deeply rooted in customary rights and traditions.

#### *Customary rights and traditions and organizational functioning*

Bourdieu (2002), attributes the development of customary rights and traditions to the need of workers to obtain reinforcements and privileges outside of the normal system of compensation, and suggests that control over these reinforcers is crucial in controlling change.

Berger and Luckman (1966) assert that customary interactions between the members of an organization become institutional behaviors through the development of informal rules. The exercise of customary rights and the enactment of traditions then comprise behaviors accepted and expected in the organization, and people see their 'rights' assaulted when an attempt is made to rein in these behaviors.

These informally created 'rights' are sustained by practices within the school which shape the organizational culture. Their perceived legitimacy comes from a sense of history: in Spanish the saying 'la costumbre es ley' (habit is law) encompasses a sense of 'thus it has always been.' In fact such practices have arisen from the interaction between teachers, teachers and union leaders, and teachers and authorities in the allocation

and distribution of non-monetary benefits. In some ways, they can be seen as natural forms of adaptation, negotiation and balance. They are neither bad nor good per se, but result from negotiation of power relationships and interactions across the various levels of the educational system. For this reason, Bruner (2002) argues customary rights need to be examined both within the specific setting as well as the broad context that supports them. For example, one must consider how these behaviors are legitimated (or interfered with) by such institutions as the family, the school, the union, the state and national governments and the broader political sphere.

Prior research on traditions and uses in the schools has been either developed from the perspective of cultural studies (Bruner, 2000; Rogoff, 1993; Wertsch, 1993) or carried out in the tradition of the ethnographic research (Rockwell, 1997; Carvajal, 1997; Sandoval, 1997; Rueda, 2000; Sanjurjo, 2002).

Regardless of the preferred method of research, however, investigators need to remember Bruner's advice when assessing the teacher's cultural context: "it is important to interpret what they say, what they do and the differences between these two" (2002: 121). Most importantly, congruence between statements and actions (canonic behavior) may be an indicator of the influence of customary rights and traditions in the organization.

Finally, since they refer to the regulation and control of cooperative relationships and connote patterns of group behavior accepted by the school community, customary rights and traditions are by necessity intersubjective in nature (Rogoff, 1993).

#### *Context*

This is a case study of the role of customary rights and traditions in a public

primary school in the city of Merida, Yucatán, Mexico. This school, according to state educational authorities granting permission for the study, is representative of the public primary schools that enroll lower and lower middle class families. As is often the case, the same physical facility houses two different sessions, in effect separate schools, with different teachers and staff. The 'morning school' runs from 7:30 to 12:30, while the 'evening school', usually enrolling children with learning and behavior difficulties who have been rejected from morning shifts, from 14:00 to 16:30 hrs. Teachers are a mixture of veterans who have worked their way to posts in the state's capital city with time (a feature of the union contract), and young teachers filling temporary contracts, who are seeking to enter the tenure track system even if they are sent to remote communities as means of entrance. On the average, these teachers make 600 dollars a month, and some of them work both shifts, although in different schools (Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 2005). In addition to the limited exposure to class work, 4 hrs on the average per day, children fail to have classes almost 40 days of the 200 stipulated in the official schedule.

As Fuentes Molinar (2003), former Undersecretary for Basic Education summarized: "In Mexico, basic education is mediocre, with standards below those of other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries; as a matter of fact, Mexican levels of education are disenchanting" (in <http://www.lajornada.com/index/123mm986>).

### *Method*

In order to develop a faithful portrayal of the informal system of rights and benefits known as "usos y costumbres," in depth interviews with the key players in the primary school described

previously were conducted by the first author of this paper over a 14 week period. The following key informants were interviewed in an individual and independent fashion: 2 veteran teachers, 1 primary school director, 1 union representative, 1 school supervisor (employee of the state education agency), 1 special education teacher, and the chairman of the state department of education.

All interviews were conducted using a flexible interview guide, in order to allow the informant to describe the practices with which he or she was familiar and his/her perception of the effects these practices have on the school or the educational system as a whole. Every participant consented to participate as long as no video or audio records were made. Thus, field notes made both during and immediately after each interview were the major tools for documenting information. In every case a research assistant also took notes, allowing for comparison checking with the investigator to assure fidelity of the information collected. Where there were differences or omissions in the records, discussion was held to arrive at a consensus on the interpretation of the participant's responses. Informants were advised of the procedures in place for assuring confidentiality and the safeguarding of information prior to consenting to participate.

Data was analyzed and categorized with the help of a second investigator acting as a critical reviewer. For the purpose of validating data obtained in the interview, a focus group was carried out the following semester, with a group of 8 teachers, using as major points of discussion the findings elicited at the first stage of the investigation. Results were organized in 4 different categories of traditions and uses as discussed in the following section.

## Results

### *Practices not addressed in norms*

#### *Automatic pass*

One of the major pervasive practices in Mexican primary schools is the automatic promotion of children to the following grade regardless of their performance and actual mastery of the curricular goals. This action on the part of teachers is tacitly reinforced by pressure from supervisors and directors, and is arguably prompted by the political need to improve school enrollment and promotion rates, widely (and lamentably) considered an indicator of school efficiency.

Another factor promoting this practice is the reality that groups under 20 students are usually cancelled. This results in a transfer of tenured teachers to other schools or the defunding of a position if it is held by a temporary, non-tenured teacher. Thus students are passed to the next grade to prevent crowded groups in the previous year (where, in some cases, they would as repeaters represent 30% of the group) and maintain the minimum number of students to fill the class in the following grade.

Despite this practice, a 12% failure rate is reported nationally in Mexican primary schools (INEGI, 2006), and it is probable that the astonishingly high 49% school failure rate in grade 10 is due to cumulative deficiencies resulting at least in part to this practice. Students promoted by automatic pass are usually beyond any feasible intervention when they are identified in secondary school as lacking minimal academic competencies, given the available resources.

#### *Paper children*

Niños de papel' or 'paper children' are fictitious students reported in the official rosters at the end of the school year, when planners at the state level assign personnel based on

numbers. They are eventually erased, before supervision or discovery at the beginning of the new school year. This practice arises in response to Mexican demographics, which show declining birth rates, foretelling the closure of many classrooms in the primary school system in the near future. Thus, teachers' fear the unavoidable closure of workplaces and the consequent struggle to decide who stays, who retires, who is to be replaced, etc. By influencing passing rates and creating 'paper children,' teachers are able to maintain classrooms open and ensure, at least for one more year, their place in the system.

#### *Holidays and celebrations*

Another major practice of Mexican school personnel is the suspension of activities due to the celebration of a number of official, religious and popular "fiestas." Veteran teachers and directors assert that, particularly in rural settings, classes are suspended for a wide range of reasons. For example, cancellation of classes for the town's annual religious festival (saint's day), union days, pay days, and other events reduce considerably the time available to meet curriculum requirements. Teachers on one hand abide by these traditions; on the other they complain about the lack of time to cover all the topics included in the nationally mandated curriculum.

#### *Bleachers' placement*

This term is a free translation to 'en la banca', which refers to a penalty given to a teacher for diverse personal or labor related problems. It consists in the placement of a teacher or even a director in an administrative "position" in the central offices, with no obligation but to check in and stay put until check out time. These teachers are punished by sitting with literally nothing to do.

Participants argued that this

practice is due to the difficulties in firing teachers for incompetence, irresponsibility, liability or any other reason. All participants were able to quote a real example of this practice in the person of someone they know. Causes cited for this action were alcoholism in a female teacher, rejection from children or parents in two cases, and the imputation of misusing schools funds. Participants disagreed over the utility of protection from the union, but only two cases were noted of teachers being fired: one because of alleged mental disease (drove a motorcycle into the participant's office) and the other for sexual abuse of a child. In this last case, he was also prosecuted.

#### *Practices that modify existing regulation*

##### *Technical Council*

In most schools, the technical council is by regulation the local governing body of a school. Its duties are to organize parental participation, carry out support functions such as extra curricular activities and help the principal in conflict resolution processes and with disciplinary measures.

In practice, these become administrative meetings held periodically to receive instructions from directors and in reality, technical councils have little or no influence on educational practices and on the school climate, quality or functioning. Instead of providing a mechanism for parental participation, the council becomes a mouthpiece for official policy handed down from state level administrators and passed through the director.

#### *Purchase of programs, class plans and exams*

By regulation, teachers are expected to develop their class plan and program every year. However, an extensive practice within the system is the purchase of programs prepared by people specializing in this activity,

many of them former teachers or teachers pursuing extra income. Instead of creating a plan for the sequence of activities for the teaching year, the teacher fulfills the requirement for submission of a plan while actually ignoring the required activities, thereby compromising quality.

#### *Purchase of exams and teaching materials*

Similar to the purchase of annual plans is the purchase by teachers of exams, which are required by regulation. In this case, the exams may be developed by educational publishers or follow the "cottage industry" model described above. It is likely that there will exist a divergence between the contents of these exams and the subject matter actually covered by the individual teacher, invalidating any usefulness the exam may have for assessing student achievement.

##### *Puentes (Bridges)*

Puentes' are an old habit that is rapidly changing with the intervention of the Mexican Congress, which has moved to the nearest Monday all national holidays. This important decision, to be implemented in 2006, aims to avoid the tradition of closing schools the day in between the holiday and the weekend. Until now, schools have routinely closed either the Friday or Monday, when the holiday is a Tuesday or Thursday. This practice is strictly one of custom, and is not allowed under regulation.

#### *Allowable practices without reasonable foundations*

##### *Economic days'*

Economic days' are 9 days per school year which teachers can take off for personal purposes. The only restriction is that the teacher cannot take these days immediately before or after a vacation period. When formally requested, the school

director has to take over the teacher's class. In practice, many students fail to have classes or school services on their teachers' personal days.

#### *Refusal to pension*

Teachers over 75 years old are commonly seen in federally funded public schools functioning as directors or in the classroom. This is because regulations do not establish an age limit to work actively in a school. More than an equity issue, this is an important constraint to innovation, quality improvement and efficiency, since many of these teachers are sick or frankly unfit to teach competently. For many teachers, the idea of having a reduced monthly income due to retirement seems to be unthinkable. Every participant in this study mentioned knowing at least one teacher actively working over 80 years old.

#### *Practices which are against the norms.*

##### *Teachers' self paid replacement*

Economic days' have been mentioned before as a paid absence which is in addition to vacation and not related to sick leave and other rights. In most cases, when a teacher asks for an 'economic day', his/her students have no classes, since no substitute teacher is sent to cover the absence. Thus, good teachers concerned about their students tend to find and pay their own replacement. The existence of the option to use these should be reviewed, since most teachers believe it to be "silly" not to take 'economic days' when they have been defined as a 'right' through union/management negotiation.

#### *Conclusions*

This work has presented some, but by no means all, of the traditions and uses that shape teacher behavior in Mexican schools. In the case of the parti-

cipant informants for this study, these were the conventions that came to mind most readily. This documentation makes clear the potentially negative effect these practices have, directly for students and, through poor use of resources, for the system as a whole.

Returning to Bruner's (2000) point about the need to understand workplace practices within their broader sustaining context, it is evident that the low level of regard that teachers experience in Mexico—concretely demonstrated in the low salary levels— influences their desire to obtain rewards through other means than economic remuneration. The machinations school personnel engage in to maintain classes and therefore teaching positions (described above as 'automatic pass' and 'paper children') demonstrates the high level of concern with stability of employment. Clearly, in order to increase the sense of mission and the efficacy of the educational process itself, a radical shift will be necessary at higher levels than the individual school, and tolerance for the 'rights first' attitude embodied in customary rights and traditions will have to end.

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