



UNCONSTITUTIONAL DEPORTATION OF MEXICAN AMERICANS

I feel that that this country should have done something for its citizens instead of getting rid of them the way they did. The American government said, 'Let's get rid of the Mexicans since they're the closest to their native lands.' (Castañeda, 1972)

Introduction

Many educators are committed to multicultural education and are constantly seeking an inclusive curriculum voicing the diversity of the many cultural groups in the United States. The influential work of James Banks (1981, 1997, 2001) has encouraged a generation of educators to design a multicultural curriculum.

Yet while this task remains an important goal for all educators so students may develop an understanding of their own history as well as a respect for the

history of others, exclusion of the historical experience of the other is still apparent in many social science textbooks adopted by local and state boards of education.

This article will explore the topic of the unconstitutional deportation of Mexican Americans (American born citizens) during the 1930s and advocate for its inclusion in elementary and secondary social studies curricula, especially through the use of family history and oral history. Actual quotes from oral history interviews conducted by the author and others are included here. This deportation is estimated to have involved 1-2 million people across the United States, with the majority of individuals involved being American born (Balderrama, Rodriguez, 1995).

American history regrettably has other examples of intolerance and the violation of the constitutional rights of various ethnic groups, such as the internment of Japanese Americans in relocation camps during World War II and the forced relocation of Native Americans to reservations. More recently, we have seen acts of

intolerance and suspicion aimed at citizens of Middle Eastern origin following the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Thus, the work of educators is to teach children about the mistakes made by our citizens and government during social, political, economic, and war crises. Teaching about these violations can help create a more just and accepting pluralistic society so that such acts are never committed again.

Unconstitutional Deportation of Mexican Americans in the 1930s

The Great Depression was the most severe economic catastrophe of the twentieth-century with vast unemployment and underemployment. Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States were especially vulnerable during this time of social and political as well as economic crisis. State governments passed legislation prohibiting the employment of aliens on work projects financed by government

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DURING THE 1930s:

A Family History & Oral History



By Christine Valenciana

funds. Many private companies and industries also adopted an anti-Mexican policy in their hiring practices.

These policies had a profound impact on the Mexican population, because the larger American society regarded “all Mexicans as Mexicans.” There was no distinction between Mexican Nationals and American citizens of Mexican descent. So employment was especially difficult to obtain for Mexican Americans as well as Mexicans.

The federal government during the Herbert Hoover Administration also conducted widespread public roundups or raids in search of “aliens” perceived to be taking jobs away from American citizens. These raids created fear and anxiety in the Mexican population.

However, the greatest challenge for the Mexican American community was the local campaign by private companies and public welfare agencies of “repatriation.” “Repatriation” was a propaganda term created by the local agencies to mask the unconstitutional deportation of Mexicans, many who were legal residents and had

lived in the United States for decades along with their American-born children (Examination of the Unconstitutional Deportation and Coerced Emigration of Legal Residents and U.S. Citizens of Mexican Descent, 2003; Balderrama & Rodríguez, 1995). This policy was presented as a way to stop a draining of government funding and to rid the country of those who were not “real” Americans.

American government leaders and American society embarked on the policy of repatriation while refusing to recognize key historical factors about the Mexican presence in the United States. Mexican immigration during the early part of the 20th century had provided essential labor throughout the United States. Many of these Mexican immigrants had been living in the United States for as long as twenty-five years and their families had become firmly rooted in the economy, life style, and culture of American society. Most of the children of these immigrants were born and raised in the United States, with the majority experiencing public education.

They were Americans not just by birth

but also were culturally American. Mexico was at best an ancestral home. Nevertheless, Mexican and Mexican American families were desperate for work. Thus, many were coerced into migrating to Mexico by offers of cheap one-way train tickets. Other Mexican American families became so desperate that they went on their own in old trucks and cars to remote areas of Mexico. The Mexican government also enticed families with invitations to develop the Mexican hinterland (Balderrama & Valenciana, 2004a; Balderrama & Rodríguez, 1995). These experiences have been poignantly told in oral history interviews such as the following:

Nosotros, con diez otras familias fuimos de San Pedro hasta aquí en troques. No habia carretera desde Ensenada. No habia nada aquí.

We, along with ten other families left from San Pedro [San Pedro, California], in trucks, to here [Punta San Ysidro, Baja California, Mexico]. There was no road from Ensenada. There was nothing here. (Balderrama & Valenciana, 2004a)

Especially important for educators is the experience of elementary and secondary school age children who were expelled to a land which they had never known and frequently encountered living conditions more harsh than their American home (Balderrama & Rodríguez, 1995). The interviewee below explains the way that women had to cart water to do everyday tasks which had previously been done in a house with running water and a washing machine:

In the center of this mesón [inn] there was a noria which is a long well. To get the water out of the noria you had to turn the handle around and around to raise the bucket. That's the way I used to pump the water out so I could do my washing. It was a tough life and it was twelve trips back and forth to carry the water. That was about five blocks that I had to go. I never did learn to carry water on my head. I carried it Chinese style. Later when we moved to the ranch it was the same situation. There wasn't dirt but sand that I had to walk over and that was really hard. (Martinez-Southard, 1971)

Many were accustomed to urban life and were suddenly thrust into a largely rural environment where there was no running water such as the situation described above. Many children were forced into child labor for survival and school became a luxury that their families could not afford.

We had to walk approximately fifteen to twenty miles to school. I resented the way we were taken from the United States and taken to Mexico and we had to struggle to live in a place where we had nothing. (Balderrama & Valenciana, 2004b)

Children who had already begun school in the United States had their education severely interrupted:

This was a setback for us. I could have gone to school, my family, my brothers and sisters and I had a better life here. I only went to school for 2½ years. We were living with my grandmother and aunt and they didn't want us living there anymore. (Valenciana, 2003a)

Some families moved to such remote areas where there were no schools. Language usage and preference also played an important role.

In the United States children of Mexican descent were punished for speaking Spanish at school and consequently spoke little if any Spanish (Hendricks, 1975; González, 1990). These children were educated in English and almost without exception read and wrote in that language exclusively:

My sister and I would write to each other in English. My sister would send me letters from Mexico although I don't know

where she got the money for the stamps. (Valenciana, 2003b)

In Mexico they were then forced to learn Spanish, in order to survive and continue their education:

We had to be tutored by a lady that lived right next to one of my relatives when we were in Mexico. I guess she understood English because she tutored us. We used to speak to her in English and she used to speak Spanish to us. She taught us how to learn Spanish, and then we started going to schools wherever we were living. We didn't understand Spanish. We didn't know how to read or write it. We spoke a little Spanish, but not enough I don't think. (Castañeda, 1972)

Many families only survived by relying on relatives for shelter and food. Mexico also was experiencing the Great Depression and resources were already limited. Families were often forced to live in unwelcoming circumstances:

I remember when we got to my grandma's house...there was a lot of commotion...my mother was telling me to hurry up and eat because we were imposing. My grandmother was imposing. My mother was real nice but my father's sisters...they used to call me *pocha* [Term for Mexican Americans often used by Mexicans in a derogatory way]. (Valenciana, 2003a)



There was little to assist the repatriates and their American born children (Balderrama & Rodríguez, 1995).

"Repatriados" became a word of disdain by many Mexicans resentful of their presence and fearful of what affect this would have on their livelihoods (Balderrama & Rodríguez, 1995). The following interviewee sadly explains the sting of feeling unwanted in a foreign land:

This family that we lived with had six children, three girls, then three boys. The oldest boy used to call me, repatriada. I don't think that I felt that I was a repatriada because I was an American citizen. (Castañeda, 1972)

Young people with limited education were locked into the poverty economy of Mexico. Many of these young people longed to return to their home of birth, the United States and did so as long as they had proof of their American birth (Castañeda, 1972; Balderrama & Valenciana, 2003; Valenciana, 2003a). In the following interview, this young woman who left Riverside, California, when she was sixteen years old explains how her desire to return home to the United States was finally realized:

I used to miss the states so much! I would cry every night because I was real lonely...I would write to my sister and I told her about my problem. I still had hopes of coming to my country. This was in 1951 that I came back to the states. She sent me the fare from Gómez Palacio to Colton [California]. The immigration people came on the train and asked all tourists to please take out their passports and all your other papers...I told him [immigration official] that I was to meet my sister who was waiting for me the next day. I had my papers, everything...my birth certificate...that was it... to prove that I was born here in the states. (Martinez-Southard, 1971)

Even though they had the legal right to return to the United States many had forgotten English and were faced with re-learning the language of their elementary and secondary school days in the United States. Due to their limited education their options for employment were severely affected. However, many returned home to the United States during World War II to join the war effort by serving in the American armed forces and working in war industries on the home front:

Although I regretted what the American government did to me and my family...I am an American. I wanted to serve my country. So I went to serve my country from 1943-1946. (Balderrama, Valenciana, 2004b)

Recently, American history's dark chapter of unconstitutional deportation of Mexican Americans has received public attention with media coverage and legislative action.

Socio-Political Action and Media Coverage in Behalf of Unconstitutional Deportation Survivors

On July 15, 2003, the California State Senate conducted public hearings on unconstitutional deportation and coerced emigration of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The hearings have resulted in pending legislation to establish a commission investigating repatriation and to extend the statute of limitations for submission of suits by survivors.

MALDEF, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, also filed the law suit of *Emilia Castañeda vs. the State of California, Los Angeles County, and the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce* in behalf of repatriation program survivors. In addition, efforts are underway sponsored by Congresswoman Hilda Solis to introduce similar legislation at the federal level.

Moreover, the hearings and law suit have resulted in extensive newspaper, radio, and television coverage (Jones, 2003; Amador 2003, Rodriguez, 2003; News Hour with Jim Leher, 2003; Magagnini, 2003). The forced expulsion of Mexican Americans is now receiving for the first time sustained public attention in the Mexican American community and larger American society.

Teachers can introduce students to this topic by using some of the above-mentioned secondary sources in social studies and language arts classes in the elementary as well as secondary classroom. These sources provide excellent sources for content area reading and critical discussions as well as other language arts activities and can be related to state content area standards.

Towards Inclusion in Social Studies Curriculum and Multicultural Education

Even though unconstitutional deportation of Mexican Americans has been receiving increasing public attention especially in California, a sample of social studies textbooks for the State of California reveals that many make no specific mention of this important historical fact. However, one simply states, "Many Mexican immigrants were sent back to Mexico" (Stuckey & Salvucci, p. 774), thereby not recognizing the deportation of U.S. citizens.

Furthermore, this exclusion is apparent in texts adopted for the fourth grade as well as eighth grade classes in History of the United States. However, the expulsion of American citizens of Mexican descent can be taught in accordance with California History-Social Science Content Standards for fourth grade specifically:

4.4.3 Discuss immigration and migration to California between 1850 and 1900, including the diverse composition of those who came; the countries of origin and their relative locations; and conflicts and accords among the diverse groups;

4.4.4. Describe rapid immigration, internal migration, settlement and the growth of towns and cities (e.g., Los Angeles);

4.4.5 Discuss the effects of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and World War II on California. (California Department of Education, 2000, p. 62-63)

Moreover, the eleventh grade History Social Science Content Standard also provides an opportunity for the teaching of unconstitutional deportation:

11.6.2 Understand the explanation of the principal causes of the Great Depression and the steps taken by the Federal Reserve, Congress, and Presidents Herbert

Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt to combat the economic crisis.

11.6.3 Discuss the human toll of the Depression, natural disasters and unwise agricultural practices and their effects on the depopulation of rural regions and on political movements of the left and right, with particular to the Dust Bowl refugees and their social and economic impacts on California. (California Department of Education, 2000, p.153)

It is therefore imperative that the adoption of future textbooks give attention to unconstitutional deportation of Mexican Americans. Inclusion of unconstitutional deportation explicitly stated in the state content standards would also address the goals of multicultural education as outlined by Banks (1981, 1997, 2001, 2003).

Family and Oral History

Probably the most important reason for inclusion of unconstitutional deportation of Mexican Americans in our curriculum has been the growing number of survivors and their families. These have come forward to share their experiences in public forums and media: "We at least, an apology, a public apology" (Jimenez, Expulsion of U.S. Citizens, 2003). They hope that the injustice of unconstitutional deportation will be recognized (Examination of the Unconstitutional Deportation, 2003). This wish and sentiment is made clear:



I want to let people know what happened and see what the government did wrong. I do not want money. (Balderrama, Valenciana, 2003)

In seeking justice for the violation of the rights of Mexican Americans citizens, they also have emerged as a teaching resource. Their respective actions have important implications fulfilling the call of James Banks' for social justice and the study of history as it relates to many diverse groups. Moreover, awareness can contribute to understanding the history of a growing ethnic group for all elementary and secondary school children.

Other resources include the few printed secondary sources, especially Balderrama and Rodríguez (1995), which is quite appropriate for high school students. On the other hand, the media, both television and public radio, has produced some significant yet short discussions of unconstitutional deportation (News Hour with Jim Leher, 2003).

However, the best teaching tools might be the incorporation of oral history testimony by survivors. Segments of oral history interviews appear in *Decade of Betrayal*, however, the most extensive collection is at the Center for Oral and Public Policy Center, California State University, Fullerton.

Moreover, oral history sources are forthcoming from many survivors and their families, because some families are recognizing that the survivors are senior citizens primarily in their 70s and 80s. They do not want this history to die with this generation, as stated by Ignacio Piña in an oral history interview: "Let people know what happened and see what the government did wrong" (Balderrama & Valenciana, 2003).

Elementary and secondary teachers might consider joining in documenting unconstitutional deportation by assigning oral history projects whereby students can conduct first-hand primary research on this important topic with family members. Oral history is a vastly underused teaching strategy that helps students learn a powerful research strategy for uncovering the history of their families and communities and also facilitates the development of language arts including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students will gain first-hand knowledge of this event by hearing the voices of survivors and their families. Students can gain valuable writing experience by writing about their interviewees' stories while giving them a voice.

An excellent way to gather family histories related to unconstitutional deportation is by teaching students simple interview strategies for conducting family and community oral history. I begin with "3 Step Interview" as explained by Kagan (1994) in his teacher-friendly publication *Cooperative Learning*. I have successfully used this strategy with elementary school students, secondary school students, and my teacher education students.

Within a matter of minutes students can learn how to interview another student, practice during class, and then formulate questions for simple interviews on various informal and academic topics. Teachers can then work with students to formulate more questions for an oral history interview of a family member. Teachers can play oral history interviews for students to hear which are available through university and local oral history collections.

In addition, teachers can log onto various websites for information for teaching students about simple oral history strategies suitable for elementary and secondary teaching. Some outstanding websites through the Library of Congress provide a wealth of knowledge

for teaching students about oral history, important oral history projects, and actual interviews such as Learning Page, Veteran's Project, Voices from the Dust Bowl, Voices from the Days of Slavery, and the American and Folklife Center.

Monographs such as *Oral History Projects in Your Classroom* and *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* are excellent teacher resources for helping students conduct interviews with family and community members. Administrators can and should support teachers in their endeavors to document this particular topic as part of family history. Family history through oral history can be a part of the school's family outreach. A bibliography of the above sources is included below.

Both elementary and secondary teachers can use the secondary sources of recent and current media coverage, particularly newspaper articles including but not limited to: *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 16, 2003; *La Opinión*, July 13, 14, and September 15, 2003; *The Guardian*, July 17, 2003; *Sacramento Bee*, July 16, 2003; *San Jose Mercury News*, July 18, 2003; and *Orange County Register*, July 19, 2003.

By using the above mentioned primary and secondary sources, students and teachers will involve themselves in dynamic curriculum development and acquaint students with oral history through interviewing family and community members. Such instruction has many possibilities for students and educators to take action as suggested by Banks (1981, 1997, 2001).

Toward Inclusion of Unconstitutional Deportation

Educators can advocate for the specific inclusion of this topic in local and state curriculum. As mentioned previously, current California history-social science contents are written so that the teaching of mass expulsion of American citizens is an option. Yet educators along with survivors, their families, and their communities also can demand that particular content standards directly address this topic. The California Federation of Teachers recently adopted a resolution calling for such action on unconstitutional deportation of Mexican Americans during the 1930s:

Be it further resolved that the CFT advocate for the adoption in California Social Studies Curricula information about this little known history... (California Federation of Teachers, Policy 34.04, 2004)

Social justice action by educators such as this can also be taken to local and state

boards of education for important policy changes in the curriculum.

The developing awareness and activity among survivors, their families, educators, and the Mexican American community, along with the media and larger American society, are "educating citizens in a multicultural society" (Banks, 1997). It is multicultural education at its best. Most importantly, these developments have given voice to people previously unheard by the vast majority of Americans.

Their experiences are yet to be heard by most Mexican American as well as other students. The inclusion of unconstitutional deportation of Mexican Americans of the 1930s must take its rightful place in the curriculum and history which all students and citizens learn in order to promote a truly democratic, diverse, inclusive, and compassionate society.

Family history can and should be part of our inclusive multicultural history. Hopefully, it also will assist in stopping more acts of intolerance and violation of civil and human rights in American society especially today when threats of terrorism are endangering civil rights.



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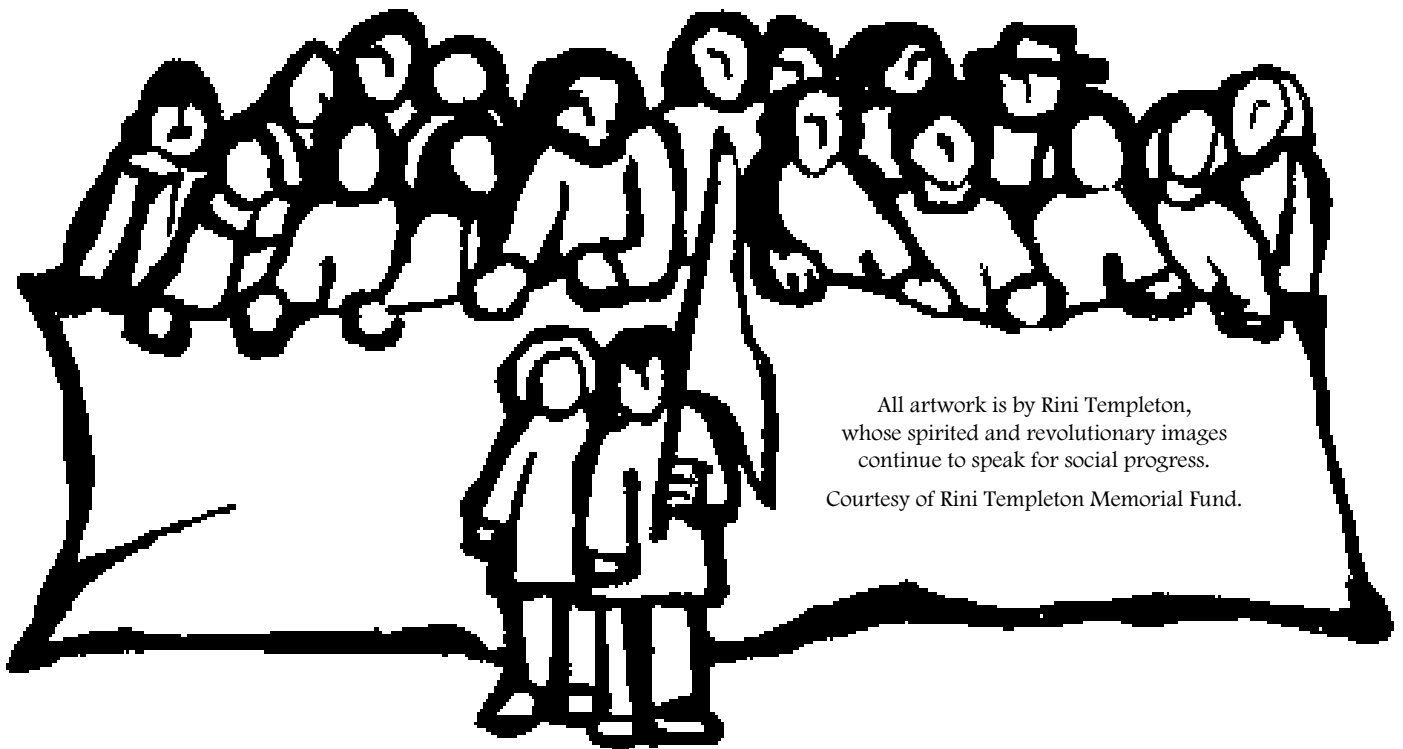
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