

Immigrants and their children: an historical perspective

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Abstract: Debates in the United States through the 19th and 20th centuries over whether immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe could be assimilated, and the role of public schools and of ethnic institutions in this process, including changing policies toward the languages of immigrant families.

Key words: immigrant, religion, culture, language, policy

At a time when Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal are wrestling with the many challenges posed by the influx of immigrants from outside the European Union, and debating how their educational systems should respond to the needs of the children and even grandchildren of those immigrants, it may be helpful to remember how the United States responded to the arrival of millions of immigrants from Southern Europe a hundred years ago. The discussion which follows places this within the context of evolving American policies about the education of the children of immigrants, especially with respect to their home languages.

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It is impossible to understand the varied attitudes toward immigrants to the United States, and the changing educational prescriptions for their children, without taking into account the ebb and flow of different immigrant groups, in the context of an American economy which has made ever more demands for skills learned in school. Between 1820 and 1996, 63 million legal immigrants arrived in the United States. Germans were, cumulatively, the largest group, with 7.1 million, followed by Mexicans, with 5.5 million; it should be noted that 60% of the Mexican immigrants over the 176-year period had arrived in the last 15 years. Other groups of immigrants, in order, were from Italy (5.4 million), the United Kingdom (5.2 million), Ireland (4.8 million), Canada (4.4 million – though many Irish immigrants came via Canada and would have been counted in this category), and Russia (which used to include much of Poland and the Baltic states – 3.8 million, primarily Jews).

Immigrants who arrived before the 1840s were, for the most part, similar to the native population if not superior in education and ambition; they were rarely considered a problem. It was with the arrival of large numbers of Irish and German Catholics in the two decades before the Civil War that immigrants began to be seen as a threat to American society. Catholic Bishop Hughes of New York, in his attack on the schools of the Public School Society as unfit for Catholic children, quoted a textbook that warned that immigration could make America “‘the common sewer of Ireland,’ full of drunken and depraved ‘Paddies’” (Tyack, 1974, p. 85).

We should not underestimate the shock of the sudden wave of immigration to cities like Boston, previously largely homogeneous, which in a single year (1847) added more than 37,000 Irish immigrants to its population of 114,000. The Catholic population of New York City city increased from about 1,300 in 1800 to 100,000 by 1850. Between 1845 and 1854 immigration increased the American population by 17.6 percent.

After many decades of essentially unrestricted admission, apart from laws in 1862 seeking to prevent the importation of Chinese ‘coolies’ “to be held for service or labor,” and in 1875 barring “convicts and women imported for immoral purposes,” Congress imposed restrictions in 1882 excluding an extensive list of ‘undesirable’ applicants for admission. In 1891, no doubt inspired by the assassination of President Garfield in 1881 and the Haymarket

Riot in 1886, this list was expanded to include “anarchists (or persons who believe in or advocate the overthrow by force of violence of the government of the United States or of all government or forms of laws, or the assassination of public officials” (Grose, 1906, p. 310). Handlin notes that “these minimal controls reflected no disposition to check the total volume of immigration” (Handlin, 1951, p. 287).

Late in the 19th century and early in the 20th, it was the turn of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, widely considered by many Americans to come from “inferior stock” though much needed by an expanding economy. First and second generation immigrants represented about 60 percent of the population of America’s twelve largest cities in the early 20th century, and were 72 percent of the residents of New York City, 67 percent of those of Chicago, and 64 percent of those of Boston.

A leading spokesman for the immigrant restriction movement wrote, “emphatically too many people are now coming over here; too many of an undesirable sort. In 1902 over seven tenths were from races who do not rapidly assimilate with the customs and institutions of this country” (Prescott Hall, in Grose, 1906, p. 122). These new immigrant groups were “almost wholly ignorant of American ideals and standards. There is a vast difference between the common ideas of these immigrants and those from the more enlightened and progressive northern nations. So there is in the type of character and the customs and manners.” As a result, “immigration is steadily changing the character of our civilization” (Grose, 1906, p. 126, 233).

A more hopeful response to immigration was given by Josiah Strong, on behalf of the American Home Missionary Society, the Congregational organization which played such an important role in the education of Southern blacks after Emancipation. Strong’s book *Our Country*, first published in 1886 and then in a revised version in 1891, was widely read: “one hundred and seventy-five thousand copies were sold before 1916, and individual chapters were reprinted in newspapers and magazines, and published separately in pamphlet form.” Indeed, the Librarian of Congress, in 1916, compared its impact with that of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Herbst, 1963, p. ix).

Although Strong sounded the usual warnings about immigration, writing that “during the last ten years we have suffered a peaceful invasion by an army

more than four times as vast as the estimated number of Goths and Vandals that swept over Southern Europe and overwhelmed Rome,” he also expressed optimism that, with the right efforts by Protestant ‘home mission’ organizations, the newcomers – or at least their children – could be transformed into real Americans and be a source of strength for the nation. Strong boldly redefined ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in terms of “two great ideas, which are closely related.” One was civil liberty, the other Protestantism in its English and American form. The Anglo-Saxon ‘race,’ he argued, was constantly being expanded as, under American conditions, new immigrant groups were brought under these two influences. Charles Darwin had shown that the process of natural selection would favor those with such superior qualities and, “if the dangers of immigration . . . can be successfully met for the next few years, until it has passed its climax, it may be expected to add value to the amalgam which will constitute the new Anglo-Saxon race of the New World.” Within a few decades, “this powerful race will move down upon Mexico, down upon Central and South America, out upon the islands of the sea, over upon Africa and beyond. And can any one doubt that the result of this competition of races will be the ‘survival of the fittest’? . . . Whether the extinction of inferior races before the advancing Anglo-Saxon seems to the reader sad or otherwise, it certainly appears probable” (Strong, 1963, p. 200, 210-11, 214-15).

Strong was expressing a significant variation on a classically racist view; his argument allowed for assimilation of other European peoples (though presumably neither of Asians nor of blacks) to the dominant Anglo-Saxon ‘race’; the crucial distinction was not ancestry but thorough acceptance of the civic and Protestant virtues. Thus he concluded his book, “Christianize the immigrant and he will be easily Americanized. Christianity is the solvent of all race antipathies. Give the Romanist [Catholic] a pure gospel and he will cease to be a Romanist. . . . the Christian [that is, Protestant] Church can do far more than political economists toward a reconciliation of social classes” (Strong, 1963, p. 247).

Another influential writer on the subject was Prescott Hall, whose *Immigration and Its Effects Upon the United States* first appeared in 1906. Hall warned against optimism that the experience of life in the United States would transform the immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe.

“The racial effects of immigration are more far-reaching and potent than all others,” he wrote. In a typical – for the times – invocation of the authority of science to a social issue, he argued that “recent discoveries in biology show that in the long run heredity is far more important than environment or education.” After all, “education, imitation of others, will do much to produce outward conformity, but racial characteristics will withstand the influence of centuries.” Like Strong, Hall drew an optimistic conclusion, but it was on more unambiguously racial grounds: “through our power of regulate immigration, we have a unique opportunity to exercise artificial selection on an enormous scale.” It was the duty of the present generation, Hall urged, not only toward the United States but toward the world as a whole “not only to preserve in this country the conditions necessary to successful democracy, but to develop here the finest race of men and the highest civilization” (Hall, 1908, p. 99, 101, 321).

The danger, according to Hall, was that America would fail to select carefully enough who would be allowed to enter the country, and that ‘native’ Americans would restrict their own birth rate in order to provide superior advantages to their children. Citing marriage rates of natives and the foreign-born in Massachusetts, he concluded “that probably the native population cannot hold its own, and that it seems to be dying out.” “A certain type was developed in this country, under relatively homogeneous conditions,” Hall pointed out, asking “is there not danger that in becoming a cosmopolitan people we shall not merely change but shall cease to have any distinctive type at all?” The political and social institutions of the United States “were established by a relatively homogeneous community, consisting of the best elements of population selected by the circumstances under which they came in the new world.” On the other hand, the contemporary immigration was “an artificial selection by the transportation companies of the worst elements of European and Asiatic peoples. If the founders of the nation had been of the recent types, can we suppose for a moment this country would enjoy its present civilization?” (Hall, 1908, p. 113, 173, 320-21).

Despite such warnings, the United States – in full industrial expansion a hundred years ago – needed its immigrant workforce, just as Western Europe, with its demographic decline, does today. In 1907 alone, immigrants added 3%

to the labor force, which would be equivalent to 9 million immigrants a year – many times the actual numbers – today (Fix and Passel, 1994, p. 21). Indeed, industry was highly dependent on immigrants: “by 1900 the bulk of the employees in each of the leading American industries was of foreign origin” (Jones, 1960, p. 312), and twenty years later one out of five white urban residents had been born in a foreign country and another thirty percent were second generation (Lieberson, 1980, p. 23). The schools faced a special challenge: when the five boroughs were united into New York City, in 1898, there were 400,000 pupils in its schools; by 1914, there were almost 808,000, including 277,000 Jewish children and hundreds of thousands of other immigrant origins (Brumberg, 1986, p. 3).

Not all native white Americans took a pessimistic view of this new immigration; to some evangelical Protestants, for example, it seemed a great opportunity. “It is not a question as to whether the aliens will come,” one wrote early in the 20th century. “They have come, millions of them; they are coming, at the rate of a million a year. . . . They form today the raw material of the American citizenship of tomorrow. What they will be and do then depends largely upon what our American Protestant Christianity does for them now.” The problem of the cultural disconnect between the newer immigrants and American society was exacerbated by the conditions under which many of them lived in urban slums. “When we permit such an environment to exist, and practically force the immigrant into it because we do not want him for a next-door neighbor, we can hardly condemn him for forming foreign colonies which maintain foreign customs and are impervious to American influences” (Grose, 1906, p. 9).

An Immigration Restriction League was founded in Boston in 1894, but it was not until organized labor joined the effort that political momentum developed. In the wave of xenophobia accompanying World War I, a requirement of literacy for admission to the country was imposed in 1917. The expectation that this would exclude immigration by the peasants of southern and eastern Europe, while permitting continued immigration from northwestern Europe, was disappointed: “peasants, who until then had had no incentive to do so, now set themselves the task of learning to read, and

succeeded . . . and the proportion of Mediterranean and Balkan folk among the new arrivals proved no smaller than before” (Handlin, 1951, p. 291).

The phase of *qualitative* restrictions ended with the National Origins Act of 1924, placing strict *quantitative* restrictions, explicitly designed to limit immigration from the countries of origin that were considered less desirable sources of future citizens. After the restrictions placed on immigration to the United States in the 1920s, the need for unskilled labor in northern industry was met in large part by internal migration of both black and white families from the rural south. An additional source of labor was blacks from the British West Indies, who were able to benefit from the generous quota for British immigrants, subject to meeting literacy qualifications, until the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952. Puerto Ricans, as United States citizens, enjoyed an unrestricted right to migrate in search of employment and better lives.

Immigrant culture as a threat

As the anxiety about Catholicism as irreconcilable with American life began to fade (though it was still a factor as late as the 1950s), what we could call *cultural* differences came to be the primary concern. The first annual report of the federal Commissioner of Education, in 1870, mentioned “the anxieties awakened by impending Asiatic immigration” (in Cohen, 1974, 3, p. 1409). Another federal official warned that Chinese immigrants should not be allowed to remain “a foreign element, as fungous or parasitic.” Instead, “the thorough Americanization of this new element is the comprehensive result which all political and individual endeavors in regard to them should seek. It is to be assimilated to the highest, completest form of our civilization, as intelligent, free, Christian.” To this end, they should be encouraged to achieve “a pure, uncorrupt English,” since “any corruption of our noble speech by foreign dialectic intermixtures, and patois, should be everywhere and by every means discountenanced and opposed.” Every effort should be made to prevent “the isolation of foreigners, and especially of Chinamen, into separate villages, towns, or wards” (in Cohen, 1974, 3, p. 1765-67).

Children of Chinese immigrants were in fact segregated by law in a number of states in the 19th century. Some twenty thousand Chinese were in California by 1852, many working on railroad construction, and they often experienced discrimination and even violence: 22 were lynched in Los Angeles in 1871. As the economy slowed in the 1870s, a central demand of the white labor movement in California was for the prevention of Chinese competition for jobs, and the two political parties competed in supporting restrictive measures. "The vote in 1880 and 1884 demonstrated conclusively that the Chinese issue determined the electoral vote of California. And, since the strength of the two major parties was so nearly equal during these years, the Pacific Coast States held the balance of power and largely determined national elections on the basis of a single issue" (McWilliams, in Sung, 1967, p. 49).

As we have seen, the California Legislature enacted a requirement during its 1859-1860 session that "Negroes, Mongolians, and Indians, shall not be admitted into the public schools," while allowing local school boards to establish separate schools for such children; this was reaffirmed in the school code adopted ten years later. The state issued a regulation in 1885 that gave local school officials "the power to exclude children of filthy or vicious habits, or children suffering from contagious or infectious diseases, and also to establish separate schools for children of Mongolian or Chinese descent" and exclude those children from other schools (Cohen, 1974, 3, p. 1761-1763).

A report by local authorities in San Francisco, in 1884, reported 722 "children of Chinese parentage in Chinatown," mostly born in California but "in every attribute of life they are Mongolian." Admitting them to the common public schools was rejected since

speaking no language but the Chinese, born and nurtured in filth and degradation, it is scarcely probable that any serious attempt could be made to mingle them with the other children of our public schools without kindling a blaze of revolution in our midst. . . . how to deal with this constantly increasing number of Mongolian children, born and nurtured in such conditions of immorality and degradation, becomes indeed a more serious problem than any which the American people have ever yet been called upon to solve, not excepting the abrogation of African slavery and the horrors which attended its achievement. the laws of morality, and the law of self-protection, must compel our own people to sternly prohibit them from mingling with

our children in the public schools, or as companions and playmates. . . what we shall do with the Chinese children is a question that may well rest in abeyance. Meanwhile, guard well the doors of our public schools, that they do not enter (in Cohen, 1974, 3, p. 1769-70).

Twenty years later (1905), the same board took the stern view that “co-mingling” the children of Japanese immigrants “with Caucasian children is harmful and demoralizing in the extreme, the ideas entertained and practiced by people of Mongolian or Japanese affiliation being widely divergent from those of Americans;” thus “our children should not be placed in any position where their youthful impressions may be affected by association with pupils of the Mongolian race.” Japanese economic competition led to the formation that year by San Francisco labor unions of the Asian Exclusion League, which persuaded the San Francisco Board of Education to segregate Japanese children as Chinese children were already segregated. Under pressure from President Theodore Roosevelt, who (for diplomatic reasons) pointed out “the testimony as to the brightness, cleanliness, and good behavior of these Japanese children in the schools,” the Board backed down and agreed not to segregate children born in the United States (Cohen, 1974, 5, p. 2971-73; Cohen 4, xxxviii), but not until after Roosevelt had felt it necessary to ask for a ship-by-ship comparison of the Japanese and American navies in case of war (Sung, 1967, p. 69).

Nor was discrimination against Asian pupils confined to the West Coast. The United States Supreme Court ruled in 1927, in *Gong Lum v. Rice* (275 U.S. 78) that school officials in Mississippi could exclude a Chinese-American child from the local “white” school. Martha Lum had “the right to attend and enjoy the privileges of a common school education in a colored school” or her father could send her to a private school at his own expense.

The immigrants who were arriving from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries seemed, to many commentators in progressive circles, an inferior “stock” which threatened to degrade American life. The National Council of Education was advised by one of its committees, in 1891, that “foreign influence has begun a system of colonization [of the United States] with a purpose of preserving foreign languages and traditions

and proportionately of destroying distinctive Americanism. It has made alliance with religion” (in Tyack, 1978, p. 72), a transparent reference to Roman Catholicism. A leading social scientist of the Progressive Era wrote, in 1907, “If in America our boasted freedom from the evils of social classes fails to be vindicated in the future, the reasons will be found in the immigration of races and classes incompetent to share in our democratic opportunities.” After all, he pointed out, “race differences are established in the very blood and physical constitution. They are most difficult to eradicate, and they yield only to the slow processes of the centuries. Races may change their religions, their forms of government, their modes of industry, and their languages, but underneath all these changes they may continue the physical, mental, and moral capacities and incapacities which determine the real character of their religion, government, industry, and literature” (Commons, 1920, p. 12, 7).

It was on the basis of assumptions about fundamental cultural incompatibility that many reformers argued for deliberate efforts to ‘Americanize’ immigrants, rather than allowing acculturation to occur through the slow process of generational succession. The danger, after all, was that the conditions under which immigrants lived and worked would simply solidify their estrangement from the majority. “Made to feel like an alien, he is likely to remain at heart an alien; whereas the very safety and welfare and Christian civilization of our country depend in no small degree upon transforming him into a true American,” urged a book published by the American Baptist Home Mission Society in 1906 (Grose, 1906, p. 237). One of the most influential educators in the country, Ellwood Cubberley, wrote in 1909 that

these southern and eastern Europeans are of a very different type from the north Europeans who preceded them. Illiterate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and initiative, and not possessing the Anglo-Teutonic conceptions of law, order, and government, their coming has served to dilute tremendously our national stock, and to corrupt our civil life. . . . Our task is to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government, and to awaken in them a reverence for our democratic institutions and for those things in our national life which we as a people hold to be of abiding worth (in Cohen, 1974, 4, p. 2162).

Madison Grant, in his highly-influential attack on immigration, *The Passing of the Great Race*, wrote that “it has taken us fifty years to learn that speaking English, wearing good clothes, and going to school and to church, does not transform a negro [sic] man into a white man. . . . We shall have a similar experience with the Polish Jew, whose dwarf stature, peculiar mentality, and ruthless concentration on self-interest are being engrafted upon the stock of the nation” (Grant, 1918, p. 16).

Such negative stereotypes seemed to be confirmed by results of early intelligence testing, during and after World War I, which concluded that 83 percent of the Jewish, 87 percent of the Russian, 80 percent of the Hungarian, and 79 percent of the Italian immigrants to the United States were “mentally defective” (Bastenier & Dassetto, 1993, p. 71).

More optimistic observers insisted upon the capacity of the public school to transform the children of immigrants into ‘real Americans.’ “Only the common school could train ‘every child in our own tongue and habits of thought, and principles of government and aims of life.’ One might trust ‘parental instinct’ to educate an individual child, but the state required homogeneity; ‘the right of preservation of a body politic’ took precedence over all other rights” (Tyack, 1974, p. 75). It was this impulse which led to several decades of emphasis upon ‘Americanization’ through schools and other agencies of popular education like settlement houses and civic associations. In particular, “for the immigrant children the public schools are the sluiceways into Americanism. When the stream of alien childhood flows through them, it will issue into the reservoirs of national life with the Old World taints filtered out, and the qualities retained that make for loyalty and good citizenship” (Grose, 1906, p. 248).

A few voices, however, were raised for understanding American society as pluralistic, so that immigrant groups could preserve many of their particularities without thereby failing to become Americans. Jane Addams of Chicago’s famous inner-city settlement, Hull House, noted in 1908 that “the public school is the great savior of the immigrant district, and the one agency which inducts the children into the changed conditions of American life,” but expressed concern that the public school “in some way loosens them from the

authority and control of their parents, and tends to send them, without a sufficient rudder and power of self-direction, into the perilous business of living.” It would be far better, she urged, to welcome immigrant children “on the basis of the resources which they represent and the contributions which they bring” (in Cohen, 1974, 4, p. 2195-97).

The Americanizers insisted, however, that it was precisely necessary that the immigrant child be “weaned away from the standards and traditions of its home;” the answer was “to Americanize the parents as well.” On the other hand, “many of the ethnic parochial schools claimed that they Americanized children even more effectively than the public schools, in part because they built on rather than destroyed family, religious, and ethnic traditions” (Tyack, 1974, p. 237, 242)

This contention was rejected by Horace Kallen of the New School for Social Research, in “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” (1915), who warned that the americanization project as commonly conceived “would require the complete nationalization of education, the abolition of every form of private and parochial school, the abolition of instruction in tongues other than English, and the concentration of the teaching of history and literature upon the English tradition” (in Cohen, 1974, 4, p. 2177). One of the strongest voices for the acceptance of cultural pluralism, Kallen would later oppose the efforts of the some Progressive educators to use the public schools for indoctrination in their version of ‘Democracy’ (Beineke, 1998, p. 203).

Kallen was prophetic; in the excitement caused by American entry into the First World War, a number of states did pass laws requiring that instruction be in English. Kallen was prophetic about private schools as well. In Oregon a referendum backed by the Ku Klux Klan and other anti-immigrant groups required that all children between 8 and 16 attend public schools and only public schools. Only in this way, the proponents urged, could social unity be achieved. The public schools would serve to blend Americans into a single people with shared loyalties and would minimize the effects of religious and other differences. A constitutional amendment was on the ballot in Michigan in 1920 that would have required all children between the ages of 5 and 16 to attend public schools. The sponsors suggested to voters that almost all the residents of homes for wayward girls in Michigan had attended parochial

schools, and that passage of the amendment “would eliminate much of the suspicion and bitterness between people of different religious beliefs and do more than any one thing to help our people to grow up together.” Parochial schools, they charged, existed “only to perpetuate some foreign language, custom or creed.” Unlike Oregon, Michigan voted down the constitutional amendment creating a government monopoly of education, and did so again in 1924. Despite their victory, though, advocates of educational freedom were alarmed that hundreds of thousands of voters – more than 421,000 in the second vote – supported the ban. They were relieved when the Supreme Court ruled, in the Oregon case, that “the fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations” (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters* 268 U.S. 510 (1925)).

A more liberal view was taken by Boston Superintendent of Schools Frank V. Thompson, who pointed out that “wherever the nation has attempted to force conformity or assimilation, the coerced races have sullenly resisted and maintained a distinctive individuality; witness Poland under the triple yoke of Germany, Russia, and Austria” (Thompson, 1971, p. 154).

In fact, despite predictions that they would not be able to fit into American life, the children of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were soon on the way to full assimilation. The presence of a large low-status black population in the United States at the time of the European immigration of the 19th century may have enabled the new immigrants to avoid sinking to the lowest position in the society, one which was already occupied; it has been suggested that ethnic identity among American whites owes its continuing significance largely to the way it implicitly locates them on the advantaged side of the color line (Alba, 1990, p. 317). “The movement of blacks to the North in sizable numbers reduced the negative disposition other whites had toward the new European groups. . . . Ethnicities and allegiances float and shift in accordance with the threats and alternatives that exist” (Lieberson, 1980, p. 380).

Part of the explanation for the significance of race in American life may be the way it has allowed white people of many different backgrounds and religions to experience a sense of “fictitious relatedness” sustaining an egalitarian democracy – for whites only (Todd, 1994, p. 52). The same presence of a native black lower class may explain the relatively greater success of black West Indian immigrants in the United States, where they were able to form the upper levels of the black population, than in England, where they tended to move into the lowest positions in the society (Sowell, 1978, p. 42; Ogbu, 1991, p. 13).

There was a “massive educational jump among the new Europeans in the cohort born between 1925 and 1935.” The fact is that most immigrants were remarkably successful, though some groups more than others. “The most striking feature for all five new European groups is a massive jump between the 1915-1925 and the 1925-1935 cohorts in the concentration in professional jobs. . . . the analogous change for native whites of native parentage was much smaller” (Sollors, 206, 329).

Ethnic institutions

Of course, immigrants are not simply passive recipients of the services provided by government and benevolent groups for themselves and their children. Research on turn-of-the-century immigration to the United States has found that even before the immigrants came many of them were familiar with self-organization. The social disruptions associated with industrialization in Europe, which created the mobile populations available to emigrate, also led to the vigorous creation of “voluntary associations . . . [for] . . . collective response to their new vulnerability. There emerged an enormous variety of associations after 1870 to insure for illness and death, to supervise education, to form agricultural and artisan organizations, to pursue political aims” (Barton, 1978, p. 154). Such organizations had not been required by traditional village life, but they proved readily adaptable to the immigrant situation in the cities of North America. In turn, the immigrant situation stimulated such groups as a

way of responding to issues of identity that were not problematical before migration.

The first step toward assimilation, the sociologists of the Chicago School believed, was paradoxically to recreate some aspects of the environment of the homeland through a vigorous ethnic community life (Béaud and Noiriél, 1992, p. 268)

Czech newcomers in Chicago . . . formed forty-nine mutual benefit societies between 1870 and 1890, thirty-six of which began as branches of societies in homeland villages. . . . Italians in Cleveland organized thirty-five mutual benefit societies between 1903 and 1910, twenty-five of which were branches of societies in Southern Italian villages. In the Slovak community of Cleveland the formation of some twenty-five societies between 1885 and 1900 served to create a stable community. . . . In these new urban settlements, voluntary associations became the characteristic social unit . . . (Barton, 1978, p. 159-160).

In his now-classic study of the assimilation of immigrants, Milton Gordon identified three primary functions served by ethnic groups. They provide “a source of group self-identification” which can offer a sense of security under the stressful conditions of adjustment to a new society, and they provide “a patterned network of groups and institutions which allows an individual to confine his primary group relationships to his own ethnic group throughout all the stages of the life cycle.” An ethnic group also “refracts the national cultural patterns of behavior and values through the prism of its own cultural heritage” (Gordon, 1964, p. 38). Assumptions shared by the group that deviate from those of the majority encourage its members to have different priorities and different ways of understanding the world than those taken for granted in the society around them.

Often immigrant organizations have attempted to maintain their heritage language through providing schools or after-school programs to teach what the home alone could not develop sufficiently. These efforts were commonly seen as a threat to assimilation; in Massachusetts, the parochial schools founded by French-Canadians and employing French as the language of instruction were the target of a bill introduced in 1888 requiring that all private schools be

approved by local school committees; a requirement for approval was that “teaching shall be in the English language” (Tyack and Hansot, 1982, p. 80). Nevertheless, by 1914 there were 90 non-public schools in Massachusetts where instruction – in contrast with that in public schools – was bilingual, half a day in English and half in Polish, Italian, Portuguese, French, or Greek. A state report that year pointed out

that the knowledge of a second language has cultural advantages is beyond dispute, and should be encouraged, for in the history, traditions, literature and art of the various nations there is much that would enrich American life. But it is not in the pursuit of culture that the overwhelming majority of these children are to spend their lives. The far more practical and far more difficult problem of bread-winning is the one to which--day in and day out--they will be forced to devote their unremitting attention.

Non-public schools should therefore be encouraged to stress the study of English without abandoning the study of the native languages, since “to speak English and to understand it is the vital need of the immigrant” (Commission on Immigration, 1914, p. 150); a few years later, Massachusetts briefly required that instruction even in non-public schools be in English (Castellanos, 1983, p. 39).

There was, in fact, on-going conflict within the Catholic Church and the Lutheran churches over the extent to which their schools should seek to preserve ethnic culture or stress a common American culture (Handlin, 1982, p. 12). “By the turn of the century, most German parish schools had felt the impact of Americanization and were using English as the main language of instruction.” On the other hand, “the Poles . . . were enthusiastic supporters of ethnic parish schools. Other Slavic groups also established ethnic parish schools in proportion to their numbers” (Walch, 1996, p. 76-77).

Research on ethnicity within American society has stressed repeatedly the almost complete loss, by second-generation Americans, of the languages spoken by their immigrant ancestors. Interviews by Waters with sixty American Catholics from various European-origin ethnic groups found that only four claimed to speak their ancestral languages; one had studied it in

school, while three had used it with their parents but had become "rusty" since the parents' death and had not taught the language to their own children (Waters, 1990, p. 116).

[T]he American experience is remarkable for its near mass extinction of non-English languages: In no other country . . . did the rate of mother tongue shift toward (English) monolingualism approach the rapidity of that found in the United States. Within the United States, some relatively isolated groups (such as the Old Spanish, the Navaho and [some] other American Indians, and the Louisiana French) have changed at a much slower rate; but language minority immigrants shifted to English at a rate far in excess of that obtained in all other countries. . . . Bilingualism, American style, has been unstable and transitional--at least until recently (Portes and Rumbaut, 1990, p. 183).

Two academic supporters of bilingual education concede that "the United States is, at the societal level, staunchly monolingual. Legislating monolingualism as a requirement for citizenship could hardly have been more successful in creating a monolingual society than have been the unofficial economic and social forces at work." Among immigrant minority groups, "only the old folks, the very young, and the recent arrivals, in general, speak these other languages; the school children and young adults have often switched to 'dominance' in English" (Snow and Hakuta, 1992, p. 385).

The languages brought to the United States by immigrants have in fact not resulted in social or political divisions; indeed, they have faded away with disconcerting rapidity. The only exceptions are the persistence of Spanish, largely as a result of its constant reinforcement by new immigrants and the privileged position created by the geographical situation of Puerto Rico, and to a very minor extent the continuing use of languages that have religious significance.

Generation after generation, however, the children of immigrants to the United States have consistently abandoned the language of their parents. A recent study of the 'second generation' in Miami and San Diego, areas with exceptionally high immigrant populations, found that

not only is knowledge of English near universal, but preference for the language is overwhelming as well. . . . while a foreign language is spoken in almost all immigrant homes, 72 percent of the children had opted for English as their preferred means of expression in junior high school, with the figure increasing to 88 percent by the time of high school graduation. . . . While over 90 percent of the sample report knowing a language other than English, their fluency in that language is significantly poorer. . . . only 30 percent of respondents report themselves fluent, that is, fully able to speak, understand, read, and write a foreign language, in contrast to 83 percent for English. . . . preference for Spanish dropped markedly between our first and second surveys [the same respondents, three years apart] – from 14.8 to only 6.5 percent – indicating a rapid language shift. . . . only one-fourth of our respondents . . . could be classified as fluent bilinguals (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, p. 119-122).

This near-universal transition to exclusive use of English by the children of immigrants, for the past hundred years and more, has not been the result of government policies – sometimes forbidding, sometimes promoting, the use of home languages for instruction – but rather of societal forces and the reality of opportunities available to those who become proficient in English.

Language policies in education

The desire to preserve German language and culture was one of the motivations behind the organization of Catholic and Lutheran parochial schools in the 19th century, and other immigrant groups made efforts in the same direction. Public schools in some cities responded to this competition by offering classes designed to maintain and develop the languages which pupils spoke at home. In 1837, for example, the Public School Society in New York City decided to open two schools with teachers who understood German, though with the intention that they would provide instruction through English and that children would transfer into other schools as their proficiency in English improved. To the Society's dismay, however, experience seemed to show that "when foreigners are in the habit of congregating together they retain their national customs, prejudices and feelings" and "are not as good members

of society as they would otherwise be,” and the schools were abolished in 1850 (Kaestle, 1973, p. 144).

German immigrants had a rather higher cultural and educational level than that of many of the mid-western Americans in whose midst they settled; the German-English public school in St. Louis was established in 1837, a year before that city had an all-English public school (Genesee, 1987, p. 2).

By 1899 there were 17,584 pupils studying German in Cincinnati, 14,248 of them in the primary grades. In the first four grades they split their school week evenly between a German teacher and an English teacher. These bilingual classes not only helped immigrant parents to preserve their culture but also gave positions to 186 German-speaking teachers. In St. Louis, Germans persuaded the school board to introduce their language into elementary schools in 1864. . . . In 1875 William T. Harris, then St. Louis superintendent, staunchly defended the teaching of the language in elementary school. By including the German minority that felt excluded, he said, the entire public system became more useful and more stable: ‘to eradicate caste distinctions in the community is, perhaps, the most important feature of the public school system’ (Tyack, 1974, p. 107).

The superintendent of schools in San Francisco argued, in 1877, that until public schools began offering French and German “hundreds of parents of foreign parents were attending private schools in order that they might receive instruction in the language of the ‘Fatherland.’ Now they are under the care of American teachers, and are being molded in the true form of American citizenship.” Public schools in Chicago began offering German in confidence that “the number of private schools now to be found in every nook and cranny of the city will decrease, and the children of all nationalities will be assembled in the public schools, and thereby be radically Americanized” (Peterson, 1985, p. 54-55). By the late 1880s, eight states had statutes authorizing bilingual instruction in public schools, and by 1900, 231,700 children were studying German in elementary school (Tyack, 1974, p. 108).

We should not misunderstand such measures on the part of public authorities as reflecting acceptance of bilingualism as an educational goal. Wisconsin, in which more than one-third of the population was then German-born, adopted the Bennett Law in 1889, making it “the duty of county and state

superintendents to inspect all [that is, not just public] schools, for the purpose and with the authority only to require that reading and writing in English be taught daily therein.” Reaction to this measure on the part of both Protestant and Catholic Germans led to repeal of the law in 1891. A subsequent Wisconsin bill in 1912, requiring that private schoolteachers be able to speak English fluently, was defeated as well, but North Dakota the same year restricted the use of German and Scandinavian languages in private schools to religious instruction. By 1911, 17 states required that English be the sole language of instruction at the elementary level in public schools, and the anti-German sentiment of World War I led 21 states to add such a requirement for private schools as well.

In 1920, the teacher of a one-room Lutheran school in Nebraska was arrested when he insisted upon conducting his Bible lesson in German despite the presence of a government official. Nebraska law, adopted in the anti-German hysteria, insisted that private as well as public elementary schools teach exclusively in English. Robert Meyer taught all the regular subjects in English but provided religious instruction in German so that his pupils could join in family devotions with their German-speaking parents. The Supreme Court 1923 decision in his favor (*Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390) was the precedent for the *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* decision two years later and is seen, by legal historians, as marking a decisive turn of the Court toward limiting the power of government to infringe upon individual freedoms.

Though many immigrant groups made efforts – usually through their religious institutions – to maintain their original languages, they were also generally very concerned to ensure that their children would learn English well. School officials shared that concern, and frequently argued that English-acquisition required that parents stop using their heritage language in the home.

Creating special reception classes to teach the language skills considered essential for participation in an otherwise unmodified school program was considered an especially progressive measure in the period of heaviest immigration to the United States in the early twentieth century. So-called “steamer classes” were provided in many cities for children just off the boat from Europe. In Massachusetts alone, there were 26 cities and towns that reported providing such classes in 1914. The Boston school superintendent

asserted, in 1920, that “there is general agreement in the practice of progressive communities in grouping older immigrant children in special classes for intensive work in English, in order that they may acquire the common tongue as a tool for work through which they can be advanced rapidly to classes of children of their own age” (Thompson, 1971, p. 118).

In the 1960s, there was a growing body of opinion, among educators, that children who came to school from homes where a language other than English was in use should be instructed through that other language. The rationale for bilingual education as the preferred strategy for the instruction of immigrant and other language minority pupils was from the start a mix of political and linguistic arguments, invoked for different audiences with little consistency. Reports of successful instruction through Finnish in Sweden led to the elaboration of linguistic theories based on the distinction between ‘communicative’ and ‘academic’ proficiency, the so-called “threshold hypothesis,” and the assertion that premature instruction in a second language would lead to a permanent intellectual deficit.

There were several forms of such ‘bilingual education,’ of which the first described became much the most common:

transitional bilingual education: a full-time program for pupils unable to perform ordinary classwork in English, in which they are provided instruction through their home language (typically Spanish) in all the subjects appropriate for their grade, while learning English in preparation for ‘mainstreaming’ into a regular class. It was initially assumed that this would require no more than three years, but many advocates have been urging that five to seven years are required to acquire sufficient proficiency in English to participate adequately in a class taught through English.

maintenance bilingual education: a full-time program in which a language other than English (typically Spanish) is used for instruction much or most of the time, without intention of ‘mainstreaming’ at any point. It is generally assumed that, given the cultural dominance of English in the US, language-minority pupils require a strongly-alternative program in order to develop full proficiency in their home language as well as to maintain ethnic identity and self-esteem.

two-way or integrated bilingual education: a full-time program in which are enrolled both pupils whose first language is English and also pupils with another first language (typically Spanish); instruction is provided through both languages in a structured way with the intention of developing in all pupils a proficiency in both languages. This is the model closest to that found in many international schools around the world, where local elites seek to have their children become proficient in English without sacrificing academic proficiency in the national language.

An impulse to the use of home language for instruction was given by the efforts of middle-class Cuban refugees in Miami to ensure their children would be bilingual. An elementary school was developed whose entire curriculum – what is described above as *two-way or integrated bilingual education* – was intended to lead to proficiency in both Spanish and English; given the motivation and the family characteristics of the parents, this school was a notable success and served to promote the idea that bilingual education offered special advantages.

In 1967, Congress adopted the Bilingual Education Act as Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965; while this had no enforcement authority, it offered funding for ‘demonstration programs’ in the education of language minority pupils. Then in 1971, Massachusetts adopted the first state law requiring that pupils with limited proficiency in English in public school systems be provided academic instruction through their home language for up to three years (and often, in effect, for considerably longer), while learning English. This Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) Act applied to any local school district in which there were at least twenty such pupils, of any age, from a language group. As a result, dozens of districts were required to provide TBE in Spanish, and the larger cities to do so in a range of languages. In some cases, as with Cape Verdean *Criolo*, this required developing instructional materials that were not available in the homeland.

Over the next several years, several other states, including Illinois and New Jersey, adopted laws closely modeled upon that in Massachusetts.

In 1974, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* that San Francisco was required to provide an instructional program that met the educational needs of Chinese pupils who could not benefit from simply being placed in regular classrooms. “There is no equality of treatment,” the Court ruled, “merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are clearly foreclosed from any meaningful education” (411 U.S. 563). The Court did not, however, require any specific remedy, writing that “Teaching English to the students of Chinese ancestry who do not speak the language is one choice. Giving instruction to this group in Chinese is another. There may be others.”

As we have seen, however, there was increasing support among advocates and educators especially concerned with language minority pupils for instruction through home languages. The U. S. Office of Education developed so-called “*Lau* remedies” that called for this approach, stating, significantly, that “since an ESL [English as a second language] program does not consider the affective nor cognitive development of the students . . . an ESL program [by itself] is *not* appropriate.” Although this position – strongly influenced by the bilingual education specialists who helped to draft it – was never given the force of regulations, it had a significant impact, especially in states that had not adopted their own laws, upon school districts that wished to shield themselves from litigation and also to qualify for federal government funding under Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Ten years after Title VII was enacted, the first national evaluation was highly critical of its administration and the apparent lack of evidence that bilingual education was providing the anticipated benefits in improved academic achievement by language minority – primarily Latino – pupils. Despite the lack of solid evidence for the success of the hundreds of bilingual programs around the country, however, there was a growing consensus among specialists in the field (not altogether unbiased observers, of course), that language minority pupils should be taught in their home languages. Faced with the disappointing results, the academic experts on bilingual education countered that programs had not been implemented effectively, or that pupils needed to remain longer to produce the desired effects: five to seven years in

separate bilingual classes became the new prescription. Through a combination, then, of state legislation, federal government influence, the threat of litigation, and a consensus among specialists, bilingual education was adopted as the treatment of choice in hundreds – perhaps more than a thousand – of school districts around the country.

By the mid-1990s, however, there was a growing number of criticisms of bilingual education, though the consensus among specialists continued to be strongly in support, as indeed one would expect. Despite thousands of evaluations and studies, the evidence supplied by research was unclear. In a very extensive review of thirty years of research on programs for language minority pupils, a distinguished panel appointed by the National Research Council took a refreshingly agnostic position on one of the central articles of faith of bilingual-education advocates, that children must be taught to read first in the language which they speak at home. “It is clear,” they noted,

that many children first learn to read in a second language without serious negative consequences. These include children in early-immersion, two-way, and English as a second language (ESL)-based programs in North America, as well as those in formerly colonial countries that have maintained the official language [of the colonizer] as the medium of instruction, immigrant children in Israel, children whose parents opt for elite international schools, and many others. . . The high literacy achievement of Spanish-speaking children in English-medium Success for All schools . . . that feature carefully-designed direct literacy instruction suggests that even children from low-literacy homes can learn to read in a second language if the risk associated with poor instruction is eliminated (August and Hakuta, 1997, p. 60).

Later in the report, indeed, the authors conclude candidly that “We do not yet know whether there will be long-term advantages or disadvantages to initial literacy instruction in the primary language versus English, given a very high-quality program of known effectiveness in both cases” (p. 179).

Concluding reflections

There has in fact been no consistent approach, in American educational policy, to the challenges created by diversity. Should schools make it possible to be a 'hyphenated American,' or should they seek to promote a single model of American identity? Should the 'common school' model be maintained, or should different groups receive different forms of schooling? These were not primarily questions of equal educational opportunity, of the sort which became salient after World War II, but rather concerns about whether a country which had fought a bloody Civil War from 1861 to 1865 to maintain its unity would be able to reinforce and express that unity through its educational system.

Historian David Tyack points out that "the search for the one best system has ill-served the pluralistic character of American society" (Tyack, 1974, p. 11), but on the other hand it could be argued that the loss of nerve about civic education in its broadest sense on the part of a public education system obsessed with tolerance and multiculturalism has ill-served the children of immigrants whose parents are concerned above all that they become American.

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