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Education Policy Analysis Archives

Volume 9 Number 3

January 22, 2001

ISSN 1068-2341

A peer-reviewed scholarly journal
Editor: Gene V Glass, College of Education
Arizona State University

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Impact of U.S. Overseas Schools in Latin America on Political and Civic Values Formation

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Abstract

This study focuses on the attitudinal outcomes of schooling in American Overseas Schools in Latin America with respect to democracy and citizenship, the formation of views about the United States, and student attitudes about the American international school.

Introduction

The American democracy is the oldest in the world and the promotion of democracy has been a central focus of U.S. foreign policy since World War I. The evolution of Latin American nations towards democratic models of governance during the 1980's was trumpeted as a diplomatic triumph. The argument has even been made,

prematurely perhaps, that the historical process of the selection of an ideal model of governance has ended and that the democratic model has emerged triumphant (Fukuyama, 1992). Although the decade of the 1990's saw some regression in this process, virtually every nation from Mexico to Brazil has attempted to develop democratic institutions. Many of these "experiments" are yet in their infancy and all of them depend upon the values and ideals of leaders who will be elected to key offices in the future. Diamond (1993) documents the importance of educational institutions; he mentions the "international diffusion of values and beliefs" which may occur through practices which occur within "democratizing institutions" (p. 421). He observes that

Culture springs from history, tradition, and collective myths, and is also forged and reproduced through a variety of institutional settings in which norms are learned, beliefs generated, and values internalized. Prominent among these settings are, of course, the family and the school...[which may] contribute to significant change over time. (p. 412)

It is a little known but important fact that a significant number of political and business leaders in Latin American nations have been educated in American Overseas Schools (AOS), and many enter American universities after successful completion of an American high school education in an overseas school. Bilingual and infused with the values implicit in U.S. pedagogy, these young people become the mayors, judges, industrialists, journalists, cabinet ministers, and presidents of their countries. Clearly, the political culture of the United States has profound direct and indirect influences on the attitudes of the future leaders of Latin America. There have been no studies focusing on the attitudinal outcomes of students in American schools overseas.

The AOS schools are essentially American high schools in Latin America. Typically, these schools offer a traditional, college preparatory American high school curriculum. Unlike AOS schools in other regions of the world, the AOS in Latin America frequently incorporate host country languages and national curricula in the school model. However, American citizens trained and certified in American universities serve as principals and certified American teachers deliver the central elements of the curriculum. With the fiscal and technical support and guidance of the Office of Overseas Schools of the U.S. Department of State, most of these schools have achieved accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the entity which accredits institutions in the United States from Texas to North Carolina. (The Office of Overseas Schools is staffed with a Director and six Regional Education Officers, each assigned oversight of a geographic region. The Director of the Office is Dr. Keith D. Miller (millerkd2@state.gov). The web site of the Office of Overseas Schools may be found at http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/schools/ofront.html.) Many of the AOS schools have a long history, such as the American School Foundation (ASF) of Mexico City, which has operated an American-type school with an American curriculum for over 100 years. Half of the ASF students enroll in colleges abroad, predominantly in the United States. Although these schools were originally established to educate the children of American citizens who lived with their families in Latin America (as part of the diplomatic corps or the international business community), that mission has clearly been altered by economic and political factors. Orr (1974) observed that the schools "exemplify the valuable qualities and merits of a democratic educational system" and serve as a "living example of American community democracy" (p. 10). He declared that "The success or failure of the U.S.A., both internally and as a model, will be directly related to the effectiveness of education and schooling" (1981, p. 2). Conlan

(1982) spoke of the AOS schools as “isomorphic embassies.”

As the world economy changed over the years, host-country children in Latin America were increasingly drawn to American schools where they could learn English. The downsizing of the U.S. diplomatic corps and a concomitant “nationalization” of the work force in the international business community accelerated this demographic change in the 1970's. American schools have retained a “U.S.” identity through the networking of regional educational associations, greater use of the Internet than comparable schools in the continental United States, and the recruitment and training of U.S. teachers who already possess advanced degrees from U.S. universities. American history, civics, and literature are central to the curriculum. Host-country students, from Mexico to Brazil, who graduate from these schools receive the American high school diploma (commonly they also receive the host country diploma, or “bachillerato”). Most plan to attend U.S. universities, either as undergraduates or for graduate study, and later return and assume responsible positions in their homelands.

Purpose

The unique role that a U.S. education plays in the career planning of future Latin American leaders has not been examined, although it has been a subject of comment. AOS schools directly influence the development of the values and attitudes of many Latin American leaders. The purpose of this research was to assess the political attitudes of 12th grade students attending 12 AOS schools in 8 countries. Three distinct groups of students were targeted in this study: American citizens, Host Country Citizens, and Students who were citizens of some third country (children of parents who form part of the international diplomatic or business community). The supposition that American Overseas Schools contribute to the formation of positive values of democratic participation and civic service should be investigated. Arguably, the extent to which these schools are in fact promoting these values is a valid measure of the efficacy of the schools themselves.

Research Questions

Three research questions were developed for this study. (1) Is there a significant interaction effect between the independent variables of political region and citizenship on students' attitudes? (2) What is the relationship between the length of time a student is enrolled in an American school and the development of positive attitudes? (3) Is there an attitudinal difference with respect to gender on these measures?

Method

Subjects. The subjects of this study were 695 12th grade students representing 21% of the approximately 3,200 12th grade students attending AOS schools in 4 geographical and political regions: Mexico, Central America, Spanish-speaking South America, and Brazil. The schools were distributed among the following countries: Mexico (3), El Salvador (1), Guatemala (1), Paraguay (1), Ecuador (1), Argentina (1), Peru (1), and Brazil (3). U.S. citizens represented 15.3% of the sample and host country nationals represented 68.2% of the sample. The other 16.5% was accounted for by third-country nationals, pupils who were not American citizens or citizens of the countries where they attended schools.

Instrument. The survey instrument, Attitudes toward Democracy (ATD[©]), consisted of 40 Likert-type items based on a 5-point rating system ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The items were associated with three categories, concerning (a) attitudes about democracy, citizenship and service, (b) attitudes toward the United States, and (c) attitudes about the role of school. The first scale combined the two aspects of responsible democratic participation, rights and obligations (People for the American Way, 1989). The second scale measured student attitudes about the U.S. government and overall attitudes about the people of the United States. The third scale assessed student attitudes about the role of the school in their social and political formation.

The instrument had high overall reliability (Cronbach Alpha = .85) and the three scales individually yielded alphas of .85, .70, and .68, respectively. The ATD instrument was mailed to the directors of the 12 schools and administered under the supervision of certified teachers according to a set of standard instructions.

Results and Discussion

An ANOVA revealed a significant interaction [$F(6,683)=2.41, p<.05$] between the variables of citizenship and political region on Scale 1, attitudes toward democracy and citizenship. Citizens of Mexico, Central America, and Brazil had significantly more positive attitudes on this scale than their counterparts in Spanish-speaking South America. U.S. students in Brazil had significantly less positive attitudes than U.S. students in Mexico. Host country students in Brazil had significantly more positive attitudes than U.S. students in Brazil.

There was no significant interaction between the two classes of independent variables on Scale 2, although there were significant main effects in both areas. Table 1 shows the ANOVA for Scale 2, attitudes toward the United States. Significant differences were found between the attitudes of U.S. citizens and the other two groups. Attitudes of the host and third country pupils were significantly more negative, and the mean response of both groups was to the negative side of the scale.

Table 1
Analysis of Variance for Scores on Scale 2:
"Attitudes Towards the United States"

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	<i>p</i>
Main Effects:	1310.52	5	262.10	5.88	<.000
Citizen	674.91	2	337.45	7.57	.001
Region	380.66	3	126.89	2.85	.037
Interaction:	385.45	6	64.24	1.44	.196
Citizen X Region					
Explained	1977.30	11	179.75	4.03	<.000
Residual	30452.04	683	44.59		

Total	32429.33	694	46.73
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The ANOVA revealed a marginally significant interaction [$F(6,683)=1.94, p<.10$] between the independent variables of political region and citizenship for Scale 3, attitudes about the role of the school. Interestingly, host country students in Mexico were shown to have significantly more positive attitudes about the United States than host country students in the other regions.

The length of time enrolled in the AOS school had no relationship to the development of positive attitudes about the United States (correlation = $-.006; p=.89$). However, student attitudes on Scale 1 (Attitudes about Democracy, Citizenship and Service) demonstrated a positive correlation (correlation = $.143; p<.001$). Similarly, with respect to Scale 3 (Attitudes about the School), student attitudes were found to satisfy the statistical test for significance (correlation = $.087; p=.02$). However, it must be noted that these correlations, given the large sample size, are so close to zero as to provide little evidence of a causal relationship, even if they could be so interpreted.

To measure the relationship between the variables of gender and the mean student responses of each of the three scales, *t*-tests were calculated for the independent samples. A significant difference ($t=-3.90, df=693, p<.000, 2 Tail Sig.$) was found on Scale 2, attitudes about the United States. Female students had significantly more positive attitudes than male students about the United States.

Although the data revealed a large number of interesting relationships and circumstances, a summary of the main findings follows:

1. Twelfth grade students in AOS schools who are citizens of South American countries possess extremely negative attitudes about democracy and citizenship.
2. U.S. citizens who are 12th grade students in AOS schools in Brazil are negative about democracy and citizenship.
3. International and host country students in all of the Latin American AOS schools are extremely negative about the United States. U.S. 12th grade students were predictably more upbeat.
4. Mexican students in the 12th grade in AOS schools expressed significantly more positive attitudes about the United States than their counterparts in other regions.
5. Female 12th grade students in the AOS schools expressed more positive attitudes about the United States than the males in the same schools.
6. The length of time a student is enrolled in the AOS school has no clear impact on the development of positive attitudes about democracy, the United States, or the role of the school in the social formation of the student.

Conclusions

The generally negative attitudes about the United States expressed by students throughout Latin America in the AOS schools should be a matter of concern for the U.S. State Department, which oversees these schools. A programmatic approach system-wide to social studies curricula should be considered. If the American Overseas School serves the quasi-diplomatic function of modeling democratic institutional behavior, then educators should focus on developing a model with the express purpose of promoting positive attitudes. It should be noted, however, that at least a portion of the negative response might be age-related, and there is some evidence that with time and maturity these attitudes may improve.

The relatively more positive attitudes of Mexican students may well point to a strategy for improvement of student attitudes in other regions. The AOS schools in Mexico are among the oldest in the world. They are generally viewed as deeply embedded in host country culture. They have traditionally incorporated the Mexican curriculum into the U.S. curricular model as an enriching factor. The fact that Mexican culture has been “included” rather than “excluded” in the structure of these schools may be a factor in the more positive attitudes of Mexican students.

The lack of impact of the time a student spends in the AOS school on the development of his/her attitudes is disappointing. This is yet another indication that school leaders and regional planners should focus on the formation of students' attitudes as a valid formative goal of the school curriculum.

The significant difference between the attitudes about the United States of young women and young men in these schools can only fuel speculation. It may be that the threat of economic competition with the United States is more acute for young men than for young women. We might also speculate about traditional roles of women in Latin America, the attractiveness of U.S. popular culture, and other factors. For the present, this finding must remain an interesting puzzle, although further investigation as to its cause might indicate a path that would lead to general attitudinal improvement.

The findings of this study lead to new and important questions about the role of the school in the attitude formation of students. How should the school model reflect or incorporate the cultural context? Can the curricula of these schools be restructured to improve attitudinal outcomes? The mission of the AOS schools is generally understood to be that of representing a positive model of an effective democratic institution. Because this is the case, the U.S. State Department's Office of Overseas Schools and regional educational leaders should take actions directed at programmatically and systematically addressing that goal.

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