Essay #2: Immigration and Americanization: Then and Now

Between 1890 and 1930, 22.1 million immigrants from Eastern, Central and Southern Europe landed on the shores of the United States. Not only was the great number of immigrants disturbing to those already residing here, but these immigrants brought different experiences, spoke different languages and had different customs.[1] The "native" white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Americans were alarmed by the impact that these immigrants, virtually none of whom had previous experience with democracy, English or even the English alphabet, would have on American culture, and reacted by attempting to "Americanize" the immigrants and their children, and ultimately, with the passage of the *National Origins Act of 1924,* by forbidding their entry into the United States. Today, we face a similar issue, although many of the details have changed. We are again in a period of large-scale immigration, and again are facing backlash against immigrants who many perceive as different from "native" Americans, especially those who have come illegally in reaction to restrictive immigration laws. In this paper, I will compare the issues that arose around immigration and education in the early twentieth century with those that are occurring now, namely those concerning use of English in education, school progress of immigrant children, curricula of Americanization and restrictionism.

In the early twentieth century, immigrants were in agreement that their children needed to learn English, and could do so through the schools. Historian Jeffrey Mirel cites ethnic newspapers from that time in which editorials noted the necessity for their children to learn English. For example, a Hungarian editorial in 1890 stated that children needed to

[1] Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000 [third edition]), p. 173; Jeffrey Mirel, Educ 741 class lecture, October 22, 2007.

learn English, and in 1921 a Greek newspaper stated that it was the duty of every immigrant to learn English.[2] The new immigrants were not the only ones with strong feelings about English in the classroom – feelings against other languages of instruction were so strong, especially during and after World War I, that in 1921 the state of Nebraska passed a law that no language other than English could be used in any school, public or private. Although this law was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1925, its very passage indicated that this was an issue that lawmakers – and likely, their constituencies – took seriously.[3]

Today, educators are faced with similar issues. Immigrant families continue to see schools as places where their children will learn English. Many schools use students' native languages for a time, or offer special English as a Second Language classes for non-native English speakers, but with very few exceptions the expectation is that students will be taught in English as soon as they can function academically in that environment.[4] Furthermore, there has been similar legislative action – in 1998, voters in California passed Proposition 227, ("*English for the Children*"), which has three goals: early literacy development in English, subject matter instruction in English with a special curriculum tailored to the limited English proficiency students, and early inclusion of limited English proficiency students in mainstream classes for maximum exposure to native English

[2] Jeffrey Mirel, Educ 741 class lecture, October 29, 2007.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] New Jersey, for example, mandates ESL classes for all non-native English speakers until they can pass an English proficiency test, and furthermore requires the additional provision of bilingual classes for students if the population of speakers of any given language exceeds twenty (New Jersey Bilingual Education Administration Code, accessed at http://www.state.nj.us/njded/code/current/title6a/chap15.pdf).

speakers. The law does allow, however, for the continuation of native language instruction programs if enough parents request it.[5]

In the early twentieth century, immigrants, by and large, were not successful in their school careers. They faced unfamiliar curricula, taught in an unfamiliar language, and had much higher rates of retention than that of the "native" American population.[6] Furthermore, many students faced the additional burden of teachers who "despised" and degraded their home lives.[7] For example, David Tyack cites a reporter, Adele Marie Shaw, who, in 1903, visited twenty-five New York schools, and reported hearing a teacher call a student a "dirty little Russian Jew."[8] Another indication of the overall attitude towards the new immigrants is found in the California Immigration Commission primer for immigrants, which advocated cleanliness and consistent, on-time school attendance so that their children would learn patterns that would promote success in the adult work world.[9]

Today's immigrant children face many of the same difficulties. Although teachers are not likely to overtly denigrate a child, and in fact, are required by law to pay specific attention to their progress, they are more likely to struggle than "native" children.[10] Furthermore, although today's society, and thus education, is more multi-cultural, in many ways education is still focused on the traditional, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant view of the United States. For example, students now study black history and women's history, but

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[5] Rosalie Pedalino Porter, "The Benefits of English Immersion" *Educational Leadership* 57 no. 4 (1999/2000).
[6] Jean Anyon, *Ghetto Schooling A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997) 50; David Tyack, *The One Best System A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 243.
[7] Anyon *Ghetto Schooling, p.* 49.
[8] David Tyack, *The One Best System*, p. 231.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 235-6.
[10] *No Child Left Behind*, for example, has provisions requiring that tests scores of English language learners (and various other minority/frequently low performing groups) be disaggregated from the scores of the school on average, so that schools are responsible for the growth and performance of those students and cannot hide their progress (or lack thereof) in schoolwide averages.

for the most part, they do so in February and March, months dedicated to the study of those topics, and thus students learn about African Americans and women outside of the mainstream of American history rather than as an integral part of that history. Hispanic Heritage month, a time where the impact of immigrants could be specifically highlighted also suffers from being set aside from the mainstream curriculum; furthermore, it occurs in September, a month where academics can get short shrift as teachers and students are reacquainting themselves with the routines and rituals of school.

The immigration of Eastern, Southern and Central Europeans stopped abruptly with the *National Origins Act of 1924*, which established quota systems tied to the 1890 census, "a sure way of keeping out those national groups which had arrived in great numbers between 1890 and 1915."[11] Today, although the debate revolves mostly around what to do about the twelve million illegal immigrants already present in the United States, some proposals mirror the restrictionist *National Origins Act*, notably the enactment of a law providing for construction of a 700 mile fence along the U.S.-Mexico border.[12] This fence will attempt to do with physical and technological boundaries what the 1924 legislation did with quotas – barring the doors to those who are different from the current crop of "native" Americans.

There are many similarities between the immigration debates that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century and those that are occurring now, almost one hundred years later. In fact, the previous debate shares many characteristics of the one that came before, in the mid-nineteenth century, bringing many Irish Catholics immigrants who were also vilified and looked upon with mistrust. Even earlier, Native Americans cannot have

[11] Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, p. 174.
[12] David Stout, "Bush Signs Bill Ordering Fence on Mexican Border" *New York Times*, October 26, 2006.

been happy at the arrival of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who took over their land. Hopefully, the understanding that no matter who we are, those who were here before us looked upon our arrival with suspicion will help us change our attitude towards immigration, and to realize that each new wave of immigrants have brought positive changes to the United States. The current "new wave" will too, if we only give them the opportunity.