

Children of the Harvest: The Schooling of Dust Bowl and Mexican Migrants During the Depression Era

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Many of the articles in this issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* speak to concerns about rural life (including education) in view of certain significant social, political, and economic conditions. This article is an attempt to recapture a "moment" in American history that has been popularized by the book and Hollywood film, *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939/1966). As Thompson and Kutach point out in their contribution to this issue, the "Okie" (a term which came to refer, generally, to migrating rural residents of the great plains states) migration to the west coast during the 1930s depression illuminates many significant issues and questions related to America's treatment of the countryside. One question involves the extent to which the children of Okies attended "schools" meeting the definition advanced by DeYoung and Howley (also in this issue) as sites designed to work catalytically toward the social production of knowledge, or as sites where Okie children received "schooling" as a part of a process designed to legitimate existing political, economic, and social relations.

The story of Okie education on the west coast is made complex by the fact that Okies shared the lowest occupational stratum (agricultural harvest labor) with Mexicans and Mexican Americans. As a result, this

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The authors would like to thank Kristin Lindholm for her research assistance in the preparation of this article.

article examines how the American educational structure responded to the increasing number of Okie and Mexican school children in public schools on the west coast during the depression era.

Between 1931 and 1939 the states of the west coast received over 500,000 plains dwellers from areas between Texas and North Dakota, along with over 685,000 Mexicans from Mexico (Gamio, 1971; Haslam, 1987). By all accounts, these transients were not received with open arms by the social, economic, and political establishment on the west coast. Signs declaring "Niggers and Okies Upstairs" and "No Mexicans allowed" in public places spoke very clearly of their subordinate status in California. Although Okie and Mexican migrant workers were both treated as second class citizens and exploited in the labor market, their histories differ. It is important to understand the prevailing economic and ideological conditions on the west coast which led to different historical trajectories, despite similar second class treatment in public schools.

Ideological and Structural Foundations of Educational Inequality for Mexican Americans

The shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy (and the growth of agribusiness) in California forged the development of a Mexican American working class. The nascent public school movement became intricately linked to California economy in ways that institutionalized an oppressive schooling experience for many Mexican American students (Cameron, 1976). Mexican American education developed during the late 19th century in such a way that children often were passed through elementary school without acquiring reading and writing skills. Instead of literacy, their schooling seems to have been designed to instill nationalistic feelings and patriotism. Ideological assimilation processes, wherein "Mexican culture" was pejoratively juxtaposed against the character of the "good American," (Cameron, 1976; San Miguel, 1987) evolved in public schools.

Between 1900 and 1940, in the midst of the progressive era, the rationale and practice of Americanization, school segregation, psychometric labeling, curricular differentiation, and discriminatory teacher attitudes were institutionally developed. By the 1920s, 80% of Mexican American students were attending separate "Mexican schools" or "Mexican classrooms." Because Mexican immigration coincided with heightened xenophobia and nationalism, various forms of discriminatory Americanization programs developed. Within this context, Mexican children in U.S. public schools were labeled as "problem" students

according to several criteria: (a) most Mexicans were poor, (b) they spoke Spanish and therefore a language problem existed, (c) they were un-American, (d) they had foreign habits and values, and (e) their performance in school was low. One solution to the "Mexican problem" was to develop Americanization programs. Another was to establish separate courses of study (Hill, 1928; Tyack, 1974).

Intelligence testing during this time period also served as a vehicle to sort and separate Mexican American and other poor children into low ability classes. Spurred by the psychometric movement, a pattern was set for I.Q. testing Mexican American students. Based on test parameters encoded with white middle-class norms, Mexican American pupils systematically and persistently scored lower than their white counterparts (Valencia & Aburto, 1991).

The isolation of Mexican Americans in schools became multifaceted and complex. For example, although Mexican Americans were not included in the provisions for legal segregation by "the color of law," as was applied to Asians, Blacks, and Native Americans in California public schools, they were in systematic ways designated as "other." The use of restrictive housing covenants segregated Mexican American neighborhood schools. The assumption that Mexican Americans were slow learners, that their presence in integrated classrooms would impede the progress of Anglo pupils, that Mexican Americans had a deficiency in English and therefore should be segregated in "special classes" until their English proficiency was up to par, were criteria used as curricular and pedagogical rationale to segregate them (Donato, Menchaca, & Valencia, 1991; Gonzales, 1990). These segregation devices in California schools also had parallels in Texas: (a) the construction of "Mexican" schools, (b) the gerrymandering of school attendance zones, (c) freedom of choice plans for Anglos only, and (d) internal segregation within integrated schools (tracking) became conventional practices (Rangel & Alcalá, 1972; San Miguel, 1987). Historically, government officials sought to limit the social and political rights of Mexican Americans based on the rationale that "Mexicans" were "Indians." As early as the 1850s, the New York *Evening Post* claimed that "Mexicans" were "Indians" and that they "did not possess the elements of an independent national existence" (Steinberg, 1981, p. 22). Because Indians were denied the right to vote, to live in white neighborhoods, and to attend white public schools, these statutes were thought to be appropriate and applicable to Mexicans. For example, California's state constitution in the mid-19th century prohibited "Indian-looking Mexicans" from voting and extended the privilege only to "white-looking Mexican males" (Menchaca & Valencia, 1991).

During the 1920s and 1930s the California legislature tried to collapse the categories of "Mexican" and "Indian" for the purposes of policy creation and implementation. The "Bliss Bill" (proposed but not passed) sought to redefine "Mexicans" as "Indians" in order to legally segregate them from white children. Although Mexicans were not mentioned in the state education code that legalized school segregation, a 1935 statute endorsing the segregation of Asian and Indian children seemed to allow for segregation of Mexican "Indians," though not of Mexican "whites" (Wollenberg, 1976).

With particular attention to rural circumstances, historian Gilbert Gonzales wrote that:

The educational experience of migratory [Mexican] children represented the social aspect of the economic system, which established the migrant family as the foundation for its productivity. . . . These conditions condemned generations of Mexican children to poor nutrition, poor health, poor housing, and virtually no education. The educational pattern of migrant children was characterized by exclusion, segregation, irregular (or seasonal) attendance, and very early drop-out rates. (1990, p. 99)

Gonzales argued further that public schooling was part of a single system that facilitated the transition of Mexican migrant children into the larger political economy. Many children of Mexican heritage who could not speak Spanish (and thus were not in need of Americanization) were coerced to attend separate Mexican schools or Mexican classrooms. One schoolteacher in San Bernardino justified the segregation of Mexican American students "based on the theory that the Mexican is a menace to the health and morals of the rest of the community" (Gonzales, 1990, p. 24). Because Asian, Black, and Native American children were legally segregated, it was not difficult to rationalize similar treatment for Mexican Americans (Wollenberg, 1976).

During the Great Depression, soaring unemployment and deteriorating social conditions had a serious impact on most people. But for Mexican Americans it was a particularly trying time. The forced repatriation of hundreds and thousands of Mexicans, including many naturalized and U.S. citizens, was part of a period of blatant oppression. Abraham Hoffman, in *Unwanted Mexican Americans During the Great Depression* (1974), found that 249,546 Mexicans were repatriated from the United States between 1931 and 1933. Albert Camarillo argues that the rationale behind the repatriation campaign centered around the belief that Mexicans were taking jobs:

. . . away from American citizens who were already severely unemployed; Mexicans were disproportionately on welfare rolls and thus a serious drain on limited relief funds; and most Mexicans were illegally in the U.S. and should not benefit from public services intended for citizens alone. (1985, p. 48)

The experience of thousands of repatriated Mexicans created an insecure environment for almost all Mexican Americans in California, even for those with U.S. citizenship. It also created a labor void that migrating Okies were eager to fill. And just as the white power structure in California contrived to keep Mexicans out of the state, circumstances soon escalated to the point that groups of "civic-minded" Californians constructed roadblocks to deny dust bowl Okies entry into the state.

The Okie Migration and Its Impact on California Schools

One popular explanation for why emotions ran deep enough to spur the makeshift construction of road blocks was that Okies came in such large numbers that west coast states simply could not adjust. In a passage reminiscent of those addressing the problem of Mexican immigration, a publication of the California State Chamber of Commerce announced that any further "inflow of depression [Okie] migrants" would "seriously disrupt the economy of California, jeopardizing wage scales, living standards, and social welfare programs" (1940, p. 36). Yet the 1930s, when compared to the 1920s, were actually marked by a decrease in the numbers of migrants and immigrants entering California, Oregon, and Washington. The reasons for repatriating Mexicans and prohibiting the entry of Okies into California were more complex than a reaction to their numbers, to Mexicans taking jobs away from U.S. citizens, or the alleged tax burden both groups created in the state. As one historian put it, "Despite frequent complaints about the relationship between the migrants and the increasing tax assessments, there existed considerable evidence that the migrants' effect upon local taxes were overemphasized in the public mind" (Stein, 1973, p. 57). Moreover, as this study regarding the education of migrants will show, local school officials often chose the expensive option of segregating Okie and Mexican children from the mainstream. The point is that the reality of numbers and taxes did not match popular perception. This suggests that we need to look deeper for an understanding of why Okies and Mexicans were treated as they were. The schooling afforded "Mexicans" and this new group of "white" migrants is one avenue for such an investigation.

The works of two novelists, Lois Phillips Hudson (1987) and Gerald

Haslam (1987), exemplify the educational experience of Okie migrant children. Both of these individuals were "Okies," and both were recipients of the kind of second class schooling that came to typify the depression era migrant experience. However, to look closely into the matter of formal schooling on the west coast, it is helpful to draw a distinction between the 350,000 migrants from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas who entered California, and the 150,000 from states like the Dakotas and Nebraska who travelled to Oregon and Washington. Hudson's family represents those who came to the Northwest from the northern plains, while Haslam's father, from Texas, is representative of migrants from the southern plains who came to California. Haslam's mother was Mexican American. Marriages between Mexican Americans and Okies were frequent in the 1930s, something that perhaps reflects their mutual identification with the experience of subordination. Paradoxically, friction between Mexicans and Okies was also common as they competed in the labor market as a source of cheap labor (Camarillo, 1985). There were differences, however, between the Pacific Northwest and California migration and the northern and southern plains migration that preclude discussion of a single "west coast" experience.

The legacy of what historian Cletus Daniels refers to as an "agricultural peasantry" made up largely of Asians and Mexican Americans in California meant that a segregated social system, traditionally defined by ethnicity, awaited Okies from the southern plains in the 1930s. Historian Walter Stein (1973) and California novelist Gerald Haslam (1987) have written about the disruption that resulted when whites began doing "nonwhite" work. Ethnicity would no longer justify low wages and poor working conditions in rural California. Theoretically, the state's socioeconomic structure was forced to adapt in one of two ways. Either the conditions and circumstances of agricultural labor would have to improve to meet white standards, or the Okies would have to be shown to be as inferior as Mexican migrants. Regrettably, there was (and is) no place like school for defining inferiority.

Yet the pretext used to segregate Mexicans could not be used to isolate Okie children in public schools. Okie children were not only white, they also spoke English. However, Okies in California, generally, had come from states with very poor systems of public instruction. One need only recall the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939/1966) to get a feel for the extent of illiteracy among migrating Okies, though certainly there was great variation in this regard. A massive study of migrant labor in California carried out by the State Relief Administration in 1939 indicated that 10% of migrant children were as far as 4 years behind their

California peers in school, while 20% were 3 years behind and 40% were 2 years behind (Stein, 1973).

Similar to the Americanization experience afforded Mexican youth, "special" classes proved to be a popular method for schooling incoming Okie children. Occasionally, one needed only to be the child of a transient laborer to sit in a special class. More frequently, older Okie children were found to be deficient in some academic skill and were forced to attend class with children far younger than themselves. This phenomenon was made worse by the fact that during their first year in California, migrant families were often so desperate that children were kept from school because of their earning power in the fields. The devastating effects of placing migrant children with younger peers was captured by Henry Hill Collins, Jr.:

Year by year, as they grow older, the embarrassment of their ignorance increases; held back sometimes four and five grades, when they enter new schools tall youths of 13 are out of place in classes with small-fry of 7. Bashful at their own backwardness and ashamed of their clothes or "foreign" accent, they stand out as easy targets for the venomous barbs of their richer and settled schoolmates. "He's from the country camp, that's what they said of my child on the school ground. Don't you see how it hurts?" one transient mother explained. (1941, p. 261)

Many Okie migrant children dropped out rather than suffer the humiliation of school, causing one father to lament that his son was "going to grow up dumb, just like me" (Collins, 1941, p. 261).

From the "native" California perspective, the most disturbing aspect of the Okie migration was the laborers' inability to "disappear" at the end of the harvest. Okies had no intention of adopting a perpetual migratory lifestyle and had no place to which they could return. While many Mexicans returned (many against their will) to Mexico, Okies set up ditch bank camps when the work was done and tried to get their children into schools. Similar to Mexican labor camps, the filth and squalor of these roadside settlements frequently defied description. Malaria and tuberculosis would sometimes spread in the camps, promoting fear and prejudice on the part of the local populations. A Kern County health official surmised:

Growers have lost their fluid Mexican workers who miraculously appeared on harvest day and silently slipped away after their work was done . . . the large family of the southwesterner harvests the cotton of the Kern Valley; when the cotton harvest is over, the family hangs on. (Stein, 1973, p. 50)

As state health officials and concerned politicians reacted to the desperate conditions in the ditch bank camps, segregated "Little Oklahomas," analogous to "Little Mexicos," were created on the outskirts of rural California communities. Once they settled in these locations, Okies were determined to send their children to school. The cost of educating these students, however, fueled already strong anti-migrant sentiment. Stein concludes that:

By nearly all measurements, the Okie children were not inferior to California children except that their absence from school had impeded their education; but their greater age at any given grade level, coupled with the patterns of prejudice developing against the migrants, led a number of counties to attempt to segregate the Okie children in separate classrooms or mobile schools, either of which increased still further the costs of education. (1973, p. 56)

There is a significant point illustrated by this passage. The consternation over schooling Okie and Mexican migrants was traditionally voiced in monetary terms. And yet when it came to implementing desired school practice, cost was secondary. Segregation sometimes entailed the creation of a classroom for transients and consequently the necessity of investing in another teacher, or possibly a mobile unit to house the transient students. If the maintenance of a docile, inexpensive labor system required social distance between the children of property owners and the children of harvest laborers, then a slightly inflated budget at the local school was, seemingly, a small price to pay. One Kern County school district, however, found a way to achieve segregation and keep costs low; officials there set up a school for Okie migrant children in an abandoned cow barn. Carey McWilliams in *Factories in the Field* (1939) quotes a state board of health report commenting on this school: "There were no glass windows; the only openings were sections of the wall which could be propped out, and since it was winter they were closed" (p. 319). Voicing discontent over costs was one acceptable way of promoting prejudice against Okie and Mexicans. Yet in many instances it appears that increased costs were preferable to the integration of Okie and Mexican children with "natives" (Stein, 1973).

This is not to say that some native Californians were against addressing the Okie and Mexican problem straight away. One California grower wrote the following to President Roosevelt when he discovered a federal migratory camp was to be constructed near his property:

Knowing the character of migrants from my experience of dealing with them, I object to these hordes of degenerates being located at my

very door. These sharecroppers' are not a noble people looking for a home and seeking an education for their children. They are unprincipled degenerates looking for something for nothing. Do not put these vile people at my door to depreciate my property and to loot my ranch. (Stein, 1973, p. 50)

Others, reacting to an Okie willingness to date and marry Mexican Americans, frequently complained of Okie sexual degeneracy.

McWilliams (1939) contended that through the manipulation of the school experience an efficient relationship between capital and labor was perpetuated. Deplorably weak efforts at providing adequate educational environments for Mexican migrant children predated the Okie influx of the 1930s. McWilliams paraphrased a 1929 California State Department pamphlet on the conditions of migratory labor when he stated that

[Mexican American] children were herded together in garages, school corridors, and abandoned barns, with as many as 125 pupils per instructor. Care was taken, also, to segregate migratory children and to discriminate against them, both as to the character and to the extent of their education. The policy [in] back of this type of discrimination was announced as an attempt to adjust the child to the crops. (1939, p. 319)

The schooling Okies received upon their arrival in California was a legacy of a long-established agricultural caste-like system. The continuity of Mexican American children receiving schooling in a barn in 1929 and white Anglo-Saxon Protestant children receiving the same treatment a few years later speaks all too clearly of the role of schooling in defining social class and ethnic relations.

Okies in the Pacific Northwest

Although Henry Hill Collins, Jr. claimed that "in Oregon and Washington the same California story is repeated" (1941, p. 129), the story told by the schooling experiences of California migrants is not as clear as the one told by the experience of migrants from the northern plains to the Pacific Northwest. When compared to California, the agricultural "truck produce" of Washington and Oregon began to grow beyond the capacity of family farms relatively late. As a result, seasonal labor requirements grew slowly. Much of the labor that was required beyond what local populations could supply was met by a procession of young men coming off the heavily mortgaged, mono-crop farms of the northern plains during the agricultural depression of the 1920s. Though these men

frequently were referred to as "tramps" and "bindlestiffs," by no stretch of the imagination can it be said that an established segregated agricultural caste system had developed by the 1930s (McWilliams, 1939). Like Mexicans migrating from Mexico to California, "Okies" from the northern plains moved to the west coast in search of opportunity. The result was the rapid development of a California-style rural underclass in Oregon and Washington.

John Blanchard, in *Caravans to the Northwest* (1940), collected and reported data concerning the issue of migration to the Pacific Northwest for the Northwest Regional Council. Blanchard disassociates Oregon and Washington from the circumstances in California:

Between a considerable number of growers and their help, quite happy working relationships exist, despite the extremely low standard of living of the workers. This is because, in the Northwest, a majority of the growers are small owners. Dealings between them and their employees often are direct and on a personal basis. Each is close enough to the others problems to make possible a sympathetic understanding of them. This is in contrast to areas where farms are vast agricultural enterprises controlled by distant absentee owners or impersonalized corporations. (1940, p. 43)

One essential difference between California and the Northwest states was the absence of a sizeable Mexican population traditionally wedded to harvest labor. Regrettably, census data relevant to the period do not differentiate Mexican Americans from caucasians. However, information concerning Asians living in the rural areas of these states has been compiled. Immigrants or native born Chinese declined in total numbers in all coastal states between 1910 and 1940. Their contribution to agricultural labor, however, was never large. On the other hand, the Japanese, were encouraged to emigrate to America precisely to bring about a surplus of west coast agricultural labor. Between 1910 and 1940 the number of Japanese immigrants in rural California jumped by almost 50%, while in rural Oregon and Washington the total number of Japanese immigrants was negligible and the percentage increase over the 30-year period was nowhere near 50% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1940).

Given the slow growth of large-scale truck farming in the Northwest, it appears to be a reasonable assumption that the presence of Mexican Americans there was similarly small. Lois Phillips Hudson, the noted short story writer and novelist now living in Seattle, maintained in an interview that although she had heard about Mexicans working in neighboring areas, it was not until "four or five years" after her family's

arrival in Washington in 1937 that she first saw Mexicans working a Washington or Oregon harvest. And Hudson was hardly a casual observer. Her father had brought his young family west because he could no longer make a living on their North Dakota farm. At as young as 10 years of age, she worked alongside her parents in the orchards and fields of Oregon and Washington (Hudson interview, 9 October 1988).

The children of Northwest Okies did not take up seats in a pre-established, class-based, segregated school system similar to circumstances in California. The treatment of Northwest migrant children in schools was something which needed to be determined by school boards and, in some cases, by individual teachers. In an autobiographical short story, Hudson described her first day at a Washington school. Because of its poignancy in linking class with treatment in school, it merits quotation at some length:

The teacher kept me standing at her desk while she called the roll and started the class on a reading assignment. When she looked up at me I got the impression that I had already managed to do something wrong. She asked me where I had come from and I said "North Dakota," thinking it would be simpler than trying to tell all the places I had been in the last three months. She gave me the last seat in a row behind a boy in dirty clothes. As she passed him by she made the faintest sound of exhalation, as though she were ridding her nostrils of a disagreeable smell. At recess a boy in a bright shirt and new cream-colored corduroy pants yelled "North Dakota, North Dakota" in a funny way as he ran past me to the ball field. The boy who sat ahead of me came up and said confidently, "We been out all around here for two years. We come from Oklahoma. We're Okies. That's what you are too, even if you didn't come from Oklahoma." I knew I could never be anything that sounded so crummy as "Okie," and I said so. "Oh, yeah!" he rejoined stiffly. I walked away. (Hudson, 1987, p. 108)

A passage such as this expresses much about the experiences of America's depression era migrants in west coast schools. Although data which could quantify the existence of "special classes" would be a valuable historical contribution, it is not special classes per se that make a school segregated. Rather, it is the subtle, and sometimes less-than-subtle, labeling that accompanies the process of separating students.

During an interview for this article, Hudson discussed her experiences moving from school to school as harvests were completed. She noted a significant difference between migrants from the northern plains and those who went to California from the southern plains. Whereas Califor-

nia Okies had come from areas with very poor state systems of instruction, Northwest Okies had come from states with some of the best schooling systems in the country. There was a thread of sound educational justification for providing "special" treatment for California Okies, the largest percentage of which were not at the same learning level as the children of natives. As Hudson points out, however, this circumstances generally did not exist in the Northwest, thus clarifying the role schooling would play in creating a class relationship between growers and pickers. Hudson explained:

The way their curriculum was set up, the natives were a year behind me. In little old Cleveland, North Dakota, during the fourth grade, we had fractions. Out here the kids didn't do fractions until the fifth grade. I was a whole year ahead and yet here I was called an "Okie," because we [migrants] were all lumped together. They resented our coming because we were poor, because everyone was struggling during the depression. At least Washington didn't put up barriers the way California did, but they resented us. I didn't know why, because how do you know why when you're nine or ten years old? But you don't have to know why to feel it. (Hudson interview, 1988)

In her autobiographical short story, "Children of the Harvest," Hudson (1987) tells of her childhood experience living in a tent while her parents worked an apple harvest. In an interview 50 years after the fact, she could scarcely contain the amazement she felt when her academic achievements placed her above her "native" peers: "What was interesting was that in 3 weeks the teacher discovered how far ahead I was, I got moved ahead of Barbara, who was in the B class, and she was the daughter of the man who owned the orchard where my parents picked apples" (Hudson interview, 1988).

Unfortunately, her progress at this school did not mean that she had somehow put aside the label "Okie" and earned treatment in school equal to the children of native Northwesterners. The last paragraph of "Children of the Harvest" indicates the pervasiveness of class demarcation through the process of schooling. Hudson described the circumstances that occurred when her parents were forced to find new work:

My teacher wrote a letter for me to take to my next school. In it, she told me, she had informed my next teacher that I should be put into the A class immediately. But there wasn't any A class in my room, the new teacher explained. By then I was traveled enough to realize that it was another special class for transients. The teacher showed us movies almost everyday. (Hudson, 1987, 112)

The similarity between the schooling system that awaited Okies in California and the one that developed almost overnight in the Northwest is too exact to dismiss. What happened in the rural schools on the west coast during the last years of the depression reflects the tension inherent in legitimation crises of the sort described by DeYoung and Howley in this issue. Schools in a late capital system appear ready to perpetuate the subordination of certain kinds of labor. Gonzalez offers ample evidence to support his claim that migrant "schooling" for Mexican children was part of an overall system that was designed to process them into a source of cheap labor.

Other explanations become secondary in light of the comparative circumstances between California and the Pacific Northwest. If one would argue that California Okies, through no fault of their own, stepped into a school system designed to accommodate a language minority group, then one would be forced to explain why the same treatment was received by Northwest Okies where no such system existed. If one would argue that the school in California represented typical educational fare for groups at low academic levels, then one would be forced to explain why California's education system was replicated in the Northwest, when migrants there were as well or better educated than their native peers.

Conclusion

Writing in 1975, Haslam speaks of Depression era Okies: "Today they are state legislators and used-car salesmen, waitresses and college professors; they are convicts, guards, country music impresarios, construction workers and contractors, farm laborers and winos; they are, in a word, Californians" (Haslam, 1987, p. 26). Up and down the west coast, the class of white fieldhands, so visible during the depression, has all but disappeared. World War II, of course, diminished the excesses of the labor market by creating new industries and jobs. Prospects for gainful, nonagricultural employment brought many Okies to urban areas. Additionally, in the post world war era, the Bracero program conveniently filled harvest labor needs without the added burden of labor's presence when the work was done. Hudson's recollections confirm the fact that postwar Mexican American agricultural migration took in larger and larger areas, including the harvests of the Pacific Northwest. In short, Okies experienced upward mobility during World War II due to employment opportunities in expanding aviation, shipbuilding, and munitions industries. Unlike Mexican Americans, Okies were not forced back to the fields, back to the west coast's lowest occupational stratum.

The treatment of America's depression era migrants in the schools of the west coast, however, stands as a telling example of the way in which public education may assuage the tensions created by legitimization crises. In 1947, the Federal Interagency Committee on Migrant Labor admitted that

a sizable segment of our population, through community and state neglect, has been robbed of so many nominal American and human rights that it is almost unbelievable. Child labor, substandard living and a padlock against education have destroyed the rights of children and drastically disturbed the integrity of family life among family workers. (United States Department of Labor, 1947, Part V, p. 117)

Herbert Gutman (1976) pointed out that the concept of class is not a thing or a group of individuals, but a relationship and a process in which we might reasonably expect socialization at school to play a major part. Inasmuch as the relationship between agricultural capital and labor is defined by the schooling awarded the children of each group, the experience of America's depression era migrants in California is particularly telling. The Okie role of farm laborer took precedence over ethnicity during a period of economic crisis. But what happened during the economic surge of the war years was a different matter. World War II became a watershed period for Okies. Richard B. Rice, William A. Bullough, and Richard J. Orsi in *The Elusive Eden: A New History of California* (1988) contend that the war was "the solution to the Okie problem," and that by the end of the war Okies were "for the most part gone from the fields" (p. 416). They took their places in mainstream California, lured away from agricultural labor by higher wages and better jobs. Mexican American migrant workers, however, were not given the same opportunities. In fact, as enrollments increased after the second world war, Mexican Americans became a threat to the educational system up and down the west coast. School segregation for Mexican children continued unabated well beyond the *Brown* decision. More importantly, the ambiguous state of the Mexican American's ethnic identity in the 1930s—the campaign to redefine Mexicans as Indians while the courts claimed that they were caucasian—continued after the second world war.

Regrettably, an analysis of the schooling experience of Mexican American and Okie children reaffirms what such scholars as Michael Apple and Pierre Bourdieu have said about the complementary development of capitalism and mass education: Class differences in schools are maintained in large measure through the capacity of those with power to control the basic principles of school finance, student evaluation, and

other educational objectives (Apple, 1979; Bourdieu, 1977). The fact that today Okie migrants are indistinguishable from the white mainstream illustrates an enduring truth in America: Class is most restrictive when defined by ethnicity. While they were temporarily subordinated into low status, low paying agricultural labor, Okies were treated as members of America's educational underclass. When political and economic circumstances changed, the educational experience afforded this group changed as well. Although the doors to middle class status are no longer padlocked for Okies, they continue to remain so for Mexican Americans. This seems to expose the utility of the educational system with regard to Mexican American children in a capitalist society; public schools, seemingly, stand ready to legitimize extreme social and economic divisions.

The tenuous circumstances that currently grip rural America, those so vividly portrayed by Haas in the first article of this issue, seem to herald a new era in the history of rural education. As a marginalized, peripheral group, rural dwellers in this country—whether loggers from the Oregon communities (studied by Miller), miners from West Virginia, or farmers from the great plains—have shared some exclusionary and exploitive experiences with historically oppressed minorities. The experience of the Okies on the west coast makes this connection explicit. In one way or another, all of the articles in this issue speak to the role that "schooling" has played in this process.

It is clear that the rural education community must refuse to allow schools to continue to function as sites where the process of schooling takes place. As Snauwaert's article in this issue suggests, rural schools must become sites of democratic deliberation. One example is the suggestion made by Thompson and Kutach, also in this issue, that an examination of agricultural ethics is a vital concern for people living in agricultural areas. Rural students must be encouraged to examine the ethical nature of the forces (economic, political, and social) that touch their lives and their communities. While there will never be another Okie migration, there are literally millions of Americans who have suffered dislocation or dispossession due to the same dynamics that afflicted the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939/1966). Rural schools can either play the traditional role of agent in the solution of the legitimization crisis of the state, or they can begin to work to expose the unethical nature of America's treatment of the countryside.

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