Educating European Immigrant Children Before World War I

During the 1980s and 1990s, over 14 million people—mainly from Latin America and Asia—immigrated to the United States. The Census Bureau reported that as of March 2000, the foreign-born U.S. population was over 28.4 million, or 10.4 percent of the total U.S. population. Today, up to 5 million immigrant children speaking 150 languages attend public schools in this country. In seven states, a quarter or more of all students are not native English-speakers. Some schools in cities like New York, Miami, and Los Angeles are heavily populated by the children of foreign-born parents.

Like today, the years before World War I were characterized by high rates of immigration to the United States. But the immigrants did not come from Latin America and Asia: They came mainly from Europe. The public schools in the great port-of-entry cities like New York were flooded with European children speaking little English. How did the schools at that time go about educating these youngsters? More importantly, did the schools succeed?

Educating the Immigrant Child: 1900-1914

In 1909, the U.S. Immigration Commission reported that almost 60 percent of students in large cities were children of immigrants. This percentage was even higher (over 70 percent) in New York City, the "golden door" to America for most European immigrants.

Between 1900 and the beginning of World War I in 1914, New York schools experienced a 60 percent jump in enrollment. The majority of these new students were Russian Jews and Italians, either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants. Moreover, the cultural backgrounds and languages of these "new" immigrants were quite different from those of the English, Germans, and Irish who had dominated immigration to America before 1900.

Overcrowding plagued New York schools at this time. Many schools held double sessions. A single classroom with one teacher often held 60 and occasionally up to 150 children. In the primary grades, pupils frequently sat three to a seat. Many immigrant children had only three hours of instruction a day. During some years, as many as 30,000 new students, mostly immigrants, were simply turned away at overcrowded New York schools.

In 1898, William H. Maxwell was appointed superintendent of the newly consolidated New York City school system. An Irish immigrant himself, Maxwell was a visionary advocate of improving education for the immigrant children then flooding into New York's schools. Maxwell first fought and defeated the old corrupt system that permitted political bosses to hire teachers. He then sought better-trained, professional teachers and selected them based on their qualifications.

Before Maxwell became superintendent, all immigrant children who entered school speaking no English were automatically placed in the first grade *regardless* of age.

Maxwell established a special program to teach English to newly arrived immigrant children as soon as they enrolled in school. Called "steamer classes," named after immigrant passenger ships, the program featured English-only instructions with teachers using objects and gestures to teach the language. Those children who could already read and write in their own native language seemed to learn English the fastest.

After about six months in a "steamer class," the immigrant child transferred to a regular grade level class. Even though the special English classes were apparently successful, only a small number of immigrant children actually attended them because of overcrowding, lack of funds, and some opposition from educators.

Superintendent Maxwell supported the "steamer classes" and many other educational reforms because they fit the needs of the students entering the schools. Maxwell, believing that immigrant children would do better in school if they started earlier, opened kindergartens. He fought to shift the curriculum away from classical subjects like Latin in favor of practical subjects such as science, drawing, physical education, manual training for boys, and domestic arts for girls. He tried to steer teachers away from old methods of instruction which emphasized repetition, recitation, and memorization.

Along with Julia Richman, a school administrator in the immigrant Lower East Side, Maxwell organized special remedial classes. In 1904, he introduced classes for students held back below the fifth grade level who were nevertheless approaching age 14 and about to leave school. A decade later, these classes were replaced by continuation schools. Maxwell also established other special classes and schools for handicapped, ill, blind, speech-impaired, and mentally retarded students as well as an accelerated program for bright immigrant children who entered school late.

High schools were rare in most parts of New York City until Maxwell became superintendent. "It is only through a high school education," he said, "that the son of a poor man obtains an approach to equality with the son of a rich man in opportunity for success in life." By the outset of World War I (which effectively shut down most European immigration to America), New York had over 20 high schools as well as a small number of vocational schools. They were filled with children of European immigrants.

The New York City schools had changed because of the immigrant children. But, did the schools succeed in giving these children an "opportunity for success in life," as Superintendent Maxwell had hoped?

Did the Schools Succeed?

In 1913, a committee of education experts issued a report on the effectiveness of the New York City school system. It found that overcrowding, half-time classes, and widespread truancy were the rule. Half of the children who entered first grade failed to complete the eighth. A third of all elementary students had been held back one or more grades. Less than 10 percent of all school-age children in the city entered high school and nearly a

third of those youngsters dropped out before completing the four-year program. The committee went on to criticize the high schools for being too few, too large, and too academic. Similarly, the small number of vocational schools could not reach enough students.

The committee blamed the school bureaucracy as well as Superintendent Maxwell for the deplorable condition of education in the city. The report called for more emphasis on manual training and practical subjects.

In some ways, the committee findings were overly harsh. Many of the programs recommended by the committee had been in operation for decades, but reached relatively few students. The committee also underestimated the many innovations introduced during Maxwell's superintendency. Finally, the committee failed to seriously address the chronic lack of funding for new schools and special programs for immigrant children.

The 1913 report also missed the fact that some ethnic groups proved more successful in school than others. On the whole, Jewish children were less truant, less likely to be held back a grade, more likely to earn high grades, and more apt to remain in school through the eighth grade than children of other immigrant groups.

One reason for the greater success of Jewish students in school was the long tradition of literacy and learning that formed such an important part of Jewish religious life in Europe. Also, Jewish immigrants more often came from cities where schooling was an accepted part of growing up. The Jewish newcomers had a saying: "Land on Saturday, settle on Sunday, school on Monday." Yet, formal education even for most Jewish youth ended by grade eight. The pressure to help support the family, as well as the availability of many unskilled jobs, made work, not school, the route to success in America for most Jewish immigrants at this time.

Other immigrant children generally had a much tougher time in school. Those coming mainly from a rural peasant culture, had parents who valued physical labor (especially for males) more than book learning. Some families also resented attempts by the schools to Americanize their children by stripping them of their heritage and language. Leonard Cavello, an immigrant child from rural Italy who fought the odds to become a New York City school official, described his own Americanization experience:

"We soon got the idea that `Italian' meant something inferior, and a barrier was erected between children of Italian origin and their parents. This was the accepted process of Americanization. We were becoming Americans by learning to be ashamed of our parents."

Did the schools succeed? Largely due to the efforts of Superintendent William H. Maxwell, New York schools did provide opportunities for some immigrant young people before World War I. But for most, the schools were largely irrelevant. In spite of the New York state compulsory education law requiring children to remain in school until age 14 or upon completing the eighth grade, the majority of immigrant students were out of

school and working after grade six. It would take one or two more generations before most of the descendants of these immigrants would be economically able to graduate from public high schools.

For Discussion and Writing

1. How did the New York City schools change as a result of the impact of the "new" immigrants between 1900 and 1914?

2. Why did so few immigrant students remain in school after the eighth grade?

3. Contrast the economy of the United States before World War I with the economy today. How do you think today's economy should influence what is taught in the public schools?

For Further Information

NYC 100 A history of New York in the 20th century. From the *New York Times*.

Gotham Center for New York City History A huge collection of links.

CityYouth: U.S. History Links Links on New York City education at the turn of the century. From Constitutional Rights Foundation.

A C T I V I T Y

New Chance

"New Chance" is a fictitious city of today whose public schools have received a recent influx of immigrant students. Currently, 20 percent of the students in the school district are recent immigrants from Asia, 30 percent are newcomers from Latin America, and 50 percent are native-born Americans. Many of the newcomers have come to America from poor rural countries often torn apart by war. These youngsters usually have little schooling and sometimes cannot read or write in their native languages. Other immigrant students come from cities and cultural backgrounds where education is highly valued and supported by the family. About 60 percent of the immigrant students speak little or no English. The following activity will enable the class to participate in a simulated school board meeting on how to go about educating the newcomers in New Chance.

A. The New Chance Board of Education has appointed four committees to recommend answers to key questions facing the school district:

Committee 1: What is the best way for the newcomers to learn English?

Committee 2: What subjects should be stressed in the curriculum for all students?

Committee 3: How can the newcomers best be integrated into the dominant American culture?

Committee 4: What should be done to reduce prejudice between native-born Americans and the newcomers?

B. Divide the class into five groups: the four committees and the New Chance Board of Education. Each of the committees should meet and decide how to gather information to make recommendations to the board. Committees might review the article on New York's experience with European immigrant students, research recent periodical articles on immigrant students in U.S. schools today, interview bilingual and ESL teachers, interview school administrators and subject teachers, or conduct surveys of students and parents.

C. The committees should next meet by themselves to discuss the information they have gathered. Each committee should then prepare its recommendations to the school board.

D. One board of education member should be elected by the others as chairperson of the board meeting. The chairperson should then ask each committee to give its report. The report should consist of the committee's recommendations together with facts, statistics, interview statements, survey results, and other supporting information and arguments. Dissenting views from each committee should also be reported.

E. After hearing the committee recommendations, the school board should invite comments and arguments from anyone present. The board should then discuss the recommendations among themselves and finally vote on each one. After voting, the school board members should give reasons for their votes.