

Research Question: *To what extent did Álvaro Obregón progressively reform Mexico's educational system (1920-1924)?*

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Identification and Evaluation of Sources

Álvaro Obregón's election as Mexican president in 1920 marked the end of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). Arguably one of Obregón's most successful and progressive reforms was Mexico's education system. This investigation will focus on the question: *To what extent did Álvaro Obregón progressively reform Mexico's educational system (1920-1924)?*

The first source utilized is a book from 1922 titled *President Obregón—A World Reformer*. This source's origin is the author, journalist, and linguist Emile J. Dillon. Dillon was a professor at the University of Kharkiv, and wrote on foreign affairs for London's Daily Telegraph and academic journals. Dillon's purpose in writing this biography was to examine Obregón's qualifications for the presidency, and his progress in reforming Mexico, from the time of his inauguration in December 1920 to October 1922. Dillon's bibliography holds much value for this investigation because he actually interviewed Obregón numerous times. Reading about a person's actions is helpful, but information such as their motives can easily be left out. Being presented with an account of a person's words along with their actions creates a better understanding for a reader, and this was gained through Dillon's work. Dillon's book contains an evaluation of Obregón's progress reforming Mexico's educational system, yet it holds a limitation for this investigation. Due to the time it was written, it excludes information on half of Obregón's time as president, and is not able to provide insight into what Obregón accomplished in total by the end of his presidency in 1924. Another possible limitation of Dillon's writing is that he may have been culturally biased in his depiction of Mexican history and events. At one point in the text, Dillon calls Mexicans "politically backward". While he may have been biased, the source still provides personal insight through interviews and factual information of Obregón's presidency and educational reforms.

The second source is titled *José Vasconcelos (1882-1959)*. This source's origin is the author Rosario Encinas, and it was originally published by UNESCO: International Bureau of Education. At the time of publication, Encinas was the assistant director of educational research at the National Institute for Adult Education in Mexico. Encinas' purpose in writing this was to provide a biographical account of José Vasconcelos' professional work as an academic and later as a government ministry leader, with a focus on his role in reforming Mexico's education system. An examination of Vasconcelos is valuable to this investigation because he is who Obregón appointed as the director of his Secretariat of Public Education. Supported, politically and economically, by Obregón, Vasconcelos organized and carried out the educational reforms in Mexico during the period of 1921 to 1924. This source provides information on Vasconcelos' opinions on how educational systems should function, and of the reforms he implemented with Obregón's approval. A possible limitation of this source could be it does not explicitly discuss Obregón. However, it does indirectly reflect on Obregón's progressive nature in that Obregón chose Vasconcelos to head the Secretariat of Public Education, and approved of his proposed reforms.

Word Count: 497

Investigation

To understand the extent to which President Álvaro Obregón's educational reforms were progressive, one must first understand the system that existed prior. Under President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910), education was heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, which neglected to educate native peoples, concentrating on the education of the Mexican aristocracy instead.¹ Education under Díaz was highly divided, with wealthy, northern Mexico's literacy rate being 45%, central Mexico's being 27%, and impoverished, southern Mexico's being only 14%.² Education was made most available to Mexico's wealthy classes, but the extensive majority of Mexicans who needed an education lived in rural areas, where education was not made available to them due to lacking a means of payment.³ This led to 72.3% of Mexico's population being illiterate in 1910.⁴

Shortly before Obregón's presidency began, the revolutionary 1917 Mexican Constitution was instituted. This new constitution addressed the country's desires for their education system. It is important to understand what the constitution called for in order to establish a way to evaluate the progressiveness of Obregón's reforms (his adherence to/deviation from the constitution). Article 3 of the constitution declared that Mexican education should be mandatory for all and free to all, and it secularized public education.⁵

For Mexico's education system, President Obregón's goals appear to have been to achieve true reformation that would benefit all Mexicans, including the poor and the native.

¹ Boyles, D. (2012, December). *John Dewey's Influence in Mexico: Rural Schooling, 'Community,' and the Vitality of Context* [PDF]. *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*, 3(2). Pg. 101.

² Vaughan, M. (1990). Primary Education and Literacy in Nineteenth-Century Mexico: Research Trends, 1968-1988. *Latin American Research Review*, 25(1). Pg. 43.

³ Encinas, Rosario. (2002). *José Vasconcelos (1882-1959)* [PDF]. Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education. Pg. 2.

⁴ N/A. *Progress of literacy in various countries: A preliminary statistical study of available census data since 1900*. (1953). Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Pg. 119.

⁵ N/A. "The Mexican Revolution and the United States in the Collections of the Library of Congress The Constitution of 1917." (n.d.).

Early in his presidency, Obregón asserted it was “part of [his] plan to send the most promising youths” of Mexico to the United States to complete their education.⁶ Obregón sought cordial, secure relationships with other countries, so it could be argued this goal was only for the purpose of forming those. Even if this was the case, the value this goal held for education was real: in 1920, the United States’ literacy rate was 94%, and Mexicans could be educated well there.⁷ On February 7, 1921, a little over two months after his inauguration, President Obregón gave a speech in which he addressed the reforms he planned to make or was already in the process of making. Of education, Obregón stated education needed to be federalized, or in complete control of the government, rather than controlled by the Catholic Church.⁸ This was a significant point for him to establish because of the call for education to be secularized within the 1917 constitution, showing he aimed to fulfill this. Obregón also stated the reformation of the education system would lead to broadening the culture of the Mexican people, a goal to be accomplished “by all the means at the disposal of the state”.⁹ This shows that Obregón valued having an educated country in which people could think for themselves.

Obregón seems to have met his goals for reforming education. Many American universities offered Mexican students scholarships, guaranteeing them an American education.¹⁰ This advanced the education and literacy of a portion of the Mexican population, as well as promoted international amity. Another goal for reform he achieved, which is in accordance with the 1917 constitution, was making education free and mandatory. President Obregón passed the Education Bill, which proclaimed that Mexican education is a service free of charge for all, and

⁶ Dillon, E. J., Dr. (1922). *President Obregón—A World Reformer*. London, United Kingdom: Hutchinson & Co. Pg. 153.

⁷ Sawyer, C., & Capt, J. C. (1948). Illiteracy in the United States: October 1947. *Current Population Reports Population Characteristics*, 20, p-20, 1-6. Pg. 2.

⁸ Hackett, Charles Wilson. “The New Regime in Mexico.” The Library of Congress, 1921. Pg. 18.

⁹ Hackett, 1921. Pg. 18.

¹⁰ Hackett, 1921. Pg. 18.

that elementary education is mandatory.¹¹ Furthermore, Obregón's bill expressed that the Mexican government would take on the responsibility of feeding, clothing, and educating all children in Mexico under the age of fourteen and who were either orphans or poor and "dependent on parents incapacitated for work".¹² This suggests that Obregón strongly wanted to reach out to students all over Mexico to involve them in a national education.

President Obregón's educational reforms were mostly organized and implemented by José Vasconcelos, his Minister of Education. In 1920, Obregón gave Vasconcelos the authority to implement a national education program. In 1921, Vasconcelos began by creating a new office called the Secretaría of Public Education, instead of "Public Instruction" as it was under Díaz's regime.¹³ The switch from "instruction" to "education" signifies what Obregón and Vasconcelos intended to do with Mexico's education system: to not only instruct, but to fully educate and develop citizens. As for Vasconcelos' intentions and goals, he believed a Mexican education should develop the full potential of the student as well as merge the indigenous culture with hispanic culture; thus, he thought natives should be integrated through a shared education.¹⁴

For their work with reforming education, Obregón and Vasconcelos shared a common goal of providing education to native peoples, and assembling an inclusive national culture and pride. Therefore, Vasconcelos received Obregón's complete political and economic support for his Secretaría of Public Education. Obregón gave Vasconcelos the largest budget ever for this sector of Mexican government.¹⁵ Obregón pushed all the funds he collected from disbanding a large portion of the Mexican army towards the Secretaría of Public Education, giving Vasconcelos sixty million pesos a year, compared to Díaz's mere six million pesos for the

¹¹ Dillon, 1922. Pg. 269.

¹² Dillon, 1922. Pg. 269.

¹³ Andrade de Herrera, Victoria. "Education in Mexico: Historical and Contemporary Educational Systems." Educational Resources Information Center, 1996. Pg. 31.

¹⁴ de Herrera, 1996. Pg. 31.

¹⁵ Encinas, 2002. Pg. 2.

Secretaría of Public Instruction.¹⁶ Under President Díaz, Mexico had economic stability, but when Obregón entered the presidency, Mexico's main revenue source (agriculture) was greatly damaged by the revolution and the country was in debt. Considering this difference, Obregón's allotted amount to the ministry is highly impressive and indicative of his seriousness to reforming the system.

Between 1921 and 1924, progressive reforms were made through the Secretaría of Public Education, with the most noteworthy being: combatting national illiteracy, education for the native and the poor, education for women, and the support and encouragement of the arts. Dealing with the problem of illiteracy was the ministry's first objective, and multiple methods were utilized. First, schools were set up in all barracks throughout Mexico, with capable officers being appointed to teach the soldiers arithmetic and how to read and write.¹⁷ Second, in the cities and towns, twenty thousand schoolteachers, and a group of translators for the natives, were enlisted to establish schools in rural areas and provide the area's inhabitants, children and adults alike, with elementary education.¹⁸ Thus, schools were opened all over Mexico and became accessible to the native and the poor. These examples show President Obregón's government actively reaching out to all persons in Mexico to provide them with an education. By increasing the number of schools, Mexico experienced a 50% increase in the number of teachers, students, and schools at the elementary level.¹⁹ Another educational project for the promotion of integration was the education of adult women: throughout Mexico, women were offered the opportunity to become teachers in order to educate themselves and others.²⁰ The ministry's Department of Fine Arts promoted Mexican poets, writers, and composers, and revived

¹⁶ Dillon, 1922. Pg. 267.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Encinas, 2002. Pg. 4.

²⁰ Encinas, 2002. Pg. 5.

traditional forms of artistic expression.²¹ Vasconcelos commissioned the artists Diego Rivera, José Orozco, and David Siquieros to paint murals on public buildings depicting scenes of the Mexican Revolution.²² These murals were significant because they served as methods of education for those who could not read, and they encouraged national pride.

As Dillon believed, President Obregón's accomplishments within such a short amount of time were "truly remarkable".²³ With his primary goal being to unite Mexico, between 1920 and 1924, President Álvaro Obregón progressively reformed Mexico's education system, mainly through his collaboration with José Vasconcelos, his Minister of Education. Obregón accomplished providing free, mandatory, elementary education for all Mexicans. In contrast to 72.3% during Díaz's presidency, Mexico's illiteracy rate had decreased to 66.2% by 1921.²⁴ However, Obregón's reform was not perfect, and in some ways it still resembled Díaz's system, as historian Andrade de Herrera presents. In 1910, Díaz passed laws that established Schools of Rudimentary Instruction, which taught native people to speak, read, and write Spanish, and to do arithmetic.²⁵ This suggests Obregón's reforms may not have been so revolutionary. Yet the progressive reforms made during Obregón's presidency did inspire further educational reform in Mexico. For example, under President Plutarco Calles (1924-1934), education was further separated from the Catholic Church, and sexual education was introduced. Furthermore, Mexico's illiteracy rates continued to decrease, from 66.2% in 1921 to 61.5% in 1930 to 54% in 1940, to 95.38% in 2018.²⁶

Word Count: 1,329

²¹ Encinas, 2002. Pg. 6.

²² de Herrera, 1996. Pg. 32.

²³ Dillon, 1922. Pg. 261.

²⁴ *Progress of literacy in various countries*, 1953. Pg. 119.

²⁵ de Herrera, 1996. Pg. 30

²⁶ Mexico Literacy Rate 1980-2020. (2018).

Reflection

Historians hold great responsibilities concerning how history is recorded. They must accurately represent the roles of both/all sides involved in an event without any personal bias towards one side or the other. A historical account that shows obvious favor to one side could skew a reader's understanding and knowledge of the event, and might even instill the same bias in them as well. A challenge I faced while composing this investigation was trying to refrain from practicing confirmation bias, or only seeking and presenting the information that best proves my argument. Thus, it was difficult to analyze my sources objectively, without actively searching only for the facts that would support my claim. Naturally, I wanted to prove Obregón's educational reforms to be fully progressive to the best of my ability, but they weren't always perfectly progressive. However, when researching this topic I did face the challenge of struggling to find sources presenting information suggesting his reforms were not progressive. This could just be due to the fact that Obregón was the first Mexican president since Díaz who actually aimed to improve Mexico for the sake of improving its people. Historical events and figures are complex, and nothing is ever one-sided, so when recording history it is imperative to present facts from both sides of the argument to the best of one's ability, yet this was difficult with this topic.

When writing about a historical subject within a word limit, I realized it was important for me to understand the difference between bias and careful selection. Here, I believe "selection" refers to choosing a range of information, with some supporting the claim and some not. Knowing I could not include every single fact from my research, I found it tricky to determine what I should include in the paper and what I should not, and trying to identify

whether the deciding factor was of confirmation bias or just of careful selection. Carefully selecting facts is about remaining unbiased and objective.

Word Count: 330

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