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Immigration Patterns and History of Mexican-origin Latin@s in the Midwest: Educational Implications and Future Considerations

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Abstract

The accelerated growth of the Latin@ population in the United States in the last few decades represents one of the most significant demographic changes in the nation. Alongside this population shift, some other trends have started to emerge: the Latin@ population, especially Mexican-origin people, has begun to move and settle outside traditional large cities (Murillo & Villenas, 1997; Stamps & Bohon, 2006). The numbers of Mexican-origin Latin@s concentrated in so-called “gateway” states, such as California and Texas, have started to decline and populations of immigrants settling in non-traditional destinations are now growing (Passel & Zimmerman 2001; Zuñiga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). This demographic flow has been referred to in academic literature as the new Latino diaspora (Murillo & Villenas, 1997) or new Latino destinations (Suro & Singer, 2002). Against this background, this essay explores the literature with a focus on the history of Mexican-origin Latin@ presence in the Midwest, as well as the more recent immigration trends of this population in the region. The essay aims to extend current understandings of Latin@ immigration patterns in the Midwest, analyze their implications for education and policy, and offer additional questions and considerations for future research in the field. A nuanced examination of these facts will help us to better understand the significance of the Mexican-origin Latin@ presence in the Midwest, the vulnerable status of this group over the years, and the need to recognize this population as an asset, not a liability, in the present and future considerations of the United States as a nation.

Keywords: Demographic changes, immigration, Mexican-origin Latin@s, Midwest

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The accelerated growth of the Latin@ population in the United States in the last few decades represents one of the most significant demographic changes in the nation. Traditionally, Latin@ populations have settled in long-established immigrant communities such as the southwestern states, as well as Florida, New York and large urban metropolises (Hamann & Harklau, 2010). According to Zuñiga and Hernandez-Leon (2005), “with the exception of the greater Chicago area, Mexican immigration had remained near their homeland” (p. xiii). However, since 1970 a new demographic trend has emerged: the Latin@ population, especially Mexican-origin people—the largest Latin@ group in the United States (Motel & Patten, 2012)—has begun to move and settle outside its traditional cities (Murillo & Villenas, 1997; Stamps & Bohon, 2006; Suro & Singer, 2002). The numbers of Mexican-origin Latin@s concentrated in so-called “gateway” states, such as California and Texas, have started to decline and populations of immigrants settling in non-traditional destinations are now growing (Massey et., 2002; Passel & Zimmerman 2001; Zuñiga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). This demographic flow has been referred to in academic literature as the new Latino diaspora (Murillo & Villenas, 1997) or new Latino destinations (Suro & Singer, 2002).

When considering these relatively recent geographic and demographic changes involving the Mexican-origin population, an important starting point is an examination of this group’s history and migration patterns in different areas of the United States. Accordingly, this essay explores the literature with a focus on the history of Mexican-origin Latin@ presence in the Midwest, as well as the more recent immigration trends of this population in the region. The essay aims to extend current understandings of Latin@ immigration patterns in the Midwest, analyze their implications for education and policy, and offer additional questions and considerations for future research in the field. A nuanced examination of these facts will help us to better understand the significance of the Mexican-origin Latin@ presence in the Midwest, the vulnerable status of this group over the years, and the need to recognize this population as an asset, not a liability, in the present and future considerations of the United States as a nation.

Early History of Mexican-origin Latin@s in the Midwest

“According to the Aztec narrative, Aztlán was located in the north, on an island with seven caves and a twisted hill called Colhuacan (Leal, 1998). To this day, it is not clear where exactly Aztlán is located geographically, but there are theories that place its

location everywhere from Nayarit, Mexico (Pina, 1998), to California, New Mexico, Florida, and Wisconsin [...] It is from Aztlán that the Aztecs departed on a journey that would eventually lead them to found Tenochtitlán, or what is now known as Mexico City.” (Gonzalez, 2011, p. 18)

The presence of Latin@s in the Midwest is connected to a long history of Indigenous peoples moving freely throughout the northern territories (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) points to archeological findings of trade-related artifacts that demonstrate trade networks connecting native Indigenous peoples of different regions. For example, she explains:

Aztec merchants acquired turquoise from Pueblos who mined it in what is now the US Southwest to sell in Central Mexico where it had become the most valued of all material possessions and was used as a means of exchange or a form of money. (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, p. 20)

Turquoise objects have been found in precolonial sites in Kansas, Nebraska, and Wisconsin (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). This archeological linkage, along with the oral and written histories of Indigenous peoples including Aztecs, Cherokees, and Choctaws, provide evidence for migrations between north and south and relationships between various groups (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Chavero (1953) also documents “pre-Columbian trade and migratory practices that date back to at least 2,500 B.C.E., linking Indigenous communities in what is now the American Midwest with Mayan groups as far away as present-day Central America” (as cited in Gonzales, 2011, p. 20).

Researchers have also found built features in the landscape suggesting early Mayan presence in the Midwest. Chavero (1953) argues that the pyramid-shaped structures found throughout the Midwest, often called “mounds,” are vestiges of Mayan cultural influence. Before European settlers arrived, there were thousands of mounds throughout the Midwest in Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Unfortunately, a large percentage of them have been destroyed by farmers or industry (Gonzalez, 2011). Some observers have remarked on the similarity between these mounds and the pyramids in Mexico and Central America. One of them was Judge Nathaniel Hyer, who in 1836 concluded that his city in rural Wisconsin was:

the original homeland of the Aztecs, Aztlán. He thought the stepped pyramid structures discovered in the area were built by the Aztecs before they began their journey south

to found what we know as Tenochtitlán. Hyer was so certain of this history that he renamed his town Aztalan, a misspelling of Aztlán (Birmingham & Eisenberg, 2000, as cited in Gonzalez, 2011, p. 21)

Another possible connection between the Mexican native tribes and the Midwest was described by Silas Farmer, a historian from Michigan. In 1890, Farmer presented the theory of the influential geographer, Alexander von Humboldt, establishing Michigan as the “original home of the ancient Mexican Indians, perhaps the Mexica-Azteca legendary birthplace known as Aztlán” (Vargas, 2011, p. 290). Furthermore, scholars such as Dennis N. Valdés, a more recent Michigan historian, have also proposed a linguistic connection between Mexico and the Midwest. Valdés (1982) explains that the ancient word for the state of Mexico, Michoacán, meant “place of fish,” while the Algonquian Indian word from which Michigan takes its name means “land of great waters.” This suggestive semantic and morphological association may ultimately support the links identified by other theorists between the peoples of the north and south.

Some researchers have also noted the importance of migration routes to the Midwestern regions. Gonzalez (2011) argues that waterways like the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico form a significant link between the pre-Columbian Midwestern and Mesoamerican cultures. She focuses on “passageways,” or river routes along which lie strings of mound cities. These passageways, the corridors for migrant streams, are still used today by Mexican and Chicano farmworkers and laborers. Gonzalez (2011) explains that there is an “eastern migrant stream [that] starts in Florida, moving north to Ohio or Maine [and] the Midwestern migrant stream begins in Texas and leads workers in one of two directions, northwest toward Washington or northeast into Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio” (p. 25). The work of other scholars such as Gilberto Cardenas (2001), Nancy Saldaña (1969), and Dennis Valdés (1999) who have studied the early presence of Latin@s in the Midwest, confirms the significance of the routes of migrant streams. These researchers have found a “strong connection between Mexico, Texas and the Midwest, indicating that a significant number of Mexican Americans living in the region migrated north in the Midwest migrant stream” (Gonzalez, 2011, p. 25).

These geographic and historical connections reveal that the presence of Mexican-origin Latin@s in the Midwest is not a new phenomenon. Unfortunately, Latin@s have suffered a

dehistoricization in American history (MacDonald & Carrillo, 2009). Problematic for Midwestern Chican@s¹ has been their characterization as new immigrants to the region. However, the analysis of their early history suggests that they are “simply following the migratory patterns established hundreds of years ago by their own Indigenous ancestors at a time before geopolitical boundaries had been drawn” (Gonzalez, 2011, p. 25) This particular perspective raises the question of power differentiation in the construction of knowledge: who is at the center and who is at the periphery of history and the construction of reality? (Canagarajah, 2002). It also reminds us that, as mentioned by Hamann and Harklau (2010), there is a possibility of becoming complicit in “established communities’ erasure of Latino histories” (p. 159). Notwithstanding these considerations, however, Mexican-origin Latin@s in the Midwest are not “new to the region but are instead returning home” (Gonzalez, 2011, p. 25). Ignoring these facts further contributes to historic (mis) understandings of the Mexican-origin Latin@ presence in the Midwest, and their ancient connection to the US territory.

Changing Demographics in the Midwest

The origin of more recent Mexican-origin Latin@ migration to the Midwest reaches back to the beginning of the 20th century, when a series of “push” and “pull” factors coalesced to bring persons of Mexican origin to the Midwest (Saenz & Cready, 1997). The Mexican Revolution, from c. 1910 to 1920, was one of the main factors that pushed many to migrate north. This was the first major wave of Mexican immigrants to the United States (Saenz, 1991). The great number of Mexicans who moved to Texas and other parts of the Southwest resulted in a surplus of labor in the region. As a result, the search for better economic opportunities in areas outside the Southwest became an attractive alternative for a significant number of people (Saenz, 1991).

McConnell (2004) relates the initial recruitment of Mexican labor in the rural upper Midwest to the 1917 Immigration Act that downsized supplies of European-origin labor. The shortages of labor in the wake of World War I and the 1921 and 1924 immigration quota acts forced Midwestern capitalists to turn to new sources of cheap labor (Saenz, 2005). As a result, recruiters scoured the Texas-Mexico border and even toured Mexico itself, seeking workers.

¹ I use the term Chican@ to move beyond gender binaries.

They touted the superior working conditions and higher wages in the Midwest to convince persons of Mexican origin to work mainly in the agricultural, railroad, and manufacturing industries (Acuña, 1988; Arreola, 1985; McWilliams, 1948; Saenz, 1991; Valdés, 1991). It is estimated that in 1923, between the months of March and August, approximately 24,585 Mexican workers were recruited by agencies to labor in Midwestern states and Pennsylvania (Acuña, 1988). In cities like Chicago, Mexicans comprised approximately 20% of the Chicago railroad maintenance workers in the 1920s. As a result, Chicago became known as the “Midwest Mexican capital” (Acuña, 1988). Other popular Midwestern destinations at the time included Detroit, Gary (Indiana), Kansas City, Loraine (Ohio), Saginaw (Michigan), St. Louis, St. Paul (Minnesota), and Toledo (Ohio) (Acuña, 1988; McWilliams, 1948; Valdés, 1991).

The agricultural sector, particularly the sugar beet industry, also attracted a significant number of Mexican workers. Valdés (1991) mentions that the state of Michigan became known as the “*Michoacán del Norte*” (Michoacán of the north) due to the number of Mexican workers there. Sugar beet zones existed in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and North Dakota where Mexican-origin workers were the majority by the 1920s (Valdés, 1991). A 1927 survey reported that these workers accounted for 75% to 95% of sugar beet workers in the Midwest (Valdés, 1991). However, Hamann and Harklau (2010) mention that these Latin@ communities were “disrupted by the depressions of 1920-21 and 1929 when many of those of Mexican origin left or were forcibly repatriated” (p. 159). Latin@ workers were subject to pressure, discrimination, and hostility at that time (Mohl & Betten, 1987). They were blamed for the lack of jobs for Americans, and their exploitation extended outside the workplace. They were harassed by police, abused by the courts, segregated into the worst available living conditions, and their rights were limited as they were considered “temporary,” second-class foreigners (Año Nuevo Kerr, 1976; Reisler, 1976). This condition was clear when they were repatriated during the depression of 1921, and again during the Great Depression when Mexicans were asked, pressured, and even coerced to go back to Mexico as a strategy to alleviate the conditions of other American workers (Hoffman, 1978).

In 1930, while 90% of the Mexican-origin population in the United States was established mainly in five southwestern states (Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas), 7% (98,122) were living in the Midwest (Saenz, 2005). Chicago became a major destination for both documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants (Corwin, 1973). At that time, “Illinois had

the sixth largest Mexican-origin population, with 28,906 making their home in this state. Thus, the early roots of the Mexican population in the Midwest were well established by 1930” (Saenz 2005, p. 33). The Bracero program, “the nation’s largest experiment with guest workers,” played a significant role in the importation of Mexican labor to the United States (Center for History and New Media, 2020). This program was created in 1942 by executive order. It was developed taking into account the concerns of many growers who argued that World War II was going to bring shortages in labor to agricultural jobs, especially, low-paying ones. The program:

“grew out of a series of bi-lateral agreements between Mexico and the United States that allowed millions of Mexican men to come to the United States to work on, short-term, primarily agricultural labor contracts. From 1942 to 1964, 4.6 million contracts were signed, with many individuals returning several times on different contracts, making it the largest U.S. contract labor program. (Center for History and New Media, 2020)

Through the bracero program, Mexican workers were brought into places or industries with a certified labor shortage. These braceros were offered short-term contracts and had to return to Mexico once their contracts had expired. They could not “compete in the open market for jobs and were to take only the jobs and occupations for which they were contracted” (Betancur et al., 1993, p. 16). It can be said that they were brought to do the jobs American citizens did not want to perform (Kirstein, 1977). The Bracero Program reinforced the idea of applying temporary immigrant status to Mexican workers during the 1917 war-related labor shortages. Mexican-origin Latin@s became part of a system focused on providing American employers with their labor needs (Corwin, 1978; Kirsten, 1977). That notwithstanding, it is important to mention that this population’s relegation to low-sector jobs is also closely connected to factors like language and educational attainment (Aponte & Siles, 1994; Fry & Passel, 2009). Scholars such as Fry and Passel (2009) have documented language as one of the pivotal elements impacting the integration of Latin@s into the different spheres of American society. Similarly, Aponte and Siles (1994) have pointed to the low levels of educational attainment as one significant factor affecting Latin@s’ labor prospects in the United States (a subject I shall return to later in this essay).

During the rest of the century, two other flows of immigration are described as prime contributors to the increasing presence of Mexican-origin Latin@s in the Midwest. First,

following World War II and up to the 1960s, Mexican-Americans started to settle outside the migrant farmworker stream corridors, establishing their homes in Midwestern states such as Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio (Fernández, 2013; Lane & Escobar, 1987; Samora & Lamanna, 1987; Wells, 1978). Mexican immigration to industrialized states such as Michigan rose from 1940 to 1960. Durand et al. (2005), explain that:

over the period 1940 to 1960 Indiana [...] increased its salience among non-gateway states [...] Trends since 1970 document the emergence of states like Idaho as a destination for Mexican immigrants and [...] point to the emergence of states like Iowa and Minnesota as attractive locations. (p. 11-13)

Santiago (1990) also documents that in the Midwest, the Latin@ population from 1970 to 1988 increased by 40%. The most considerable gains took place in Illinois (107%). The Latin@ population was of different origins, however, “approximately 63% [were] Mexican” (Santiago, 1990, p. 5).

The number of Latin@s in the Midwest has increased significantly since the beginning of the 20th century, when they numbered approximately 1,200 (Cardenas, 1976). Martinez (2011) mentions that by the mid-twentieth century, Latin@s numbered “approximately 80,000 increasing rapidly and steadily thereafter” (p. 6). According to Cardenas (1978),

in 1970 there were slightly over one million persons of Spanish origin in the Midwest. Similar to current trends, at that time Illinois was also the Midwestern state with the most members of this group, with 393,204. Three other states (Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana) also had more than 10,000 persons of Spanish origin. (p. 37)

It is important to mention that this period corresponded to the early immigration change from Europe to Latin America and Asia which started in 1965 (Martinez, 2011). By 1970, Chicago had the fourth-largest urban Mexican population in the United States with 106,000 people (Betancur et al., 1993).

Recent Trends: New Destinations & The New Latino Diaspora

The second most recent immigrant flow of Latin@s to the Midwest has occurred since the 1980s. This demographic shift has been termed the “browning of the Midwest” (Aponte & Siles, 1994), and has been connected to the industrial and agricultural prosperity of the Midwest as one of the main reasons driving Mexicans towards the north from states like Texas

(Cardenas, 2001). The migration of Latin@s—primarily Mexicans—to the Midwest has been accelerated by the revitalization of the meatpacking industry and the consequent active recruitment of Latin@s to fill jobs in this sector of the economy (Baker & Hotek, 2003; Cantu, 1995; Dalla et al., 2005; Fink, 1998; Gouveia & Saenz, 2000; Gouveia & Stull, 1995; Grey, 1999; Guzmán & McConnell, 2002; Haverluk & Trautman, 2008; Lopez, 2000; Millard & Chapa, 2004; Saenz, 2005; Stull et al., 1995; Zuñiga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). By 1980, the number of Latin@s in the Midwest was approximately 1.25 million, reaching almost 1.5 million by 1990 (Gibson & Jung, 2002). Dunard et al. (2005) point to the slow end of the recession in California and the quick sustained boom of the rest of the country, including the Midwest, as the reasons for the 1990s Latin@ migration to the area. These researchers connect some patterns of immigration to the effects of the new regime of the immigration IRCA (Immigration Control and Reform Act) of 1986. According to them, the full effects of the IRCA were not felt until after 1990, and some consequences of this massive legalization included a flooding of the labor markets with newly legalized immigrants, mainly Mexicans, who were now free to move anywhere within the United States.

This regime, coupled with other negative social and economic forces and a growing hostility against immigrants in California, produced a movement of Mexican immigrants from California to other parts of the United States (Dunard et al., 2005). The movement to new destinations, Dunard et al. (2005) contend, was “led by young single men of labor force age who worked in agriculture. By the mid-1990s, however, they had already begun moving to cities, where they were joined by growing numbers of women” (p. 18). The Latin@ population in the Midwest grew from approximately 1.3 million in 1980 to around 4.2 million in the year 2008 (Saenz, 2011). Robert Aponte and Marcelo Siles (1994) found that “over 56% of the region’s population increase was accounted for by Latinos, of which persons of Mexican origin were the largest proportion (accounted for virtually 70% of all Midwestern Latinos) [...] Illinois, particularly the Chicago area, showed the most Latino growth, with Michigan second” (p. 2). This rapid growth was evident in 1988, when the Latin@ population in the Midwest numbered approximately 1.2 million persons, which equated to approximately 3% of the total population of the region (Aponte & Siles, 1994). With that said, one interesting fact is that while all other states in the Midwest were found to include at least 30,000 Hispanics among their population

during the count in 1990, a number smaller than 30,000 were found in the Dakotas even when their Latin@s populations were combined (Aponte & Siles, 1994).

Zuñiga and Hernandez-Leon (2005) explain that between 1990 and 2000 the number of Mexican immigrants in non-gateway states grew exponentially. In Iowa, Indiana, and Nebraska it had grown between 500% and 600%. In Minnesota, it had grown more than 1000% and in Wisconsin between 200% and 400%. In addition, Saenz (2011) clarifies that despite the high concentration of Latin@s in mainly four Midwestern states (Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio), the number of Latin@s living in these states decreased from 79% in 1980 to 71% in 2008. He credits this change to the increasing movement of Latin@s to “new destination” areas where they had not been historically present. Tapia et al. (2011) point to the estimates of the U.S. Census Bureau from 2000 to 2007 to call attention to the growth of the national and regional Latin@s population. These estimates reveal that “the size of the Latino Population grew by 10 million people, an increase of 27%, making them by far, the nation’s largest minority group. The Latino population in the Midwestern states grew by 30% over this time frame, adding about 1 million inhabitants” (Tapia et al., 2011, p. 181).

The body of research known as the New Latino Diaspora has drawn attention to the phenomenon of Latin@s moving to regions in the United States that traditionally had lacked a visible Latin@s presence. The scholars behind this research have focused on exploring Latin@s conditions and education from the perspectives of these new destinations (Hamann et al., 2015; Wortham et al., 2002). A detailed analysis of these demographic trends in the so-called new Latino destinations (Suro & Singer, 2002) is beyond the scope of this essay. However, as part of the study of the immigration patterns of Mexican-origin Latin@s in the Midwest, this recent demographic shift cannot go without mention.

Education and Policy Implications

The currently increasing numbers of Latin@s immigrants, mostly of Mexican origin, in the Midwest, particularly in rural locations where in the recent past there has not been a large immigrant presence, has had social and economic ramifications. In some of these locales, the communities lack experience supporting the arrival of a foreign-born population (Majka & Majka, 2011), which has resulted in issues ranging from a lack of effective communication to

inadequate provision and access to social services, including schools and health-care facilities (Majka & Majka, 2011).

As previously mentioned, Fry and Passel (2009) found that one of the major factors in the integration of Latin@s into the core fabric of American society and its institutions is language. The growth of the Latin@ population has occurred in locations with a shortfall of professional resources to linguistically support the influx of this growing group of people. Language issues exert a strong effect on the education of Latin@ children who find themselves in new contexts without adequate access to education (Lee & Hawkins, 2015). In this regard, Aponte and Siles (1994) indicate that education continues to play a major part in community integration of the new arrivals because of the youthfulness of the Latin@ population. The researchers documented that the educational attainment indicators of Latin@s reveal a significant disparity between this group and other sectors of the population. They also point out, however, that “the influx of immigrants with lower levels of educational attainment may well account for the relatively slower growth in educational attainment reflected in the data for the region’s Latinos” (Aponte & Siles, 1994). The constant influx of new immigrants may also be related to the low average educational indicators marked by the researchers, since transnational immigrants (mainly Mexicans) usually aim for large urban areas where there are networks of relatives and acquaintances (Aponte & Siles, 1994).

In the Midwest, the enrollment of new immigrant populations has rapidly increased in public schools (Lee & Hawkins, 2015). However, despite the widespread nature of this trend over the last twenty years, there is still much to be learned about how schools are responding to the influx of immigrant students. According to Majka and Majka (2011), “schools have a critical role to play in analyzing and deflecting stereotypes and cultivating respectful relationships. Nurturing aspirations is difficult when students not yet fluent in English are not accommodated or when parental involvement and concerns are deflected” (p. 100). Bohon et al. (2005) found that many times, “Latino students in new diaspora communities are encountering improvisational educational responses, particularly in regard to language issues” (as cited in Hamann & Harklau, 2010, p. 160). Teachers in these new communities are usually unprepared and untrained to teaching English Language Learners (ELLs). Furthermore, communication between home and school is hindered by the lack of professionals and support staff to function as bilingual educators or translators (Bohon et al., 2005; Oberg De La Garza et

al., 2015). This finding is corroborated by Lee and Hawkins (2015), who also found districts and teachers ill-prepared to support the English language learning population. In the rural districts they studied in the Midwest, they found schools were understaffed and overwhelmed by the demographic changes in the population.

A significant point regarding policy was also documented by Lee and Hawkins in their 2015 study. In the schools they examined, testing policies were influencing and “shaping how educators were talking about ELs and how they thought about their work as teachers” (Lee & Hawkins, 2015, p. 54). Despite a common narrative about inclusion, the researchers found little evidence that “any of the districts had prepared the staff for the inclusion of English learners in mainstream classes. ELs and ESL teachers were marginalized, and students were simply victims of the policies” (Lee & Hawkins, 2015, p. 54). These findings point to the inadequate responses of local agencies and institutions to the needs of contemporary Latin@ communities. In this regard, Sonia Nieto (2002) reminds us that due to the number of children entering schools unable to speak English, “it is clear that attending to the unique conditions of language minority students is the responsibility of all educators. For students with limited English proficiency, suitable approaches geared to their particular situations are not frills, but basic education” (p. 96).

The current quandary faced by schools in communities impacted by demographic changes connected to the migration patterns of Latin@s, mostly of Mexican origin, is a compelling one. The responses to addressing the needs of this population are not always discernible or commensurate with the magnitude of the situation. Future demographic predictions point to the steady increase of this population in the years to come. Vega et al. (2011) alert us that “as the baby boomers move out of the economy and become dependent on the productivity of others, their well-being becomes more directly tied to that of Latinos” (p. 79). Thus, the challenge is not how Midwestern communities can handle this new population, but more importantly, how these communities can create educational policies and support their institutions in order to help Latin@s succeed as part of American society.

Further research

The accelerated changes in demographics in the Midwest are creating an urgent need for further investigation of ways in which the educational needs of Latin@ students, particularly

of Mexican-origin, the largest group in the region, are addressed. Much remains to be researched, as well as acted upon, particularly in regard to the struggle involved in the inclusion and exclusion of Latin@s in US society. Common narratives currently circulating highlight certain negative public perceptions of the Latin@ community (Mexicans in particular), deriving from its portrayal in American society (Santa Ana, 2002). The danger of this type of xenophobic message lies in its promotion of a divisive national climate based on prejudice connected to notions of Self and Other (Hall, 1997). To counter this artificially inculcated reality, it is important to advance new understandings that can help to paint a more complete picture of this formerly “invisible” community.

In the Midwest, Mexican-origin Latin@ arrivals have strengthened declining and languishing existing populations while at the same time helping to revitalize their economies (Gouveia, 2006). The shift in the sites of settlement of Mexican-origin Latin@s requires a careful examination of these contemporary contexts of reception (Lee & Hawkins, 2015) in order to better understand how to develop policies that may foster the socio-economic well-being of this population (Santiago, 1990). Hamann and Harklau (2010) consider it necessary to investigate “how Latino students entering new diaspora communities are positioned and position themselves racially, and how such positioning might affect their socialization into particular life and career pathways in and out of school” (p. 164). Furthermore, they encourage us to consider the role of schools as possible spaces for the support of the community and active advocacy for Latin@ families in new locations.

There is no doubt that local-level educational policy must take into account these population changes in order to better address the needs of the individuals in the region. One significant effort that is important to highlight in this regard is the strong presence of bilingual policies in states like Illinois in the Midwest. Oberg De La Garza et al. (2015) explain that in 2009:

Illinois became the first state to target statewide bilingual policies for pre-K instruction. The state mandated that early childhood educators with 20 or more ELLs of the same language background in their classroom or center obtain the ESL endorsement by 2016. Initially, the deadline was 2014, but the state extended it due to the lack of credentialed educators. The state mandate has had a ripple effect of alerting elementary and

secondary teachers to the importance of pursuing the endorsement in preparation for similar regulations for K-12 educators in the future. (p. 369)

Similar policies have also been enacted in states like Wisconsin, where the Bilingual-Bicultural Education statute (Subchapter VII of Chapter 115) specifies “trigger” numbers, requiring school districts to provide bilingual services in schools that serve at least twenty students who speak the same non-English language in grades 4-12. This number decreases to at least ten students in grades K-3 (115.97.2-4).

Another attempt to support the linguistic needs and academic development of Latin@ students in the Midwest has been the passing of the legislation offering a State Seal of Bilingualism. This designation supports the development of bilingualism and biliteracy recognizing students’ linguistic and cultural assets. Currently all Midwest states, except South Dakota, have adopted the Seal (Illinois (2013), Minnesota (2014), Wisconsin (2015), Kansas (2016), Ohio (2017), Missouri (2017), Iowa (2018), Michigan (2018), North Dakota (2019), Nebraska (2020), Indiana (2015) (<https://sealofbiliteracy.org>)). Nevertheless, these policy efforts have been met by the difficult reality of school districts not having enough financial resources and qualified educators to meet the demands of supporting bilingual/biliterate academic development in schools (Lee & Hawkins, 2015; Oberg De La Garza et al., 2015). More research is necessary to examine the effects of state policies on local school districts and the Latin@ populations they serve.

Finally, further research should include questions around the deconstruction of the idea of Latin@ presence in new locales as a “problem” (Hamann et al., 2002, p. 5). More research is needed to consider how Latin@ children are understood within these new communities and how educational policies can take into full consideration the needs of this population group. It is imperative to examine the different cultural constructions associated with education within diverging communities and move towards dynamic ideas that could bring about a culturally amalgamated vision of education (Villenas, 2002).

Conclusion

The literature and history of Mexican-origin Latin@ presence in the Midwest makes it clear that Latin@s are not new to this region. Their roots are to be found in a far older history that links them to the first inhabitants of the North American continent. However, this history seems to have been “erased” or simply ignored over the years. The immigration patterns of

Mexican-origin Latin@s in the Midwest are intricately connected to the economic needs of the region and the vulnerable status of this group of people considered temporary “second-class” immigrants (Año Nuevo Kerr, 1976; Reisler, 1976). Mexican-origin workers in this area have served as the backbone of the economic and social development of the region. Nevertheless, the experience of this group in how it has been treated and incorporated into the labor market has differed markedly from that of immigrants from Europe. The typical consideration of Latin America as the backyard of the United States (Livingston, 2009), seems to have permeated US attitudes towards this group of Latin@s, leading to their treatment as cheap labor to satisfy American economic needs.

Multiple structures of inequality have marginalized Mexican-origin Latin@s over the years and continue to disadvantage this community. As schools and other social institutions continue to struggle to support its needs, it can easily be argued that the focus should be not only on the challenges posed by this “new” group of settlers but rather on the rich opportunities inherent in this situation. Martinez (2011) urges us to consider “how do the Midwest and the nation move from reactionary or indifferent attitudes toward Latinos to proactive incorporation efforts intended to benefit whole communities and the nation?” (p. 313). As a nation, the United States must become aware of the implications of the demographic shifts that connect Latin@s to the immediate future of the larger society. Concerning this, Saenz (2011) states, “the future of the Midwest will increasingly be tied to the Latino population, given the group’s youthfulness. Today’s K-12 students in the Midwest are increasingly Latino, and tomorrow’s workforce in the region will be increasingly Latino” (p. 52). Inadequate provision of services for the Latin@ population today will undoubtedly affect their ability to support America’s population tomorrow. Well-intentioned attempts are still falling short, despite a favorable appearance.

As the United States prepares for the future, it is necessary to look at the present and upcoming demographic changes with hopeful eyes, recognizing that the Mexican-origin Latin@ population represents an asset, not a liability, for the nation (Martinez, 2011). Clearly, the future of the United States will be built by the hard work of Latin@s, among others. In view of this obvious fact, adequate provision of resources and services for Latin@s should be considered a strategic investment to ensure the economic, cultural, and socio-political stability of the American society in decades to come.

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