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A Study of Mexican American Education in The Mercedes Independent School District, 1908-2008: Opportunities and Obstacles?

Beatrice De Leon Edwards
University of Texas-Pan American

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A STUDY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION IN THE MERCEDES
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, 1908 – 2008:
OPPORTUNITIES OR OBSTACLES?

A Dissertation

by

BEATRICE DE LEON EDWARDS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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August 2011

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INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, 1908 – 2008:
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COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. Martha Tevis
Co-Chair of Committee

Dr. Anita Pankake
Co-Chair of Committee

Dr. Miguel A. Nevárez
Committee Member

Dr. Miguel de los Santos
Committee Member

August 2011

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ABSTRACT

Edwards, Beatrice de León, A Study of Mexican American Education in the Mercedes Independent School District, 1908 – 2008: Opportunities or Obstacles? Doctor of Education (Ed.D), August, 2011, 341 pp., 15 tables, 11 figures, references, 196 titles, 2 appendices.

This study investigates the educational history of the Mercedes Independent School District of deep south Texas during the twentieth century with a focus on the opportunities and challenges encountered by Mexican American schoolchildren who were served by the district. The methodology selected is qualitative research wherein the researcher is the primary instrument collecting the experiences of participants with direct or indirect knowledge of the school district. Also examined are archival documents such as high school yearbooks, graduate pictures, school board minutes, maps, and newspaper articles. The demographics of the school district have changed from an all-Anglo school district at its inception to an all-Mexican American school district in one hundred years. Limited integration was practiced at one elementary school partially based on residential and socioeconomic factors, and total segregation of Mexican American students was practiced at two other elementary schools for at least fifty years. Students were integrated in junior high and high school since the early 1920s. A growing middle class of educated Mexican Americans gradually secured city and school district political positions, and earlier segregation practices in the elementary schools ended with single-line integrated campuses in the 1973-1974 school year. The school district today continues to struggle with multiple challenges to student success such as continuing poverty, the influx of

unschooled and often undocumented immigrant children in the region, and the increasingly rigorous state standards for graduation. Emerging themes include the political solidification of a Mexican American educated middle class initially formed from prominent families which was key to the final dissolution of the remnants of segregation in the Mercedes school system that persisted into the 1970s; the initial acceptance of the status quo on the part of many community members who did not feel that true segregation existed in the Mercedes school system; the willingness of many Mexican American parents to do all in their power to secure the best educational opportunities for their children; and the absence of ethnic or racial confrontations in the community during and after the transition period when city and school political positions changed over from Anglo to Mexican American control.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents who have always stressed the importance of education for their children; to my children who understand that their mother is driven to fulfill her dreams and aspirations; to my extended family members who have always supported one another through good times and bad; and to my husband who has patiently waited through months of separation for his wife to be done with her work.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With deepest gratitude I would like to acknowledge my dissertation committee members who patiently and meticulously read through my dissertation so many times: Dr. Martha May Tevis, who provides inspiration and wisdom and who shares a love of educational history with all of her students; Dr. Anita Pankake, who cares not only about correct grammar and syntax, but most especially about the clarity of expression of the work; Dr. Miguel A. Nevárez, who has provided insights into the inner workings of public and higher education politics; and Dr. Miguel de los Santos, whose expertise in school district management is invaluable. These four committee members are truly dedicated individuals who unselfishly give up evenings, weekends and vacation time in order to read doctoral dissertations. Special thanks also go to Doctoral Program Director Dr. Marie Simonsson and her Administrative Assistant Connie de la Rosa for their assistance in ensuring that I met the requirements of the doctoral process.

My thanks especially go out to all of the participants in this study, whose experiential knowledge of the Mercedes Independent School District has provided the glue that binds this work together. Their stories are inspirational, profound, and a testament to the indomitable spirit of a people who have suffered and endured in order to achieve their highest aspirations.

Special thanks also go out to the city of Mercedes, to the staff at the Dr. Hector P. García Memorial Library in Mercedes, and in particular to the school staff at the Mercedes Independent School District who so graciously welcomed me and provided me with excellent assistance as I completed my research investigations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Background of the Study.....	5
Purpose of the Study	8
Research Questions	11
Rationale.....	12
Design of the Study.....	15
Significance of the Study	18
Organization of the Study	19
Limitations and Delimitations of the Study	21

Assumptions	22
Definition of Key Terms	22
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	29
Part I. Setting the Context	29
Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks	29
Who are the Mexican Americans?	32
Geography and Ecology of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.....	34
Mercedes, Texas and the Mercedes Independent School District	36
Part II. Educational History of Mexican Americans Prior to 1950.....	57
Spanish Colonial Period in South Texas.....	60
Early Education in the Spanish Colonies of the Northern Rim	65
The Republic of Texas and U.S. Annexation	70
Mexican American Education Under the New Regimes	81
Educational History of the Rio Grande Valley Prior to 1950.....	113
Part III. Educational History of Mexican Americans Post – 1950	123
Organizations for Civil Rights	123
Court Litigation for Equal Educational Opportunities.....	128
Bilingual Education Instruction in Texas	137

The Mexican American Civil Rights Movement.....	140
Summary of Review of the Literature	144
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY	146
Theoretical Framework	148
Conceptual Model	151
Historical Research	156
Research Questions	160
Data Collection Procedures.....	160
Role of the Researcher	161
Site and Setting.....	162
Data Collection Methods.....	165
Sampling: Interviews	165
List of Participants	165
Archival Documents	170
Summary of Methodology	172
CHAPTER IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION	173
Organization of Chapter Four	173
Data Collection: Primary Sources	173
Part I. Historical Period 1908 – 1958	182

Part II. Historical Period 1959 – 1978	219
Part III. Historical Period 1978 – 2008	247
CHAPTER V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	270
Use of Conceptual Model to Collect and Organize Findings.....	270
Summary of Major Findings	272
Access to Public Education.....	272
Character of the Schools	274
School Achievement: Academic and Social	277
Curriculum and Instruction.....	279
Administrative Practices	282
Minority Responses to Discrimination	283
Research Questions	286
Research Question # 1	286
Research Question # 2	289
Research Question # 3	291
Research Question # 4	295
Conclusions: Emerging Themes	300
Reflections.....	305
Recommendations	309
REFERENCES	312

APPENDICES	326
APPENDIX A. IRB INFORMED CONSENT FORMS	327
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	338
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	341

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 2.1: Population Growth in Mercedes, Texas.....	43
Table 2.2: Scholastic Population of the Four Counties in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.....	118
Table 2.3: School Segregation in South Texas Counties, 1928.....	119
Table 4.1: Mercedes ISD School Enrollment and Other Data, 1915 and 1921	187
Table 4.2: Mercedes ISD Student Enrollment, 1922	191
Table 4.3: Mercedes High School Graduates, by Surname, Selected Years, 1914 – 1953	205
Table 4.4: Honor Roll Students in Mercedes Schools, By Surname, 1941	214
Table 4.5: Honor Roll Students in Mercedes Schools, By Surname, 1950	216
Table 4.6: Teacher Recommendations for the 1953 – 1954 School Year, By Surname	217
Table 4.7: Honor Roll Students in Mercedes Schools, By Surname, 1974	238
Table 4.8: Mercedes High School Club Officers, By Surname, Selected Years, 1948-1986.....	254
Table 4.9: List of Mercedes ISD Superintendents, 1909 – 2011	263
Table 4.10: One Hundred Years of Mercedes School Board Trustees in Ten-Year Snapshots. .	264
Table 4.11: Enrollment for Mercedes ISD by Ethnicity/Race: 1990 – 2008	267
Table 4.12: Mercedes ISD Graduates by Ethnicity: 1990 – 2008	268

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2.1: The Mercedes Railroad Depot, 1912.....	38
Figure 2.2: The American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company Building, 1907, Mercedes, Texas.....	39
Figure 2.3: The Mercedes Hotel, circa 1912.....	40
Figure 2.4: Troop C, Third U.S. Cavalry Riding Through Mercedes, circa 1917.....	42
Figure 2.5: Harriet Claycomb School, Mercedes Texas, circa 1912	53
Figure 2.6: Discriminatory Sign in Dimmit, Texas Diner, 1949	125
Figure 3.1: Conceptual Model	155
Figure 3.2: Map of the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas	163
Figure 4.1: Fifth Grade Class at North Ward Grammar School, 1935, Mercedes, Texas	197
Figure 4.2: South Grammar School and North Grammar School, 1947, Mercedes, Texas.....	211
Figure 4.3: Eighth-Grade Groups in the Mercedes ISD, 1947	246

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Not to know what happened before we were born is to remain perpetually a child.
For what is the worth of a human life unless it is woven into the life of our
ancestors by the records of history?

—Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106-43 B.C.

In 1938, Leon R. Graham, a teacher in the Mercedes Independent School District (hereafter known as Mercedes ISD) in the lower Rio Grande Valley of deep South Texas, successfully completed his Master's Thesis at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. The thesis was entitled, "A Comparison of the English Speaking and Latin American Students in the Mercedes, Texas Schools." The purpose of his study, as he stated, was to compile data concerning the differences and similarities of Latin American and English speaking students in the district, so that the information would serve as an aid in the treatment of problems arising in Mercedes and in other Rio Grande Valley school districts where there was a large percentage of Latin American students.¹ He was undoubtedly referring to what was then called the "Mexican Problem"² in the educational field. State leaders had paid little attention to Mexican American

¹ Leon R. Graham, *A Comparison of the English Speaking and Latin American Students in the Mercedes, Texas Schools*, (master's thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1938), 2.

² Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *"Let All of Them Take Heed:" Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 15.

schoolchildren in the nineteenth century, but by the early decades of the twentieth century, the rapid growth of this non-English-speaking group in Texas schools forced policymakers to discuss the problems that the children presented and how they might be solved.³ Graham's thesis is such a study. It is a fascinating and revealing glimpse of a Rio Grande Valley school district in another time. It both intrigues the reader and calls out for more information regarding the historical events that have shaped the education of Mexican Americans in the lower Rio Grande Valley.

Statement of the Problem

The educational history of Hispanic Americans dates back to the sixteenth century with the arrival of Spanish explorers, missionaries and colonizers in the New World. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the educational history of Hispanic Americans in contemporary historical scholarly work in the United States has been neglected and is "a rich, unearthed site awaiting the work of archivists and researchers."⁴ A review of the literature on the educational history of the lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas reveals limited or inadequate sources of information, in particular about Mexican Americans. In many of the national mainstream works that do mention Mexican Americans, the tone is often condescending with references made, for example, to where "various attempts to compensate for cultural disadvantages...have been tried."⁵ Most works are outdated and reflect the deficit thinking of the era in which they were written.

An example of one such study is called *The Mexican Americans of South Texas* published in 1964 by William Madsen. It is included in a series on cultural anthropology. Some of the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Victoria-Maria MacDonald, "Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, or 'Other'?: Deconstructing the Relationship between Historians and Hispanic-American Educational History," *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 365.

⁵ John D. Pulliam and James J. Van Patten, *History of Education in America* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2003), 257-258.

other titles in this Spindle Series are *The Tiwi of North Australia*, *Hano: A Tewa Indian Community in Arizona*, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, *The Mapuche Indians of Chile*, *The Kapauki Papuans of West New Guinea* and *The Dusun: A North Borneo Society*.⁶ The majority of these studies are framed as case studies in cultural anthropology and one was a study in anthropological method. Although Madsen's work on the Mexican Americans of south Texas is credited with having pioneered and promoted much-needed "border" studies, he was heavily criticized by Octavio Romano who was a member of the ethnographic field research team on the project.⁷ In his book, Madsen argued that Mexican American culture itself was the root cause of the inability of Mexican Americans to succeed in America.⁸ Romano felt that there were ethnographic distortions in the book and charged Madsen with "perpetuating false stereotypes of Chicano people without considering how a history of discrimination had impacted them."⁹ Martha Menchaca, an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin, asserted in 1997 that two very divergent paths have been taken by social scientists in explaining Mexican American success or failure in education. According to Menchaca, Madsen represents those cultural anthropologists who promote a "deficit thinking" discourse by their belief that the inability of Mexican Americans to become socially mobile is intrinsic to deficiencies in their culture. Romano represents those cultural anthropologists who believe that Anglo American scholars perpetuate negative stereotypes of minorities in order to maintain their dominant status

⁶ Madsen's study took place in Hidalgo and Cameron Counties and was conducted under the auspices of the Hidalgo Project on Differential Culture Change and Mental Health. For a complete list of the Spindle Series, see "Ethnographies Available in the Anthropology Office," University of Notre Dame, at <http://anthropology.nd.edu/multimedia/ethnographies/index.shtml> (accessed on February 16, 2011).

⁷ Martha Menchaca, "History and Anthropology: Conducting Chicano Research," Julian Samora Research Institute, Research & Publications Occasional Paper Series, (January, 1997), University of Texas at Austin at <http://www.jsri.msu.edu/RandS/research/ops/oc11.html> (accessed on February 16, 2011).

⁸ William Madsen, *The Mexican-Americans of South Texas* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), back cover.

⁹ Menchaca, 6.

and overlook institutional racism.¹⁰ Part of the problem regarding the educational history of Mexican Americans in the lower Rio Grande Valley is that when Mexican Americans are researched, their depiction may be stereotypical.¹¹ This study expands our knowledge of Mexican American education in a district of the lower Rio Grande Valley, that of the Mercedes ISD. Madsen's and Romano's premises are examined in light of the responses of participants in the study.

An early book written in 1955 by C. E. Evans on the history of Texas education mentions Mexican American children in the Rio Grande Valley only once, in a section called "Schools for Mexicans," where it describes the establishment of the Rio Grande Female Seminary by Melinda Rankin in Brownsville in 1854.¹² Another early book is written by J. Lee Stambaugh and Lillian Stambaugh in 1964 which contains limited historical information about education in the lower Rio Grande Valley between 1850 and 1940.¹³ Besides Leon R. Graham's study, the only other extended studies that touch in whole or in part on Valley educational history are doctoral dissertations and master's theses on the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District's desegregation years,¹⁴ the history of the Weslaco Independent School District,¹⁵ the Pharr riot,¹⁶

¹⁰ Ibid. See also Renato Rosaldo, "Chicano Studies, 1970-1984," Working Paper Series No. 10 (Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Chicano Research, 1985), 3-6.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² C. E. Evans, *The Story of Texas Schools* (Austin: The Steck Company, 1955), 342.

¹³ J. Lee Stambaugh and Lillian J. Stambaugh, *The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas: Its Colonization and Industrialization 1518-1953* (Austin, TX: the Jenkins Publishing Co. San Felipe Press, 1964), p. 295.

¹⁴ Beverly F. Ashley-Fridie, *Another Shade of Brown: A Historical Study of Brown v. Board of Education and Its Impact on the Education of Mexican Americans in Edinburg, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas*, (doctoral dissertation, University of Texas Pan American, 2006).

¹⁵ José Richard Rivera, *The Evolution of the Inclusion of Mexican Americans in the Educational Process: A Study of the Weslaco Independent School District, 1926-2006* (doctoral dissertation, University of Texas Pan American, 2008).

¹⁶ Edward Francis Wallace, Jr., *The Pharr Riot: An Incident from the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (master's thesis, University of Texas Pan American, 2008). Although focused on police brutality and injustice issues, its investigation brought to light school segregation in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district.

the Colegio San Jacinto Treviño in Mercedes,¹⁷ the biography of James de Anda who was an important figure in the struggle for equity for Mexican Americans in education,¹⁸ the educational history of Hidalgo County,¹⁹ and the educational history of Starr County.²⁰ A few articles focus on specific incidents in Valley school history, such as the article by Miguel Guajardo and Francisco Guajardo on the Edcouch-Elsa school walkout of 1968.²¹

There are no comprehensive studies on the history of education in the Rio Grande Valley that are current, and there are no historical studies of the Mercedes ISD other than Leon R. Graham's study in 1938. Gaps in the history of public education in the Rio Grande Valley, in particular regarding Mexican American education, are still quite prevalent. This study examined the history of the Mercedes ISD in Mercedes, Texas within the context of the public educational history of the lower Rio Grande Valley with a focus on the education of Mexican American children. The researcher is hopeful that other studies will follow that will eventually give a more complete historical picture of education in this region.

Background of the Study

Mercedes, Texas is a small town situated, as many Valley towns are, along the U.S. Business Highway 83 in the county of Hidalgo in the lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas.

¹⁷ Carlos Lino Cantú, *Colegio Jacinto Treviño: A Microcosm of the National Chicano Movement* (master's thesis, Edinburg, TX: University of Texas Pan American, 2008).

¹⁸ David Bowles, *James de Anda: A Life History* (doctoral dissertation, University of Texas Pan American, 2008).

¹⁹ Robert Daniel Beane, Sr., *A Brief History of the Educational Development of Hidalgo County, Texas*, (master's thesis, Kingsville, TX: Texas College of Arts and Industries, 1942).

²⁰ Arnulfo Simeón Martínez, *History of Education in Starr County* (doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, 1966).

²¹ Miguel Guajardo and Francisco Guajardo, "The Impact of Brown on the Brown of South Texas: A Micropolitical Perspective on the Education of Mexican Americans in a Rural South Texas Community," *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 501-526.

The population of Mercedes, Texas in the 2000 census was 13,649²² of which approximately 90% are Hispanic, less than 3% African American, Native American or Asian, and about 7% Anglo. Anglo is the word used in this area for white, non-Hispanic Americans. About 25% of the population of Mercedes is school age children between the ages of 5 and 18 years.²³

Mercedes has two school districts situated within its boundaries, the Mercedes ISD with approximately 5,500 students, and the South Texas Independent School District which is a magnet district that serves students from the entire Rio Grande Valley. The two South Texas ISD campuses are the Medical & Health Professions campus and a Science Academy campus located on the west side of Mercedes. Additionally, any students living in the western extremes of Mercedes are zoned to attend the Weslaco Independent School District, if they wish.²⁴

The Mercedes site was first settled in the 1750s when José de Escandón explored and colonized Nuevo Santander. He founded over twenty towns or villas and a number of missions in the colony, including Camargo, Reynosa, Mier, and Revilla south of the Río Grande and Laredo and Nuestra Señora de los Dolores Hacienda north of the Río Grande. For his colonization efforts Escandón is sometimes called the "father" of the lower Río Grande valley.²⁵ The Mercedes site was originally part of the Llano Grande Spanish land grant issued on May 29, 1790 to Juan José Ynojosa de Ballí. In the 1850s, a portion of the land grant known as the Anacuitas Ranch was owned by Ramón and Manuel Cavazos. By the early 1900s it was called the Fuste Ranch and was owned by members of the Cavazos family who had allegedly inherited

²² The U.S. Census Bureau has not yet released the 2010 population data for Mercedes, Texas; however, the 2009 estimate is 15,401 with a ± 29 margin of error. The percentage of Hispanics has risen to 91.3%, with 44.5% of individuals reported at the below poverty level. See www.census.gov (accessed June 30, 2011).

²³ Fact Sheet: Mercedes, Texas. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, <http://factfinder.census.gov> (accessed September 29, 2010).

²⁴ Mercedes ISD Website, 2010, <http://misdtx.schoolwires.com/misdtx/site/default.asp> (accessed June 15, 2010).

²⁵ Alicia A. Garza, "Mercedes, Texas," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hem03> (accessed July 12, 2010).

it from the Ynojosa de Ballí family.²⁶ In 1902, Lon C. Hill, Jr., a local land promoter and developer purchased 300,000 acres in the Hidalgo-Cameron County area and later sold 45,000 acres of it to the American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company (ARGLIC). He had named the community Lonsboro but the ARGLIC changed the town's name to Díaz. The name was changed three more times until finally being named Mercedes. The belief that the town was named for Porfirio Díaz' wife is questionable, because Mexican President Díaz never married a woman named Mercedes.²⁷

On July 8, 1904, Mercedes became the first town on the Sam Fordyce Branch of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway and served as the central facility of the ARGLIC. The city was incorporated in September of 1907, and grew rapidly when Anglo entrepreneurs promoted it in northern states as prime agricultural land. However, three things had to be in place before commercial agriculture would transform the town into a prosperous community. First, a means to transport produce to market towns had to be established. Second, a means to irrigate the agricultural fields was needed. Lastly, a cheap labor source was needed to ensure success for commercial agricultural ventures. The cheap labor was secured with the importation of agricultural workers from Mexico who were willing to work for pennies a day.²⁸

In 1907, a hotel was built in Mercedes and intensive recruitment of land buyers resulted in a thriving community of 1,000 by 1908. The community needed a site for a school, and at first churches were used for classes. In June of 1908 the first meeting of the Trustees for the Mercedes ISD was held. The Hidalgo County School Superintendent R.E. Marsh explained their duties to them. In September of that year, four teachers were hired, as stated by Graham in his study: "two for English-speaking students and two for Latin Americans. The minutes of the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

district do not state why or how the English speaking and Latin American children were separated.”²⁹ No reason was given for the segregation; however, this begins the immediate separation of Mexican American and Anglo American schoolchildren in the public schools of Mercedes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the educational history of the Mercedes ISD during the twentieth century with a focus on the opportunities and challenges encountered by Mexican American schoolchildren who were served by the district. A review of the existing educational history of the lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas seems to indicate that there were significant differences from county to county and from school district to school district regarding the types of opportunities and obstacles that Mexican American schoolchildren encountered. Guadalupe San Miguel cites the noted social scientist Robert H. Montgomery as describing Mexican American immigrant laborers in the 1920s with the following words: “They did not speak the English language, knew next to nothing of the customs and traditions of the community, they were not Methodists, and their children did not attend school.”³⁰ Montgomery considered them “deplorably ignorant,”³¹ and extremely poor, willing to live in any kind of shack. He was very critical of the parents, asserting that they were apathetic and cared little for the education of their children.³² Graham also indicates in the Summary and Recommendations section of his study, that the lack of attendance and low levels of achievement of Mexican American children should be addressed through “parent education to convince the Latin American parents that their children should be in school, and pupil education to make the Latin

²⁹ Graham, 12.

³⁰ San Miguel, 17.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 18.

American children desire to attend school.”³³ Although his study thoroughly researches, compiles and cites the attendance, scholastic achievement and even extracurricular participation data, he apparently makes no effort to interview the teachers, administrators, parents or students to ascertain why they believe that the Latin American students are not succeeding. As did many researchers of his era, he seems to arbitrarily blame the victims for their educational failings, rather than researching institutional practices to determine whether policies and practices were negatively affecting the educational success of the Latin Americans.³⁴

Many Chicano studies conducted since the 1960s have argued that schools in the Southwest were oppressive institutions aimed at forcefully Americanizing Mexican American schoolchildren and tracking them into low-skilled jobs. Many of these studies depict Mexican American schoolchildren and parents as “passive victims of an oppressive and racist public school system.”³⁵ But a few emerging studies have begun to view Mexican Americans not as passive victims, but as “active participants in the shaping of their own destinies,”³⁶ and promoters of the importance of education for their children.³⁷ This aspect of Mexican American educational history has yet to be thoroughly explored. Were the Mexican American children who attended Mercedes public schools given opportunities or presented obstacles in attaining an education? Why were some Mexican American children successful in Mercedes schools where many others dropped out and wound up in low-skilled, low-paying jobs? Why were there no school walkouts protesting segregation in Mercedes as there were in a neighboring school district?

³³ Graham, 88.

³⁴ Richard R. Valencia, ed. *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1997), iv – v.

³⁵ Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., “The Status of Historical Research on Chicano Education,” *Review of Educational Research* 57, no. 4 (Winter, 1987): 468.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

In Graham's study, we learn that in the school year of 1937 – 1938, 91% of the English speaking children are enrolled in school compared to only 59% of the Latin Americans; 64% of the English speaking children were on grade level while only 14% of the Latin American children were on grade level, indicating the extremely high failure and retention rate of this group; the attendance rate for the English speaking children who were enrolled was 94% and for the Latin American children who were enrolled it was 88%, which was not a marked difference and seemed to indicate that once the Latin American children enrolled in school, they were fairly constant in attendance.³⁸ Another portion of Graham's study compared participation in extracurricular activities for English speaking and Latin American children. In explaining why Latin American children did not participate very much in school clubs and sports, Graham stated:

There are several reasons why Latin Americans have not participated very much in extra-curricular activities. Perhaps the three most important reasons are: (1) there is a more or less pronounced social barrier between the Latin American and English speaking children, (2) the teachers and the administration have not encouraged Latin American participation as much as they might have, and (3) the Latin Americans have felt that they could not compete on even terms with the English speaking children in assembly programs, homeroom activities, and dramatic work. Homeroom teachers and club sponsors must endeavor to break down the social barrier that does exist between the Latin American and English speaking children, they must encourage Latin American participation, and they must find activities in their organizations which the Latin Americans can perform creditably.³⁹

There are so many implications and questions in this single paragraph that one feels compelled to ask how Graham came to these conclusions. His study only showed the comparative quantitative data and no qualitative data was gathered through any interviews or questionnaires to indicate why Latin Americans did not participate as fully as English speaking

³⁸ Graham, 85.

³⁹ Ibid., 89-90.

children did in extracurricular activities.⁴⁰ Additionally, no explanation is given of the “social barrier” that exists between the two groups, almost as if it is a “taboo” subject. The final clause in the final sentence also begs explanation. What is meant by “which the Latin Americans can perform creditably?” What was meant by “creditably,” and why could they not perform creditably? There are too many unstated assumptions and beliefs which compel the reader to ask many questions about the opportunities and obstacles encountered by Mexican American schoolchildren throughout the history of the Mercedes ISD. These questions help to set the purpose of this study.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the educational history of the Mercedes ISD during the twentieth century with a focus on the opportunities and challenges encountered by Mexican American schoolchildren who were served by the district. This will be accomplished through a review of documents and records such as previous historical studies and data on the area, newspaper articles, school board minutes, county records, census data, high school yearbooks, school attendance and academic achievement records, property tax rolls, curricular materials, maps, pamphlets, photographs, artifacts, museum archives, library archives, and literary works; and through questionnaires and interviews with parents, students, teachers and administrators who attended or served in the Mercedes ISD.

Research Questions

Although the dearth of information on schooling in the lower Rio Grande Valley provides numerous questions regarding the education of Mexican Americans in schools, this study will limit itself to the examination the following questions: 1) What educational opportunities and

⁴⁰ In Graham’s defense, the study was typical of the research done in his time where quantitative data was gathered and simplistically analyzed. No qualitative data was gathered to enrich the study. See Holly Knox, “A History of Educational Research in the United States,” *ERIC Digest*, (September 1971), <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED088800.pdf> (accessed on July 14, 2010).

obstacles were experienced by Mexican Americans in Mercedes, Texas, during the twentieth century? 2) What were the schools like that were attended by the Mexican American schoolchildren in Mercedes, Texas? 3) What perceptions, attitudes and reactions did the Mexican American parents and schoolchildren have regarding the schools they attended and the educational opportunities and obstacles they experienced? and 4) Which individuals played important roles in the educational history of the Mercedes, Texas schools?

Even though this study focuses on the Mercedes ISD, any educational history data that can be compiled regarding other educational endeavors in the lower Rio Grande Valley will be researched in order to make comparisons between the opportunities and obstacles experienced in the Mercedes school district and those experienced by Mexican American schoolchildren elsewhere in the Valley. Either the Mercedes ISD was representative of all school districts in the Rio Grande Valley in its time, or it was unique in a variety of ways. The likeliest scenario is that it is unique in some ways and generally representative of all Rio Grande Valley school districts in other ways.

Rationale

The historiographer Victoria-Maria MacDonald states that there is a great need to expand scholarly discourse on the educational history of Hispanic Americans for several reasons. Hispanic Americans are poised to become the largest minority group in the United States during the first half of the twenty-first century. It has been known for several decades that Hispanic Americans are not achieving well academically, a fact that has implications for the future socioeconomic welfare of the nation in view of the fact that Hispanics are a fast-growing group.⁴¹ As a counterpoint to these two facts, the educational history of Hispanic Americans is

⁴¹ MacDonald, 365-366.

relatively obscure, with much of the literature coming after the 1960s and limited to researching reasons for failure or success within Anglo-created educational venues.⁴²

Although there are numerous studies on the “failure” of Mexican Americans, the historical context in the twentieth is insufficiently researched, particularly in this region. For example, we do not know enough about access to schools or school programs, about the character of specific schools or school districts, about the community’s response to the segregation, about the curriculum and how it varied depending on the ethnic group, about administrative practices, and about interpretations of school achievement.⁴³ Unlike African Americans who were segregated based on race, Mexican American segregation was not based on constitutional or state statutes but on school board regulations, customs and practices.⁴⁴ The extent of this type of segregation in the schools of the lower Rio Grande Valley and in particular in the Mercedes ISD is insufficiently known.⁴⁵

Although we know there was segregation practiced, many historians make assumptions that the facilities were unequal with insufficient data. Gathering local evidence of the nature and quality of the separate facilities can illuminate this perception and determine if the assumptions are correct. Strickland and Sánchez, in their well-known report “A Study of the Educational Opportunities Provided Spanish-Name Children in Ten Texas School Systems,” documented

⁴² Ibid., 367.

⁴³ San Miguel, “Status of Historical Research,” 467-477.

⁴⁴ James A. Ferg-Cadima, *Black, White, and Brown: Latino School Desegregation Efforts in the Pre- and Post- Brown v. Board of Education Era* (MALDEF, May 2004), <http://inpathways.net/LatinoDesegregationPaper2004.pdf> (accessed on August 14, 2010).

⁴⁵ There are two studies which indicate that school segregation existed in Rio Grande Valley school districts. Beverly Ashley-Fridie’s and José Richard Rivera’s dissertations have indicated that segregation existed in the Edinburg and Weslaco schools respectively until the 1970s. A review of the school district’s board minutes indicate that the segregation in Mercedes schools did not end until the 1973-1974 school year when full integration was practiced. See Mercedes School Board Minutes, 1973.

Mexican School facilities in several Texas school districts.⁴⁶ Their evidence indicated that school facilities were inferior to Anglo counterparts. We do not know whether this was true in the Mercedes ISD because it was not visited for that study. We know based on Graham's study that separate schools or at least separate classrooms were set up in 1908 but we do not know whether segregation was strictly adhered to, and we do not know when or if it ended.

Another area of interest is the means by which decisions were made for the placement of students in the Mercedes ISD. Was the decision based on language test results, Hispanic or Anglo surnames, residence, or appearance? Other areas of interest include the quality of the teaching and the credentials of the teacher, the curriculum, and the resources allocated to the different schools in the school district. We also have insufficient information on the responses of the community to the schooling practices; for example, was there individual or group resistance to the segregation? Were there specific events or incidents where Mexican Americans approached school officials to protest? Were these instances by private individuals or by public group requests?

In a recent dissertation written by Kathleen Neal Carroll at the University of Texas Pan American, an interesting incident was reported which illustrated that Mexican American parents united to protest segregation. This incident occurred in the Mercedes school district in the late 1920s or early 1930s. According to Lucille Cuéllar Graham who attended schools in Mercedes, a group of Mexican American parents approached the superintendent because notes had been sent home with several children indicating that segregation was going to be enforced. Lucille states "it is rumored that one of the parents had a gun and explained to the superintendent that it

⁴⁶ Virgil E. Strickland and George I. Sánchez, "A Study of the Educational Opportunities Provided Spanish-Name Children in Ten Texas School Systems," reprinted from *The Nation's Schools* 41, no. 1 (January 1948), <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/photodraw/sanchez/study.html> (accessed September 24, 2010).

wasn't a good idea to segregate the schools since everybody was doing just fine." According to Lucille, Mercedes did not segregate during the time that her siblings attended school.⁴⁷

In the area of curriculum, we know that there were movements in Texas in the early twentieth century to place Mexican Americans in vocational programs. Was this also true in the lower Rio Grande Valley schools and in particular in the Mercedes schools? Did the curriculum also include an Americanization emphasis that valued Anglo American customs and traditions over Mexican American culture? How was this manifested through their curricular materials? What were the perceptions, attitudes and reactions of Mexican American families to the curriculum imposed on their children? Were Mexican American schoolchildren encouraged to enroll in vocational courses as opposed to college preparatory courses? What college opportunities were available?

It is obvious that there are still many questions to be answered regarding the education of Mexican American schoolchildren in the lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas and in particular of the Mercedes ISD during the twentieth century. This study proposes to answer some of these questions.

Design of the Study

The design of this study as qualitative historical research within a Critical Race Theory framework will best serve the purpose of the study. Qualitative researchers' philosophical viewpoint is that reality is constructed by people as they interact within society. While positivist quantitative researchers view education reality as stable, observable and measureable; interpretative qualitative researchers prefer to view education as a process and a social institution whose reality is constructed by people's views, perspectives, and interactions within that

⁴⁷ Kathleen Neal Carroll, *Meeting the Challenge of Educational Leadership: A Historical and Biographical Examination of Minority Women Who Have Made Major Contributions to the Education of Students in the South Texas Rio Grande Valley* (doctoral dissertation, Edinburg, TX: University of Texas Pan-American, 2010), 153.

system.⁴⁸ The phenomenon being studied often describes racism and the discrimination of Mexican Americans within the educational system. Therefore, it is proposed that LatCrit Theory, a branch of Critical Race Theory which specifically addresses the issues and problems of Latinos, is the most appropriate theoretical framework to use for this study. LatCrit Theory is an ideological critique of power, privilege and oppression within the system that is studied through the eyes of the participant/informants and through the archival documents.⁴⁹

Jane L. Thompson, drawing upon Paulo Freire, stated:

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.⁵⁰

Many Chicano scholars of the 1960s and 1970s who read Paulo Freire's works came to agree that the educator should not assume the position of an all-powerful figure who showers his/her passive students with pre-determined and sanctioned curriculum but should allow the students to explore the truth and challenge existing paradigms. Freire, considered one of the most influential thinkers in twentieth century education, believed in listening to the stories of the oppressed in his home country of Brazil, and advocated learning from others with different cultures and in questioning the status quo.⁵¹ Chicano historians and those who litigated for desegregation began to question traditional history and to write critical interpretations of historical events. This study

⁴⁸ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 4-6. Also Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd Ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 184, 445, and 303.

⁴⁹ Merriam, 4.

⁵⁰ Jane L. Thompson in S.B. Bunce, Teaching as an Invitation to Think: The Work of Paulo Freire, *It Begins with Me Blog*, <http://itbeginswithme.wordpress.com/2009/09/13/teaching-as-an-invitation-to-think-the-work-of-paolo-freire/>, (accessed August 20, 2010). Also Jane L. Thompson in Peter Mayo, *Gramsci, Freire, and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative Action* (London: MacMillan, 1999).

⁵¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2000), iv.

is designed to follow the same critical interpretation of events in the history of Mexican American education in the Mercedes ISD.

As a qualitative study, the researcher was the primary instrument in collecting the data. Data was collected from the available secondary sources which are examined in Chapter Two, the Review of the Literature. The study was hampered somewhat by the lack of existing historical literature on the Mercedes ISD, with the Leon R. Graham master's thesis being the only available historical study on Mercedes. However, the Graham study was limited in scope by its date of completion, August of 1938. Some limited information was also available in other master's theses and doctoral dissertations on Rio Grande Valley school districts. One dissertation was written in 1966 on the educational history of Starr County, with little mention of Hidalgo County in which Mercedes is located. However, a master's thesis on the educational history of Hidalgo County written in 1942 by Robert Daniel Beane does devote several pages to the Mercedes Independent School District. More recently, several doctoral dissertations at the University of Texas – Pan American of a historical nature have been written on Rio Grande Valley school districts including the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District and the Weslaco Independent School District.

The bulk of the data collection on the Mercedes ISD was from primary sources which included archival documents such as school board minutes, county records, city records, census data, school yearbooks, memorabilia, letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, registers, curricular materials, pamphlets, booklets, maps, photographs and court records. The researcher also conducted individual face-to-face interviews with both selected and random voluntary participants. Previously conducted interviews with Mercedes graduates for other purposes, such as an Oral History project called *Tejano Voices* conducted by the University of Texas at

Arlington, and videotaped or audio interviews with Dr. Hector P. Garcia, a Mercedes graduate, and others were also used.

The Library of Congress American Memory project is a collection of photographs which fortuitously has several photographs of Mercedes ISD schools in the early 1900s taken by Robert Runyon. Runyon was contracted by land developers to help promote the Rio Grande Valley to develop commercial agriculture. Personal photographs with appropriate permission were also used to visually enhance oral descriptions of schools and other pertinent school activities. Artifacts at the Mercedes school district and local museums were also used as appropriate.

The town of Mercedes has had several local English-language newspapers in operation since 1907 which include the *Mercedes Enterprise*, the *Mercedes News* and the *Mercedes Tribune*. The Mercedes city library, or Dr. Hector P. García Memorial Library, has conserved a limited number of editions dating back to 1910. A few other editions were found at the University of Texas Pan American Library. These were researched for news items, photographs and editorials which address the Mercedes ISD. The *Enterprise* has also produced special editions for the 75th and 100th Anniversary Celebrations which provided some articles of historical interest on the founding of the city, the local businesses and the school district. Some Spanish language newspapers were known to have been produced briefly. Mercedes residents are reported to have read *La Verdad*, produced locally for a short time, and *La Prensa* of San Antonio. Unfortunately, most local Spanish language newspapers were not considered important enough to conserve by the local museums and libraries in their time, and efforts to locate copies from interviewees provided some vintage postcards of Mercedes but no newspaper editions were located.

Significance of the Study

This study expanded the limited body of knowledge that currently exists about the educational history of Mexican American schoolchildren. It answered questions about the past in order to have a better understanding of present institutions, practices, trends and issues in education. It will help to inform future educational decisions and policy development to provide equal educational opportunities to all school children. In addition, the study of the history of an educational entity such as a school district provided a myriad of examples in the exercise of educational leadership. The twenty-four superintendents and hundreds of school board trustees and school administrators addressed many educational issues. Included in this study are those who led the Mercedes Independent School District, the challenges they confronted, how they handled change from without, how they effected change within, how they solved problems, and how they came to make the decisions that they did. As such, it provided an invaluable exemplar on educational leadership in a small school district in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study by stating the problem, giving the background to the study, providing the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, an overview of the methodology and the research questions, the limitations, delimitations, assumptions and the definitions of key terms used in the study.

Chapter 2 provided a thorough review of the literature on the educational history of Mexican Americans in Texas, in particular those in the lower Rio Grande Valley and the Mercedes ISD. It provided information on the conceptual framework, on competing perspectives related to the study, and on appropriate theoretical frameworks used in the study including Critical Race Theory, LatCrit theory, and historiography. It also reviewed race, racism, racial

stereotypes, and identity issues for Hispanics in order to set a framework for the study. It provided information on political, legislative and legal issues regarding Mexican Americans. It also provided an overview of Mexican American education touching on its earliest beginnings during the Spanish colonial period of this region, on the legal battles for equality, language issues, covert racism present in curriculum, instruction, assessment and other educational policies, the limitations of poverty, immigration issues, and the geographical and historical context of the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas and specifically of Mercedes, Texas.

Chapter 3 delineated the methodology used in the study, elaborating on the research design of the study and the selection of qualitative research, historical research, oral history, life histories, purposive sampling, the data sources and collection, and the proposed analysis of the data.

Chapter 4 provided the results of the study, giving the history of the Mercedes Independent School District from its inception in 1908 to 2008. It provided one hundred years of descriptions of the school district, the access that Mexican American children had to the schools, the character of the schools, the curriculum and instruction, administrative practices, the academic and social achievements of the Mexican American children, and the minority responses to the existing segregation and any instances of discriminatory practices. It provided a picture in broad strokes with some detail of important events in the history of this school district.

Chapter 5 completed the work listing the findings, identifying emerging themes and patterns, and providing interpretations of the interviews. It provided reflections on why the study of the history of education is important to educational leaders, and it also discussed the implications of the study and made recommendations based on the data analysis and its significance for future studies.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study relied heavily on the information obtained in interviews of participants and informants who attended schools in the Mercedes ISD and who therefore had first-hand knowledge of the schools in that district. The first limitation was interview participant memory and recall. As always with personal interviews, the recalling of events that occurred in the past can be faulty or incomplete and may require supporting interviews with secondary persons, or corroboration and triangulation through additional researching of archived documents and records such as graduation pictures, school board minutes, attendance records, school yearbooks and similar artifacts. However, it is assumed that participants responded to interview questions to the best of their ability. A second limitation included personal researcher or participant biases, values and interests that may cause the researcher to include some details and not others. A third limitation existed in the contacting of participants for interviews or questionnaires through social networks on the Internet, since only a certain population had computer and Internet access, or subscribed to social networks.

As a qualitative study, the primary instrument for data collection is the researcher. As a graduate of the Mercedes ISD, the researcher will have experienced some of what was researched. This fact can be construed as a limitation, because it may have had an impact on the data collection and on the relationship between the researcher and the district personnel as well as the participants and interviewees. Also, as a former student, the researcher was familiar with the buildings, the curriculum, and many of the administrators and teachers that were referenced or interviewed.

This study is delimited by the researcher in two ways. First, the researcher chose to delimit the study by using a purposeful sample of alumni of the Mercedes ISD as well as selected

teachers, administrators and community members. The researcher was focusing on the educational experiences of Mexican American schoolchildren in the Mercedes ISD. This limited the ability to generalize findings outside of this area. The results of the interviews and subsequent interpretations are not intended to be applied in generalized situations, but may be applicable to similar contexts. A second delimitation was that the sample selection was from a public educational institution. Those students who were enrolled in private educational settings may bear different characteristics and were not represented by this sample population, except in instances where public education students may have attended private schools for a limited amount of time.

Assumptions

It is assumed that the participants who were interviewed understood the purpose of the study and answered all interview questions to the best of their recollection. It is also assumed that the researcher was impartial in collecting and interpreting the data and that the personal experiences of the researcher may have affected the interpretation of the data. Assumptions were made on the efficacy of qualitative oral history research to illuminate the study of the historical education of the Mercedes ISD, and of Mexican Americans of the lower Rio Grande Valley in south Texas. An assumption was made that this study would increase the volume of discourse on the educational, career and other life experiences of Mexican Americans who attended schools in the Mercedes ISD.

Definition of Key Terms

For the purposes of this dissertation, these definitions apply to the following key terms appearing in the study:

Access to Public Education

Access to public education refers to how much, what kind, and under what conditions schooling is given to a population (see Conceptual Framework, p. 156).

Administrative Practices

Administrative practices refers to the actions of superintendents and other administrators responsible for the education of the students, including school board trustees.

Anglocentric

Anglocentric in this study means the tendency to view the world from an Anglo or British perspective, with more importance given to the British colonies than to the Spanish, French and other European colonies in what now constitutes the United States.

Anglos

Anglos will be used as a term to describe English-speaking whites in Texas and other Southwestern U.S. states.

Character of the Schools

For the purposes of this study, the character of the schools is a description of the physical buildings, classrooms, materials, staff and equipment as well as a description of the school culture and climate, or the prevailing attitudes, practices and policies of students and staff.

Chicano

Chicano is a shortened form of “mexicano” used to refer to Mexican Americans.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory is a critical approach to the study of race, racism and power. It particularly focuses on institutional racism and the dominant group’s maintenance of the status quo.

Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum in this study is viewed as the courses of study, textbooks and materials used in schools. Instruction will be viewed as the methods used by teachers to deliver the school's curriculum.

Deficit thinking

Deficit thinking refers to the belief that the low educational attainment of minority students can be traced to deficiencies of culture, language or stereotypical characteristics.

Eurocentric

The term Eurocentric is used in this study to mean the tendency to view the world from a European perspective with a stated or implied belief in its superiority.

Greaser

Greaser is a pejorative that has been used by Anglos in Texas and other Southwestern U.S. states for Mexicans or Mexican-Americans, particularly in the earlier part of the 20th century.⁵²

Gringos and Bolillos

For this study, “gringos” and “bolillos” are Spanish words used to refer to Anglos.

LatCrit Theory

LatCrit theory is a branch of Critical Race Theory that focuses on Latino issues of racism and discrimination.

Latin American

This term is used to designate any inhabitant or immigrant with cultural ties to Mexico and the countries of Central and South America.

⁵² Arnolando de León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 3.

Latinos

Latinos refers to persons residing in the U.S. whose nationality is tied to a Latin American country in the Western Hemisphere. It excludes non-Hispanic Latin Americans.⁵³

Machismo

“Machismo” is a Spanish term that refers to a cultural belief in male superiority over the female.

Mestizo

“Mestizo” is a Spanish word that refers to the blended European and Native American person in the Spanish colonies of the New World.

Mexican

Mexican is used in this study to refer to a citizen of Mexico or to an immigrant from Mexico.

Mexican American

This term refers to a native-born U.S. citizen who has cultural ties to Mexico, or to a naturalized immigrant in the United States whose country of origin is Mexico.

Minority

This term refers to a social or cultural group of people that exists in less numbers than another social or cultural group in the same area. In the town of Mercedes, Texas, Anglos were a majority and Mexican Americans were a minority group in the early part of the twentieth century. In later years the reverse became true where Anglos became the minority group in town.

⁵³ Ibid., 7.

Minority Responses to Discrimination

This phrase refers to the type of reaction Mexican American students and parents had to their schooling, from passive and accepting to actively demanding equality.

North Ward School

This Mercedes ISD school was first called School # 2 in school board minutes. Over the years and in varied sources it was also called the Mexican School, the Latin American School, North Ward Elementary, North Grammar School, North Side School, the north side school, and North Elementary. Its name was finally changed to John F. Kennedy Elementary, a name it still retains today through several remodeling and new construction projects.

Race

Race is used to indicate U.S. census distinctions between the White race and the Black race. At times, quotations will be included where the person cited is referring to an ethnicity or nationality but construes it as a different race; e.g. “Those Meskins are an inferior race.”⁵⁴

Racial macro-aggressions

Racial macroagresions refers to public or overt racial stereotypes, attitudes and behaviors; such as threats of harm, lynchings, violent clashes, wars, forceful roundups and deportations of legal and illegal Mexican Americans or other minorities, internment camps, police harassment and other forms of racial bias and discriminatory actions against a particular segment of society.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ “Racial and Ethnic Classifications,” U.S. Bureau of the Census, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/race/racefactcb.html> (accessed on July 3, 2010). Also Arnolde de León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 47-48.

⁵⁵ Daniel G. Solorzano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race and LatCrit Theory and Method: Counter-storytelling,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 14, no. 4 (2001): 474.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 475.

Racial micro-aggressions

Racial microaggressions are those “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ ”⁵⁶ used by members of one racial or ethnic group to demean or abase another.

Racism

In this study, racism is often used interchangeably with prejudice, bias, or discrimination to refer to actions taken by one group which demean or abase other racial or ethnic groups.

Lower Rio Grande Valley, or El Valle.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley, or “El Valle” is a geographical area along the Rio Grande River at the southernmost tip of Texas which includes Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron and Willacy Counties.

Scholastics

This term is used between approximately 1830 and 1940 to refer to children eligible for public schooling according to their age.

School Achievement

For purposes of this study, school achievement will include not only academic achievement such as passing grades, promotion and school completion but also social achievement such as participating in and leading school organizations.

Single-line Campuses

This phrase refers to an integration strategy wherein each campus in a school district held a single grade level, or perhaps two grade levels, so that every student in the school district regardless of residence must attend that campus.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

South Texas

South Texas is the geographical area extending southward from San Antonio to the southernmost tip of Texas.

South Ward School

This Mercedes ISD school was first called School # 1 in school board minutes. Over the years and in varied sources it was also called the English speaking School, South Ward Elementary, South Grammar School, South Side School, the south side school, South Elementary, and Leon R. Graham Elementary. The Graham school has been a migrant school, a junior high school and a sixth grade single line campus at various times in school district history.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are exaggerations about the personality, character or physical attributes of a member of a particular racial or ethnic group, often used to demean or abase said groups.

White privilege

This phrase is a reference to the belief of some whites that they are superior to other racial or ethnic groups because of inherent traits.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Part I. Setting the Context

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

According to Gloria Ladson-Billings, Critical Race Theory (hereafter CRT), was only introduced to education relatively recently in 1994.⁵⁷ The use of this theoretical framework has done much to expand the scholarly discourse on inequalities in educational settings, but has focused mostly on Black struggles for equality. Solórzano and Yosso state that Critical Race Theory is not a passing trend but is here to stay. As researchers, it frames what we do, why we do it, and how we do it.⁵⁸ “We work to tell the counter-stories of Chicanas and Chicanos,”⁵⁹ as Solórzano states, in order to challenge the status quo and push toward the goal of social justice. In their article on the under education of Latinos, González and Portillos maintain that while CRT is well-suited to analyzing institutional racism in education, it does not fit ethnic discrimination such as that experienced by Mexican Americans.⁶⁰ In their estimation, the theory known as LatCrit, or Latino Critical Theory, better fits the civil rights situations and issues that Latino and Chicano scholarly writers have utilized to frame their research. Solórzano adds that “LatCrit theory is conceived as an anti-subordination project that attempts to link theory with

⁵⁷ Gloria Ladson-Billings, “The Evolving Role of Critical Race Theory in Educational Scholarship,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (March 2005): 115.

⁵⁸ Solórzano and Yosso, 474.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 475.

⁶⁰ Juan Carlos González and Edwardo L. Portillos, “The Undereducation and Overcriminalization of U.S. Latinas/os: A Post-Los Angeles Riots LatCrit Analysis,” *Educational Studies* 42, no. 3 (2007): 248.

practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community.”⁶¹ Solórzano and Delgado Bernal have described LatCrit’s five basic themes that build the framework used to research Latino and Chicano experiences. These are: 1) the examination of oppression based on race, class, gender, language, and immigration status, 2) the resistance of the oppressed group to dominant ideology, in particular in educational institutions that have traditionally explained and justified Latino inequality with cultural or linguistic inferiority, 3) the commitment to social justice and a transformation of the oppressiveness and inequalities of society’s institutions, 4) the importance of experiential knowledge, or the lived experiences of Latinos as valid and legitimate sources of knowledge, and 5) the use of an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge construction of Latino issues.⁶²

Solórzano has worked with a great number of other scholars such as Ladson-Billings, Tate, Yosso, Delgado Bernal, Dixson, Rousseau, and Parker to apply this framework to educational studies.⁶³ He explains that CRT in education starts with the premise that racism is permanently part of American society and that racism intersects with forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexuality, language, culture, immigrant status, phenotype, accent and surname. The subordination can come from what he terms “racial microaggressions,” or verbal and nonverbal racial affronts directed at Latinos that indicate to them that they are unwelcome and unwanted. They range from the subtle to the openly overt, and often leave Latinos bewildered and frustrated. Reactions by Latinos to the verbal insults can leave them labeled as

⁶¹ Daniel G. Solorzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal, “Examining Transformational Resistance Through a Critical Race and LatCrit Theory Framework,” *Urban Education* 36, no. 3 (May, 2001): 308.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 312.

⁶³ Tara J. Yosso, William A. Smith, Miguel Ceja, and Daniel G. Solorzano, “Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 4 (Winter, 2009): 662.

“too sensitive,” “whiners,” and “can’t take a joke.”⁶⁴ Racial microaggressions in this context are part of social interactions, but there is a more serious side to them when they become institutional microaggressions. An example of institutional microaggression is that of cultural bias in the curriculum. Solórzano calls this “cultural starvation,” and manifests as a decided Eurocentric, Anglocentric or White bias in history classes, literature classes and general classroom atmosphere.⁶⁵ In Texas, every child in fourth and seventh grade studies about the Alamo and the Texas Revolution of 1836, many times with a lack of sensitivity on the part of the teacher and in the history books when the Mexicans are described as lazy, cowardly, stupid and incompetent when losing skirmishes and as vicious and unprincipled when winning battles.⁶⁶ This one-sidedness in presenting history is part of what CRT and LatCrit challenge, maintaining that the dominant Anglo society uses the educational institution to maintain the status quo and retain power and privilege.⁶⁷

CRT and LatCrit recognize the importance of the experiential knowledge of minorities as “critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination.”⁶⁸ Only through narratives and counter-storytelling methods such as family histories, biographies, *cuentos* (tales) parables, testimonies, *dichos* (proverbs) and chronicles can the Latino and Chicano perspective be known.⁶⁹ The individual interview and the focus group interview become very important when researching the Latino or Mexican American experience, and therefore form an essential

⁶⁴ Ibid., 671.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 673.

⁶⁶ Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 7th ed., (Boston: Longman, 2011), 43. Also Texas Administrative Code (TAC), Title 19, Part II Chapter 113. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies, Texas Education Agency, <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/index.html> (accessed February 21, 2011).

⁶⁷ Yosso et al., 663.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Solórzano and Yosso, 473.

part of this research study on Mexican American education in the Mercedes Independent School District.

Who are the Mexican Americans?

In order to begin to understand the educational history of Mexican Americans in the lower Rio Grande Valley it is necessary to look into the history of the name itself. In the literature on the education of the Mexican American, the Mexican American is referred to as Spanish, Spanish American, Spanish-speaking, Spanish-surnamed, Hispanic, Latin, Latino, Latin American, Mexican, Chicano and other designations. None of the above terms is completely accurate or acceptable throughout the Southwest.⁷⁰ For the people of Mexican descent in the Rio Grande Valley, Mexican American most closely names this group, although at times the above terms will be used interchangeably with Mexican American depending on the time period being cited.

The Mexican American varies in degrees of the mixture of Spanish and Indian genetic material from person to person, with many also having some other European and African mixtures. Some, especially in New Mexico and Colorado, insist that they are of pure Spanish blood and others proudly proclaim an entirely indigenous heritage.⁷¹ The Spanish blood is actually a blending of many different cultural and genetic people including the original Celtic and Iberian stock of the Iberian Peninsula, Greek, Phoenician, Roman, Visigoth, and North African among others. The indigenous blood can come from any of numerous tribal affiliations with varying physical, social, economic and cultural characteristics. For example, the Mayas of

⁷⁰ Strickland and Sánchez.

⁷¹ David E. Hayes-Bautista and Jorge Chapa, "Latino Terminology: Conceptual Bases for Standardized Terminology," *American Journal of Public Health* 77, no. 1 (January, 1987): 66.

the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico were very distinct culturally from the Yaquis of northwestern Mexico or the Otomis of the eastern Veracruz area of Mexico.⁷²

George I. Sánchez explains that an important consideration is that the Spanish arrived in the New World during the colonization over a period of three hundred years, and each group had variances in language and culture just from the fact that they came from different time periods. Add to that the fact that the colonists settled in isolated areas and evolved linguistically, socially and culturally in differing ways. Today a native of the lower Rio Grande Valley can travel to northern New Mexico and have trouble understanding many of the Spanish expressions used there. The New Mexican Spanish is often archaic and the tribally variant indigenous influences on the language can result in words that are very different from region to region.⁷³

Other European incursions into Mexico left lasting marks on the culture. Maximilian's short term as Emperor of Mexico brought in large numbers of Austrian, French, Polish, Belgian, Hungarian and even Egyptian troops who managed to blend their genetics and culture with Mexicans. At varying times in history, large numbers of Asians settled on the west coast of Mexico and the people that live in the area show their influences. The descendents of African slaves on the east coast of Mexico have contributed their culture and genetics not only to that region but also to wherever Mexicans have migrated.⁷⁴

Therefore, to say that we understand the language and culture of the Mexican American is to make a generalized comment that rarely takes into consideration the many nuances mentioned above. Of course, this is true of any group. Anglo Americans are likely to have as

⁷²George I. Sánchez, "Foreword," in *Mexican Americans in School: A History of Educational Neglect*, Thomas P. Carter (Princeton, NJ: College Entrance Examination Board, 1970), ix.

⁷³Ibid., x.

⁷⁴Nancy Nichols Barker, "The French Colony in Mexico, 1821-61: Generator of Intervention," *French Historical Studies* 9, no. 4 (Fall 1976): 597. Also Edward R. Slack, Jr., "The Chinos in New Spain: A Corrective Lens for a Distorted Image," *Journal of World History* 20, no. 1 (2009):35. Also John Dunn, "Africa Invades the New World: Egypt's Mexican Adventure, 1863-1867," *War in History* 4, no. 1 (1997): 29.

many variances as do Mexican Americans. However, for purposes of this dissertation, a Mexican American is defined as a person of Mexican descent or cultural connections living in the United States; and an Anglo or Anglo American is defined as a white, non-Hispanic, English-speaking person living in the United States. The interactions of the two groups, particularly through educational institutions, are of primary interest in this study.⁷⁵

Geography and Ecology of the Lower Rio Grande Valley

To place the context of this study, the geography and ecology of the lower Rio Grande Valley is important. Many aspects of the interactions of Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans in the Valley are tied inescapably to the land and its exploitation. These elements will impact upon the education of Mexican Americans, and it is useful to understand the Valley and its development based on the geography and ecology of the area.

⁷⁵ It is also important to note the Spanish use of last names. Much confusion has been created by the lack of knowledge about how Spanish *apellidos*, or surnames, function. A Spanish man's name will include first and any other middle names followed by his father's last name and then his mother's last name; for example: Juan José García Treviño. García is the father's last name and Treviño the mother's last name. To refer to this person as Treviño, as most English-speaking American historians do, is considered an insult in the Spanish speaking world because it makes it seem that he has no father. It is improper, for example, to refer to the explorer of the southwestern United States as "Coronado" when his name was Francisco Vázquez de Coronado and if shortened to the paternal surname he should be referred to as "Vásquez." The proper reference is to use both last names, and at least the father's last name, as the man's proper last name. An unmarried woman's name would follow the same order; for example, Elena María González Garza. González is her father's last name and Garza is her mother's last name. Although she does not have to, when she marries, she usually drops her mother's last name and takes on her husband's name. If Elena marries Juan, her name becomes Elena María González de García. The possessive preposition "de" announces that she now "belongs" to her husband (not to be confused, however, with some Spanish surnames which contain the word "de" which anciently designated the provenance from a city or region, such as "de León" which refers to a city in Spain; or to the nobiliary particle "de" indicating noble ancestry). Some women choose to use both paternal and maternal surnames and only add their husband's, so that Elena's name would then be Elena María González Garza de García. If they have a child named Juan José for his father, for example, his complete name would be Juan José García González. Note that the father and the son have different last names because they have different mothers, thereby eliminating the need for "Junior" or "III." The difference between Spanish usage and English usage of surnames has caused confusion as Spanish-speaking families living in the United States seek to utilize English customs and usage. Also, feminist movements in Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries have protested the secondary position of the mother's surname and since 1999 citizens in Spain have a choice as to the position of each surname. See George R. Ryskamp, *Finding Your Hispanic Roots*, (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2009).

The lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas is not really a valley but a true river delta with alluvial soils varying from sandy and silty loam through loam to clay. Extending approximately one hundred miles upstream from the mouth of the Rio Grande River, the lower Rio Grande Valley; or “El Valle” as it is called in Spanish, includes Starr, Cameron, Hidalgo, and Willacy counties and encompasses an area of about 43,000 square miles.⁷⁶ Previous to Anglo incursions, the area supported *ranchos* settlements that began with Count José de Escandón’s colonizing efforts in the mid-1700s. The area was part of Spain’s province of Nuevo Santander, which extended north and south of the Río Grande from the Río San Antonio to the Río Panuco in present-day Mexico.⁷⁷ When Spanish settlers arrived, the river was wide and meandered in loops on its way to the sea. Near the river the vegetation was lush with *mesquite*, *huisache*, and other varieties of thorny brush; away from the river the land was drier with some grasses and scrub brush predominating. Cattle – ranching was the main occupation of the region, along with some raising of horses, mules, hogs, sheep and goats. Crop cultivation occurred only near the river in small areas geared to produce enough for the sparsely populated local settlements. By 1800, the land had been divided up into larger land grants, such as that of Juan José Ynojosa de Ballí who received his land grant in 1790 in present day Hidalgo and Cameron counties; and smaller *porciones*, narrow strips of land so divided to ensure that each owner had access to the Rio Grande River.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ David M. Vigness and Mark Odintz, “Rio Grande Valley,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ryr01.html> (accessed October 1, 2010).

⁷⁷ C. Daniel Dillman, “Occupance Phases of the Lower Rio Grande of Texas and Tamaulipas,” *California Geographer* 12 (January 1971): 30.

⁷⁸ Armando Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1794-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 26.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century and the “American invasion”⁷⁹ of the Rio Grande Valley, the area has been highly agricultural, producing citrus fruits, cotton, sorghum, and all manner of winter vegetables that supply many northern markets. Today, 95% of the native vegetation has been cleared, but the remaining 5% is rich in diverse wildlife, with 1,200 types of plants, 700 species of vertebrates including nearly 500 bird species and 300 kinds of butterflies.⁸⁰ The area is well known to bird-watchers as well as white-wing dove hunters, and the cultivation of tourism has welcomed thousands of “snowbirds,” winter visitors from Northern states who seek warmer climates, to the Rio Grande Valley.⁸¹ The proximity of Mexico and of South Padre Island attracts many visitors, both young and old, to the Valley.

Mercedes, Texas and the Mercedes Independent School District

Mercedes, Texas is located in Hidalgo County five miles from the Texas-Mexico border. The site where the city of Mercedes is currently located was first settled by Spanish colonists in the late 1700s and was part of the Llano Grande Spanish land grant issued on May 29, 1790 to Juan Jose Ynojosa de Ballí. In the early nineteenth century the land where Mercedes is now was known as the Anacuitas Ranch, and at the end of the nineteenth century it appeared on maps as the Fuste Ranch. Cavazos family members who had married into the Ynojosa-Ballí family and were descendants and heirs owned both ranches.⁸²

Leonidas (Lon) C. Hill, Jr., a South Texas land developer, purchased land which included the site where Mercedes is now located. In 1904 he chartered the Capisallo Town and

⁷⁹David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 113.

⁸⁰Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge. <http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=21552> (accessed October 1, 2010).

⁸¹Vigness and Odintz, “Rio Grande Valley.”

⁸²Garza, “Mercedes, Texas.”

Improvement Company and laid out the city plat for the town of Lonsboro.⁸³ However, he decided to sell the company to the new American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company that was interested in establishing its headquarters at the site.⁸⁴ The town was renamed Díaz, and later the name was finally changed to Mercedes. Some sources say that Mercedes was named for the wife of Mexican president Porfirio Díaz; however, President Díaz was never married to a woman named Mercedes.⁸⁵ Armando Alonso in his book, *Tejano Legacy*, discusses the sizes of the land grants in Hidalgo County and says that beyond the town settlements, the land grants were never called *porciones*, but *mercedes de tierra*.⁸⁶ It is possible that the name Mercedes arose from the Spanish word for these land grants, but the true origin is unknown. On July 8, 1904, Mercedes became the first town on the Sam Fordyce Branch of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway that ran a fifty-five mile length from Brownsville through Mission to the town of Sam Fordyce by December of that year.⁸⁷

⁸³ Verna J. McKenna, "Hill, Leonidas Carrington, Sr. [Lon]," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/fhi25> (accessed November 29, 2010).

⁸⁴ Garza, "Mercedes, Texas."

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Alonso, 39.

⁸⁷ George C. Werner, "St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/eqs30> (accessed November 29, 2010).



Figure 2.1: The Mercedes Railroad Depot, 1912. Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, image # 03098, courtesy of The University of Texas at Austin.

The American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company built a two-story building in Mercedes from which the company planned the irrigation and drainage system projects that were to ensure that agricultural ventures succeeded. A settling basin, a pumping plant on the river, a canal, and an electrical plant were built in Mercedes in 1906 and 1907. By 1920 the system had expanded to three large canals, five pumping plants, reservoirs and settling basins and was providing irrigation water to a large portion of Hidalgo County.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Goldsby Goza, "American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company," *Handbook of Texas Online*. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/gza01>, (accessed November 24, 2010).



Figure 2.2: The American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company Building, 1907, Mercedes, Texas. Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, image # 03073, courtesy of The University of Texas at Austin.

The company advertised extensively to bring prospective buyers and investors into the town. Wanting to establish a first-rate location, they passed restrictions on the building of businesses and residences within the city, requiring that they be constructed of brick, stone or concrete and cost no less than \$3,000 for a business or \$2,000 for a residence. Additionally, no alcoholic beverages could be sold in the town for fifteen years after its founding.⁸⁹ In order to advertise the town they hired photographer Robert Runyon who took numerous pictures of the town and surrounding areas, and they advertised heavily in northern newspapers.⁹⁰ Prospective buyers from northern states were given tours of the Rio Grande Valley area as well as Mercedes

⁸⁹ Garza, "Mercedes, Texas."

⁹⁰ Ibid. Also "Robert Runyon, Border Photographer," University of Texas at Austin <http://runyon.lib.utexas.edu/bio.html> (accessed on June 23, 2010).

by way of the new railroad facilities, and a new hotel was built in 1907 so that visitors to the area could have a place to stay in comfort.⁹¹



Figure 2.3: The Mercedes Hotel, circa 1912. Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, image # 03091, courtesy The University of Texas at Austin.

By 1908 Mercedes had a population of over a thousand, and the town's newspaper named the *Mercedes Enterprise* had been established, as well as a school, a lumberyard, a feed store and a livery stable.⁹² The land surrounding the town had been purchased and was actively producing citrus fruits and vegetables year round. By 1908 the town's first bank, the Hidalgo County Bank, had been established and reported deposits totaling \$100,000 by the end of 1909.⁹³ According to the Handbook of Texas Online, Mercedes was incorporated in 1909; however, other sources state

⁹¹ Garza, "Mercedes, Texas."

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

that it was incorporated on March 8, 1908.⁹⁴ In 1909, Mercedes was hit hard by a destructive flooding of the Rio Grande River. The Mercedes Commercial Club was organized in 1911 to promote the town. A public library was established in that same year and by 1915 the town population had grown to 2,000.⁹⁵

In the first decade of the twentieth century, political events across the border began to impact the border towns as Mexico dissolved into civil war. Matamoros, directly across the river from Brownsville, succumbed to Revolutionary General Lucio Blanco in 1913. A military parade honoring the victory was an event which photographer Robert Runyon was on hand to photographically archive.⁹⁶ Many Mexicans fled into the United States to escape the violence and destruction, and the newly established towns north of the Rio Grande, fearing a spillover of revolutionary violence, reacted by petitioning the U.S. government to send troops to prevent disorder.⁹⁷ As the United States entered World War I and war hysteria swept the country, it was feared that Germany would establish a presence in Mexico and perhaps invade the U.S. through the Rio Grande Valley.⁹⁸ The U.S. response was to send 15,000 National Guard troops to the Rio Grande Valley, most of which were stationed at Camp Mercedes and Camp Llano Grande just south of Mercedes, to guard the border.⁹⁹ In 1918 in response to the U.S. involvement in World War I, the Mercedes City Council passed an ordinance making it illegal to “speak German

⁹⁴ Graham, 9.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “The South Texas Border, 1900 – 1920,” Photographs from the Robert Runyon Collection, Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, <http://runyon.lib.utexas.edu/> (accessed July 28, 2010).

⁹⁷ Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 119.

⁹⁸ Robert A. Calvert, Arnolde de León and Gregg Cantrell, *The History of Texas, 4th ed.* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2007), 286.

⁹⁹ Garza, “Mercedes, Texas.”

or any other language used by the enemy in any school, public or private,” and also forbade businesses to use the German language for any advertising or even entertainment purposes.¹⁰⁰



Figure 2.4: Troop C, Third U.S. Cavalry Riding Through Mercedes, circa 1917. Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, image # 01747, courtesy The University of Texas at Austin.

The population of Mercedes increased as northern and Midwestern farmers were recruited to buy land for agricultural ventures, but many also came to establish businesses such as pharmacies, barber shops, farm equipment, hardware and supplies, and dry goods stores. Professional people arrived also; doctors, lawyers, bankers, bookkeepers, and teachers.¹⁰¹

Table 2.1 shows the population growth of Mercedes during the twentieth century:

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰¹ “Mercedes Founded to Serve as American Company Headquarters,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, September 15, 1982.

Table 2.1 Population Growth in Mercedes, Texas

<u>Year</u>	<u>Population</u>
1910	1,002
1920	3,414
1930	3,956
1940	7,624
1950	10,065
1960	10,943
1970	9,335
1980	11,851
1990	12,694
2000	13,649

Source: U.S. Census Data at <http://census.gov>. *Note:* The final 2010 U.S. Census population data for certain locales including Mercedes, Texas, is not yet available as of July 30, 2011.

Oil was discovered near Mercedes in 1935; this impacted the town's population as speculators, developers and oil field workers and their families moved to the town. A bumper crop of produce was reported for the 1947 and 1948 seasons when it handled more than 2,000 train carloads of produce.¹⁰² Mercedes and Weslaco partnered in 1952 to build an international bridge to Mexico to promote tourism and international trade. The result was the Progreso/Nuevo Progreso Bridge that has greatly enhanced the economics as well as the population growth of both sides of the river.¹⁰³ The 1960s were known for an increase in cotton and vegetable production as well as livestock processing and marketing. Mercedes has become internationally known for the quality of custom boot-making shops in the town. In 1960, 140 businesses were reported in the census. The 1980s was best known in Mercedes for the annual Rio Grande Valley Livestock Show that is attended by thousands of visitors every year. The 2000 Census reported 377 businesses. Opening in November of 2006, the Rio Grande Premium Outlets just

¹⁰² Garza, "Mercedes, Texas."

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

east of Mercedes with 140 stores feature many nationally known name brand items and report seven million visitors yearly for shopping.¹⁰⁴ It is probable that Mercedes will report a population surge in the 2010 census data due to the location of the outlet mall.

According to a Master's Thesis written in 1938 by Leon R. Graham, a Mercedes teacher, the Mercedes Independent School District was established within a year of the city's founding as families arrived to live in the newly founded town.¹⁰⁵ The first trustees' meeting of the Mercedes Independent School District was held on June 13, 1908.¹⁰⁶ The Hidalgo County Superintendent of Schools, R.E. Marsh, instructed the newly elected members to the Mercedes Board of Education as to their duties and responsibilities as trustees.¹⁰⁷ The new board of trustees spent several months planning for school facilities, the employment of teachers and purchase of instructional materials. They then met in September of 1908 and voted to hire four teachers, two for a school for English speaking children and two for an elementary school for Latin Americans.¹⁰⁸ According to Graham, the minutes of the district do not state why or how the English speaking and Latin American children were separated, nor does he venture an opinion of why that occurred.¹⁰⁹

The board also voted to rent buildings for the purpose of schooling, since no school buildings had yet been constructed.¹¹⁰ As the town grew, it was soon apparent that school

¹⁰⁴"Mercedes Retail Corridor," *Development Corporation of Mercedes*, <http://investinmercedes.com/retail-corridor> (accessed December 1, 2010).

¹⁰⁵ Graham, 12.

¹⁰⁶ Mercedes School Board Minutes, June 13, 1908.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Graham, 12. Graham's choice of terms reflects the era; the term "Mexican" had been replaced by "Latin American" by the time he wrote his thesis through the influence of the Good Neighbor policy. His use of "English speaking" for the Anglo American children indicates that the Latin American children were considered non-English speaking; that is, they were Spanish speaking. He does not mention language differences until later in his conclusions to indicate that the Latin American children have a language "handicap" that leads to school failure.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

buildings would have to be constructed, and in April of 1909 the school board approved a bond issue for \$15,000 in forty-year, five percent bonds in order to erect two school buildings of other than wooden construction. They also voted to collect school taxes for the purpose of providing a sinking fund to pay for the bond monies.¹¹¹ The bond issue had to go before the public to be approved, and a bond election was held in June of 1909 when the bond was voted for approval with forty-seven votes in favor and none against.

The following excerpt from Graham's study shows the actions of the Mercedes school board on June 30, 1910 when they deliberated on the building of additional space at both the Latin American school and the South School designated for English speaking children only. According to Graham's study, the board argued extensively as to the building plans. The final decision is explained in the following paragraph:

The contract was let for a four-room Latin American school to cost \$4,000. A month later the contract for a building for English speaking students was awarded at a total cost of \$8,472. While the English speaking elementary school, commonly called 'The South School' was officially a school for English speaking children only, it was never so in fact. Many children from the families of prominent Latin American citizens attended the school. This was made possible because these Latin Americans often lived next door to English speaking families. In order to exclude the Latin Americans it would have been necessary to make a specific declaration that all Latin Americans, no matter who they were or where they lived, must attend the Latin American School. This would not have been wise, even if thought desirable from an educational standpoint, as many of the Latin Americans had considerable political influence.¹¹²

The disparity between the buildings for the Latin American children and the English speaking children is apparent in the difference in cost between the two sites. The "South School," as it is called above, cost over twice as much as the north school for Latin Americans. Graham does attempt to explain that "officially," which we must take to mean in school board

¹¹¹ Minutes, April 14, 1909.

¹¹² Graham, 14. Later data collected through interviews indicate that there were many well-educated middle class Mexican Americans who owned businesses in town who maintained cordial relations with the Anglo inhabitants, a situation which was not often replicated in neighboring Rio Grande Valley towns.

policy, there was no segregation. He explains that children from prominent Latin American families did attend the South School, and that those Latin American families lived in the residential area where the English speaking families lived. One could assume that their socioeconomic status was comparable, and probably of the middle class of the town such as business owners and other professionals. We might also assume that the Latin American children were “English speaking” and therefore acceptable to the South School’s standards. The north side of town was reserved for Latin Americans of the lower socioeconomic classes, which can be ascertained from maps of the era that show smaller sized residential and commercial lots than on the south side of town.¹¹³ The final sentence in Graham’s quotation above seems to indicate that there existed a faction of influential Mexican American citizens in the town of Mercedes even at that early date who insisted on their children attending the South School.¹¹⁴

Kathleen Neal Carroll in her doctoral dissertation at the University of Texas Pan American in 2010 interviewed Lucille Cuéllar Graham, sister of educator Estella Cuéllar, who attended schools in Mercedes. Mrs. Graham related an anecdote where various Mexican American citizens in the 1930s approached a Mercedes superintendent concerning a letter sent home with students saying that officials planned to segregate the schools. According to Mrs. Graham, one of the Mexican American parents was rumored to have a gun. They were able to convince the superintendent not to segregate the schools since “everybody was doing just fine.” Lucille Cuéllar Graham did not believe that the Mercedes schools were segregated at that time, since she and her siblings attended the South school.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Sanborn Mercedes Map 1, 1917, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/m-o/txu-sanborn-mercedes-1917-1.jpg>, (accessed November 20, 2010).

¹¹⁴ Graham, 14.

¹¹⁵ Carroll, 153.

In June of 1911, the head teacher, J. M. Hamlett, was designated as the superintendent of schools at an annual salary of \$1,125. The extra duties included being present at least fifteen minutes before the opening of school every morning and ensuring the school's needs occupied his entire attention.¹¹⁶ That year another school was established in Heidelberg, a small community northeast of the town with a growing population, many of whom were initially of German descent.¹¹⁷ A teacher was hired just for the school created there.¹¹⁸ In September of 1911, the board discussed the need for nine teachers to service the growing population of scholastics.¹¹⁹ Four were needed at the Latin American school, four were needed at the English speaking school and one was needed at Heidelberg.¹²⁰ It is interesting to note that during this school year, the school board minutes reported that three Roman Catholic nuns were employed as public school teachers at the Latin American school where they remained for at least three more years.¹²¹ Considering the lack of available trained teachers during this period of time in Texas, it is likely that these were the only accredited persons available to teach.¹²²

According to Graham, the Mercedes school district encountered financial difficulties and had to borrow \$1,000 to finish the 1911-1912 school year. Graham notes that regardless of the

¹¹⁶ Graham, 13.

¹¹⁷ Graham spells the small community's name as "Heidleberg," but current maps designate it as "Heidelberg."

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* "Scholastics" was a term used in the early part of the twentieth century in Texas to indicate children of eligible school age. Not all scholastics were enrolled in school; of those enrolled, not all attended school.

¹²⁰ Graham, 14.

¹²¹ Minutes, April 18, 1911.

¹²² In the early part of the twentieth century, many Texas teachers trained at what is now known as the University of North Texas in Denton. The university was founded in 1890 by Joshua Crittenden Chilton as the Texas Normal College and Teacher Training Institute. Chilton leased three separate facilities above a hardware store on Denton's main square. At the time, Denton was only a small town of only 3,000 people. After three years tenure, facing financial hardships and declining health, Chilton agreed to release his title and interest in the Texas Normal College to the City of Denton. Since its inception, the institution has had its name modified six times to reflect its growth and change. In 1894, the name became North Texas Normal College, followed by North Texas State Normal College in 1901. The institution was known as North Texas State Teachers College in 1923, North Texas State College in 1949, and North Texas State University in 1961, before becoming the University of North Texas in 1988. See <http://www.unt.edu/catalog/undergrad/university.htm>, (accessed on December 3, 2010).

lack of money that year, the Latin American school was not closed to conserve money; in addition, the money was borrowed from the town bank by the school trustees who obtained underwriting of the note through sixteen private citizens who were willing to pledge their support.¹²³ Graham's statement regarding not closing the Latin American school is significant in that it reflects the feelings of some Anglo American citizens of the times that the inferior facilities of "Mexican schools" were justified by the fact that lesser amounts of school taxes were collected from Mexican American citizens. It should be noted, however, that in many instances, school districts collected state monies for Mexican Americans and then spent this money on the Anglo schools.¹²⁴

In 1915, another bond was issued in the amount of \$10,000 that was used to provide additions to the English speaking school known as "South School." All English speaking children from first grade to high school attended school at this campus, while Mexican American children attended elementary school at the "North School," or "North Ward," as the school came to be known, and only if they continued to junior high and high school did they attend the south campus.¹²⁵ The school district increased in size to 36.4 square miles in 1917 through a special enactment of the Thirty-Fifth Legislature of Texas, which made the voting of a new maintenance tax necessary. On May 26, 1917, a fifty-cent tax was adopted of which forty cents went to maintenance, five cents went to a sinking fund for the 1909 bonds and five cents went to a sinking fund for the 1915 bonds.¹²⁶ The school population continued to grow and necessitated the addition of more school buildings, with 475 students enrolled in 1917 and 1,294 enrolled in

¹²³ Graham, 15.

¹²⁴ *Mercedes News-Tribune*, June 20, 1919. Also San Miguel, "Let All of Them Take Heed," 53.

¹²⁵ Graham, 16.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

1921. Ninety thousand dollars in bonds were issued for the construction of a new high school building across the street from the original south side high school on Ohio Street in 1919.¹²⁷

The new high school was completed in 1921. In 1926 another bond for \$140,000 was passed of which \$80,000 was used for a junior high school building and large auditorium and \$30,000 went to the building of a modern elementary for the Latin American schoolchildren.¹²⁸

The remainder of the money was used to purchase building sites, but the south side of town continued to have the most number of school buildings and the most extensive compared to the lesser facilities on the north side of town that were designated for the Latin American children. A 1917 map of Mercedes, Texas that was developed by the Sanborn Map Company to be used for fire insurance purposes shows clearly that the North side of town is designated as “Mexican.”¹²⁹ A study of the map shows that the south side school buildings are larger than the north side school building for Latin American children; and that the south side school buildings have electricity for lights, yet the north side school buildings have the word “none” marked next to “lights.”¹³⁰

A much larger bond issue was voted in 1930 for \$250,000 for the purpose of building a new senior high school classroom addition, gymnasium, cafeteria, remodeling of existing buildings, purchasing additional playground land and “equipping the new buildings with modern educational furniture as required by the different departments.”¹³¹ Nothing was done for the Latin American school until 1934 when a four – room addition was built using materials salvaged from the demolition of the older south side elementary school. The labor was provided

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁹ Sanborn Mercedes City Map 1, 1917.

¹³⁰ Ibid..

¹³¹ Graham, 19.

through the Public Works Administration (PWA).¹³² While re-purposing salvaged building materials can always be considered a worthy project, it is noteworthy that new materials had not been used for the Latin American school while brand new building materials were used for the South School where the children of the more affluent members of town went to school.

In 1938 when Graham wrote his Master's Thesis, the school system consisted of a fifteen-room structure at the Latin American school on Hidalgo street in the north side of Mercedes; the Heidelberg School on the northeast side of town which was a one-room Latin American school; the English speaking elementary school commonly called "South School;" and a cafeteria, a gymnasium, and a junior and senior high school serving grades six through twelve.¹³³ The cafeteria served all the schools on the south side, since they were essentially on one campus; however, neither the Latin American Heidelberg School nor the Hidalgo Street Latin American School had cafeteria or gymnasium facilities.¹³⁴

Graham makes it a point to mention that between 1908 and 1938, "the Latin American child was not forgotten. He was admitted on equal terms with the English speaking student in the high school, and was given good buildings and well trained teachers in the elementary grades."¹³⁵ He neglects to mention, however, that although there were more Latin American children "scholastics" than English speaking children (1,111 Latin American children enrolled compared to 686 English speaking),¹³⁶ the facilities for the English speaking children were far

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Graham, 23. See Table II: Actual Enrollment Mercedes Schools 1937-38. Graham shows that although there are 2,024 Latin American school-age children in Mercedes, only 1,205 are enrolled in either public school or private schools. Of the 768 English speaking children eligible for attendance, 699 are actually enrolled. The disparate enrollment percentages are 91% for English speaking children and 59% for Latin American children, a fact that he attributes to the lack of interest in education of the Latin American population. See also pages 88-89 of Graham's thesis.

superior in number, type and construction than were the Latin American schools.¹³⁷ For example, the Mercedes, Texas map of 1917 shows that the Latin American schools are constructed of wood while the English speaking schools are constructed of brick; additionally, the Latin American schools have no electricity or lighting while the English speaking schools do.¹³⁸ Leon R. Graham conducted his study in 1938, consequently his historical description of the Mercedes Independent School District does not cover later years.

The only other scholarly work that touches on the history of the Mercedes school district is that of Robert Daniel Beane, Sr. entitled *A Brief History of the Educational Development of Hidalgo County* written in 1942, about four years after Graham's work.¹³⁹ Robert Daniel Beane, Sr. served as Hidalgo County Superintendent of Schools beginning in 1939 and was serving in that office when he wrote his master's thesis in 1942.¹⁴⁰ He also is listed as Secretary of the Hidalgo County School Board in the 1941-1942 Public School Directory.¹⁴¹ Included in his research on the school districts existent at that time is a description of the Mercedes ISD. Beane gives some information about the Mercedes district that was not available in Graham's thesis, including its roots prior to becoming an independent school district. It also states that the Hidalgo County Commissioners' Court created the Mercedes ISD on June 8, 1908 as the first independent school district in the county.¹⁴² All other school districts at that time were Common School Districts, created under a prior Texas law. The total area of the Mercedes ISD at its creation was twenty-five square miles, "which was believed at the time to be fully sufficient."¹⁴³

¹³⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁸ Sanborn Mercedes City Map 1, 1917.

¹³⁹ Beane, 12.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁴² Mercedes School Board Minutes list the date that the district was created as June 13, 1908. This was the date of the first meeting of the Mercedes trustees, but the Hidalgo County Commissioner's Court Minutes list the approval of its creation on June 8, 1908.

¹⁴³ Beane, 52.

The first trustees were Fred J. Cutting, J. M. Johnson, Jr., George S. Freeman, Lytle Harrison, S. P. Silver, C. W. Wattson, and Fred L. Johnston who were appointed by the Hidalgo County Judge D. B. Chapin.¹⁴⁴

It is clearly indicated in Beane's study that there were two separate schools for Anglo children and Latin American children in Mercedes in 1908. He states:

In 1907-08 there were two schools---one a two teacher school south of the railroad for the American children. Miss Anita Cocke was principal and Miss Josephine Hooks was the other teacher. There were about sixty pupils. Miss Cocke taught the upper grades and Miss Hooks taught the lower grades. The Latin-American School was located north of the track. It was a two-room frame building 20' x 40'. Fred L. Johnston was the teacher. The next year George B. Marsh was his assistant and they had one hundred eighty-nine pupils. The school served as a preparatory school for the English or American school.¹⁴⁵

Several items stand out in the paragraph above. Fred Johnston had been listed as a trustee but at the first school board meeting he resigned so that he could take the teaching job at the North side school.¹⁴⁶ There were sixty pupils in the south school for the American children, and there were two teachers; that brought the teacher/pupil ratio to 30:1. Yet in the Latin American school there were one hundred eighty-nine pupils with only one teacher and one assistant. The teacher/pupil ratio was 189:1; or if you counted the assistant, who was probably not trained and therefore not labeled a teacher, the ratio was 95:1. This was still a significant disparity with the American school's teacher/pupil ratio. The final sentence "the school served as a preparatory school for the English or American school" can be interpreted to mean that in the estimation of the school officials, the Latin American children did not possess sufficient English skills to be enrolled at the American school. There is no mention, however, of Latin American children being enrolled in the American school because they did speak English well enough.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴⁶ Minutes, June 13, 1908.

Beane also indicates that the first Mercedes Superintendent of Schools was Mr. E. L. Horton and he was followed by J. W. Hamlett the following year. New members of the faculty for the school year 1908 – 1909 were Mrs. Isa M. Poag and Miss Boyd. There were nine grades in the school, of which grades seven, eight and nine were considered to be part of the high school. There were only nine pupils in the high school for that school year. In 1910 a new eighteen-room brick school building was erected which was named for Harriet Claycomb in honor of the mother of Miss Nannie Mer Buck, a teacher and principal who later became superintendent of the Mercedes schools.¹⁴⁷

Figure 2.5 is a picture of the Harriet Claycomb School that was taken by contracted photographer Robert Runyon. It is included below:



Figure 2.5: Harriet Claycomb School, Mercedes, Texas, circa 1912. Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, image #03084, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁴⁷ Beane, 53.

The Class of 1914 had only one pupil, Marion Reiss, who completed her studies that year as the first graduate of the Mercedes Independent School District. In 1909-1910 there were six teachers in the system. By 1915 there were 358 pupils in the entire system. That year Miss Nannie Mer Buck was elected superintendent, and other members of the faculty were B. K. Phelps, principal; Miss Aline Colvin, Miss Mary Lane, Miss Rowena Bull, Mrs. George Freeman, Miss Ruth Cash, Miss Alma O'Hara, Judge R. A. Marsh, his two daughters Virginia Marsh and Bessie Marsh, and Mrs. Borstadt. The Mercedes School Board Trustees for the year 1915 were President Mrs. Frank Miller, Secretary D. K. Kennett, Dr. A. H. Kalbfleisch, Mrs. C. K. Reiss, Mrs. Crawford, and Jesús García.¹⁴⁸ It is apparent that by 1915, the Anglo community was in full control of the school district. However, one board member, Jesús García, was Mexican American.¹⁴⁹

Beane next reports that the Mercedes High School, which was the first high school established in Hidalgo County in 1908, became affiliated in 1916 through the sponsorship and assistance of Congressman John N. Garner. In order to meet the requirements, the school library needed additional books and maps that Garner provided. By 1942, the Mercedes High School offered 41 ½ units of credit and an had enrollment of 326 students. It also had a band and a football team by that time.¹⁵⁰ During the World War I years, all the faculty members in the district were women. In 1917 the school district was enlarged for a total of thirty-five square

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Minutes, June 14, 1910. There was another early school board member named Alex Champion who may have self-identified as Mexican American. The Champion surname in other later family members was considered Mexican American, but it is unknown whether in these early years if Alex Champion considered himself Anglo or Mexican American.

¹⁵⁰ Beane, 53.

miles, or an additional ten square miles.¹⁵¹ Beane described additions and new buildings in the district as follows:

- The North Grammar School was first built in 1908 and has had some additions.
- The South Grammar School was built in 1920 and additions were made in 1931.
- North Grammar School Number 2 was built in 1926 at a cost of \$31,500.
- The Junior High School was erected in 1926 at a cost of \$90,000.
- The Senior High School was erected in 1931 at a cost of \$100,000.
- A Cafeteria and Gymnasium were constructed in 1931 at a cost of \$59,000.
- Heidelberg School in the northeast part of the district is a rural school having one teacher.
- The school district has one school bus for transporting pupils.¹⁵²

When he wrote the thesis, Beane also provided a list of superintendents who had served the district from its inception in 1908 as an independent district to 1942. They were as follows: E. L. Horton, J. W. Hamlett, J. W. Massey, J. T. Briggs, Theo Dietel, Miss Nannie Mer Buck, C. W. Taylor, H. A. Milsap and E. H. Poteet. As of 1942, Beane reported that the district had four plants or sites: the Heidelberg School where Mrs. Louise Sheppard was principal and only teacher; North Grammar School with Mr. Wm. O'Hair as principal with sixteen more teachers; the South Grammar School where Mr. W. N. Perry was principal with eleven other teachers; and the Junior-Senior High Schools with Leon H. Graham as principal with twenty-one more teachers. In 1941 - 1942, the Mercedes School Board Trustees were President R. H. Kern, Sr., Vice-president Fred Johnston, Secretary-Manager J. E. Barry, and other members B. F. Byers,

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 56.

Nix Herrington, Walter Hoekstra, and J. B. Taylor.¹⁵³ No Mexican Americans were listed as teachers, principals, administrators or school board members for this school year.

The total number of scholastics in the 1939 – 1940 school year for the Mercedes ISD was 2,870.¹⁵⁴ The number of scholastics reported only indicated all those who were eligible for schooling by virtue of their age, which was then set between seven and eighteen. Of the 2,870 eligible for schooling, only 1,973 were actually enrolled, and the average daily attendance for those was 1,553. There were fifty classroom teachers that made the teacher/pupil ration 31:1. The average annual salary of the teachers was \$1,122.92. There were two “colored”¹⁵⁵ scholastics reported for Mercedes that year but they were not enrolled in the district. No colored teachers were reported for Mercedes that year, but one colored teacher each was reported for Edinburg, McAllen, and Weslaco.¹⁵⁶ It is possible that the two colored students enrolled in nearby Weslaco for that school year, or else attended at McAllen or Edinburg.

No other published or unpublished scholarly works have been uncovered that include more than passing information on the Mercedes Independent School District. Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr. includes an extensive bibliography on unpublished material including master’s theses and doctoral dissertations on Mexican American education in Texas and the other Southwestern states in his book, *“Let All of Them Take Heed”: Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910 – 1981*. The majority of the works cited is general and treat Mexican American education in Texas. Some cities in Texas that are specifically included in some of the titles in the references are Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Sugarland, San Antonio, and

¹⁵³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 94. See Table 2: Scholastic Population, Enrollment, Average Daily Attendance, Number of Classroom Teachers, Aggregate Annual Salaries of Teachers, and Instructional Cost Based on Daily Attendance, *Thirty-First Biennial Report State Department of Education 1939-1940*, Bulletin No. 408, 144-164.

¹⁵⁵ Beane, 94. The term “colored” was used by Beane in his 1942 thesis and is used in this paragraph which cites his material.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

San Marcos. Others mention certain geographic areas, such as the Big Bend region, and still others include the names of counties such as Cameron, Starr, Zapata, and Hidalgo. It is therefore expected that this study has added to the body of knowledge of educational history for the area.

Part II. Educational History of Mexican Americans Prior to 1950

The educational history of the Mercedes ISD does not officially begin until its formation in 1908, but no event occurs in a vacuum. As evidenced by Beane's study of the educational development of Hidalgo County, the independent school district that was created in the town of Mercedes already had its beginnings in the common school district created by Hidalgo County as Common School District Number 1 and the Mercedes Common School District Number 2 located in the southeastern part of Hidalgo County.¹⁵⁷ The county system of schools had been created since 1840 during the time of the Republic of Texas, and underwent many changes until the independent school districts in the state of Texas were created.

To overlook the history of the region prior to the creation of the Mercedes ISD in 1908 is to ignore the many events that came together to create the social reality and context that was the town and the school district in the twentieth century. The tensions between Anglo and Mexican Americans in the early days of the school district and on through the years of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s and perhaps beyond were the result of historical events that must be explained in order to give a deeper understanding of what was occurring in the school district throughout the twentieth century. David Montejano in his work *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836 – 1986* states that, “the absence of a sociological memory is nowhere more evident than in the study of race and ethnic relations in the Southwest.”¹⁵⁸ Although there is extensive literature on historical events in the Southwest, such as the Mexican War, there is

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Montejano, 1.

rarely sufficient discussion of the impact and consequences of these events for the various peoples living in the region. He states the importance of an “interpretative history that would outline the connections between the past and the present while maintaining a focus on Mexican-Anglo relations.”¹⁵⁹ He maintains that the “Texas history of Mexicans and Anglos points to a relationship that today, although frequently violent and tense, may be characterized as a form of integration.”¹⁶⁰

Asa G. Hilliard III, professor of the School of Education at San Francisco State University, makes the following statement regarding the attainment of equality of educational opportunity:

The history and culture of colonized or dominated people is usually destroyed or distorted. This enables an oppressor to hold a view of the oppressed which will justify self-serving interventions by the oppressor. It also serves the function of confusing the oppressed group regarding its own identity and resources, thus limiting its ability to respond to oppression. The world view and cultural information of the oppressed group is manipulated, and truth becomes a scarce commodity.¹⁶¹

According to Hilliard, it is important to hear the complete historical record in order to lay the groundwork for a complete understanding of a people, a time and a place.¹⁶² It is the duty of researchers to investigate history to determine what the truth is, and why it may have been distorted in the past. By laying a historical foundation, contemporary conditions, issues and possible remedies and solutions to age-old problems such as racism and discrimination can be understood and one day solved.¹⁶³

In order to better understand Mexican American education in the Mercedes school district in the twentieth century, it is important to realize that it depended on the relationship between

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Asa G. Hilliard III, “Equal Educational Opportunity and Quality Education,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (Summer, 1978): 110.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans in that city, and how they were able to come to an accommodation on the rights and privileges of each group. This cannot be fully accomplished unless the historical events leading up to the presence of both groups in Mercedes, Texas, in the 1900s can be studied. Montejano asserts that there has been a great diversity in Mexican-Anglo relations in south Texas at any one historical point that are tied to the social, economic and political conditions prevalent at the time.¹⁶⁴ Revisionist historians who have approached the subject of Anglo-Mexican relations in more recent years have looked at the origins of Anglo prejudice in several ways. Most see it as the product of bitter warfare between the two groups which created a lasting animosity. Others recognize it as an Anglo legacy in a long history of dealing with Indians and Blacks. Other historians see the roots of prejudice in a belief in Manifest Destiny that asserted the right of Anglo-Americans to “Americanize” others because of their belief in the superiority of their culture.¹⁶⁵ Montejano states that these viewpoints are still insufficient to explain variations and shifts in relations between Anglos and Mexicans. He proposes that a historical study is essential in understanding contemporary Mexican-Anglo relationships, in particular a historical study that takes into account land ownership, social classes and class relations, and the progression of the south Texas economy from ranch-based to farm-based, including commercial agricultural ventures, to urban industrialization and the mechanization of labor. Every one of these changes in economics would impact Anglo-Mexican relationships in south Texas, including educational institutions.¹⁶⁶ To ignore this history would be remiss and it would leave gaps in the later understanding of Mexican American education in the Mercedes Independent School District.

¹⁶⁴ Montejano, 4.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-7.

Spanish Colonial Period in South Texas

The earliest known European explorations of the lower Rio Grande Valley occurred sometime around the fall of 1519 with the voyage of Alonso Alvarez de Piñeda, who traveled up and down the Gulf coast and reported entering “a very large river.” According to later research, this large river was the Río de las Palmas, or Río Grande, which had been swollen by floods when Alvarez de Piñeda explored it upriver for about six leagues, or eighteen miles. The expedition also reported about forty Indian “pueblos” or settlements along the river of friendly natives who were willing to trade with the Europeans.¹⁶⁷ Another exploratory visit followed in the summer of 1520 with Diego de Camargo, but this time the natives were not so friendly when they realized that the Europeans wanted to establish settlements. Camargo’s men were attacked and one of the three ships of the expedition was sunk at the mouth of the Río de las Palmas.¹⁶⁸ A third expedition was outfitted by Francisco de Garay, then governor of Jamaica, in 1523 which included sixteen vessels and around 700 well-armed men. Garay’s men reached the mouth of the river on July 25, 1523 but they encountered hostile natives and other difficulties and decided to march south to Mexico City where Garay became ill and died.¹⁶⁹ A fourth expedition to explore and establish a settlement at the mouth of the Río de Las Palmas was undertaken in 1528 by Sancho de Cañiedo. This expedition spent five months exploring; but after encountering hostile natives, swarms of mosquitoes, sweltering temperatures and becoming ill with tropical fevers, Cañiedo’s men were unable to establish a settlement.¹⁷⁰ The next historical mention of the area along the lower Rio Grande River is in the wanderings of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca who was shipwrecked on the Gulf Coast in 1528. In his search for rescue, he wandered with several

¹⁶⁷ Stambaugh and Stambaugh, 2.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

companions all through south Texas including along the Rio Grande River, and survived by pretending to be a healer. He finally arrived at Mexico City in 1536.¹⁷¹ The next historical mention was in 1553 with another shipwreck at Padre Island near present-day Corpus Christi. Only three hundred of the one thousand voyagers survived the storm that wrecked them. The survivors decided to head south along the coast and reported crossing the Río de las Palmas. Unfortunately, of the three hundred, only two monks finally reached Spanish settlements and were rescued; all others died from hostile native attacks, starvation, and illnesses.¹⁷²

The Spanish continued to be interested in settling this area because they feared attempts by other European powers to explore and settle the land. In 1638, after reports of Dutch pirates in the area, Sergeant Major Jacinto García de Sepúlveda was sent to investigate the Río de Las Palmas to determine whether rumors of “foreigners” to the area were true. García de Sepúlveda was unable to find any enemies after marching up and down the river all the way to the mouth near present-day Brownsville.¹⁷³ In 1653 another expedition under Captain Alonso de León explored the valley of the Río de las Palmas and reported that the natives were friendly, the lands fertile and the rivers abounding with fish.¹⁷⁴ Several other expeditions followed but it was not until the 18th century that settlement of the region was finally successful under José de Escandón.¹⁷⁵

Escandón made several expeditions to ascertain the feasibility of and best location for settlements in the area. In 1747, he reached the mouth of the river and found twenty-nine Indian *rancherías* or settlements consisting of about 2,500 families along the banks of the river. He completed his inspection and returned to file his report where he recommended the establishment

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

of fourteen settlements. After much careful planning and heavy recruiting of families in the more settled of the northern colonies of Nuevo Santander, he returned to the Rio Grande Valley in March of 1749. Blas María de la Garza Falcón had already arrived with forty families from Cerralvo, Nuevo León to establish Camargo, the first settlement. Reynosa soon followed further south on the river.¹⁷⁶

The first settlement north of the Rio Grande was the villa of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, founded by José Vásquez Borrego on August 22, 1750, several miles northwest of Guerrero (formerly Revilla). Mier followed in 1752 on the south side of the river near some ranches that had already been established a few years before by Captain Garza of Camargo, Prudencia Basterría of Saltillo, Manuel Hinojosa and José Florencio de Chapa. In 1753, Escandón approved the request of settlers for land on the north side of the Rio Grande at a place called Carnestolendas near present day Rio Grande City. Some of the first families there were those of Juan de los Angeles García, Miguel López de Jaén, Francisco López de Jaén, Joseph de Hinojosa and Francisco Ignacio Farías.¹⁷⁷ By 1755, several large ranches had been established in this area including those owned by Nicolás de los Santos Coy, Captain Blas María de la Garza Falcón, and Blas María Farías. Settlers from Reynosa were also given land on the north side of the river where many were already grazing their herds of horses, sheep, goats and cattle.¹⁷⁸

The population of the lower Rio Grande Valley has varied from the time of Escandón's last expedition in 1749 when, according to Agustín López de la Cámara Alta's report, there were 1,479 persons in the Villas del Norte, which included Laredo on the north and/or east side of the Rio Grande River and the other settlements downriver on the southern and/or western side of the

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

Rio Grande River.¹⁷⁹ By 1755, Escandón reported a total of twenty-three settlements with 1,481 families for a total population of 6,384 persons in the Rio Grande Valley area.¹⁸⁰ By 1767, the population of Laredo was 186. The Spanish were meticulous census-takers, and the 1789 census listed 45% of Laredo's residents as *españoles*, 17% as *mestizos*, 17% as *mulatos*, and 16% as *indios*.¹⁸¹ In 1828, the Hispanic residents of Laredo numbered 2,052.¹⁸² Most of the population of the Rio Grande Valley resided on the southern side of the Rio Grande River in the settlements of Camargo, Mier, Revilla, Reynosa, and Matamoros. In 1749, the total population of these towns numbered 1,479; by 1829 the census revealed a growth in population to 24, 686.¹⁸³ The north side of the river included many land grant and *porción* ranches with small settlements, but no large settlements existed besides Laredo until the establishment of Brownsville in 1848.

In 1765, the site of today's city of Matamoros near the mouth of the Rio Grande River was called San Juan de los Esteros, later changed to Refugio and organized into a village in 1821.¹⁸⁴ In 1781, a land grant of fifty-nine leagues of land¹⁸⁵ was issued to José Salvador de la Garza by the Spanish authorities on the northern bank of the river. By 1830, Matamoros already had a population of 7,000.¹⁸⁶ Because the south side of the river was already well-populated, squatters began building *jacales* (huts) on the north side of the river on de la Garza's land and by

¹⁷⁹ Alonzo, 41.

¹⁸⁰ Stambaugh and Stambaugh, 31.

¹⁸¹ Acuña, 31.

¹⁸² Calvert, de León and Cantrell, 34 and 72.

¹⁸³ Alonzo, 41.

¹⁸⁴ Dillman, 30.

¹⁸⁵ One league of land was approximately 4,428.4 acres. The size of land grants depended on the intentions of the settlers for land use. Those interested in breeding large range animals received the largest grants. To receive a land grant, an application and fee were filed and sometimes took several years to be granted. Not all grantees had official written titles, a situation that would cause many Mexicans to lose their lands after the Texas Revolution of 1836 and the Mexican War of 1845-48 when they were unable to prove legal ownership according to American standards. See Stambaugh and Stambaugh, 34, for a table of conversions for Spanish land measurements such as the *vara*, *caballería*, *labor*, *legua*, *sitio*, *hacienda*, and *hectaria*.

¹⁸⁶ Montejano, 18.

1836 a small settlement had formed.¹⁸⁷ The interest of the Anglos in the Rio Grande Valley was already high by the 1830s, because the river represented an important means of transporting goods to markets, possibly even up to Santa Fe and out to Europe through the port at Matamoros. In 1834, Stephen F. Austin's cousin Henry Austin introduced the first steamboat on the Rio Grande River---a venture not looked upon kindly by pack-mule transporters who feared the steamboat would bring an end to their business.¹⁸⁸ When Texas declared its independence in 1836, it was quick to declare its boundaries to extend all the way to the Rio Grande River, recognizing its commercial importance.¹⁸⁹

The strategic importance of the river both commercially and militarily was well understood by North Americans. After the United States declared its intention to annex Texas, General Zachary Taylor arrived at the Mexican border in 1845 and built Fort Brown to garrison American troops in preparation for war with Mexico. During the Mexican War, Richard King, Mifflin Kennedy and Charles Stillman set up a transport company to move troops and supplies up and down the Rio Grande River.¹⁹⁰ In 1848 after the end of the war, Stillman and other partners had a town site surveyed and they began selling lots for the town they called Brownsville. Brownsville therefore became the first township in the lower Rio Grande Valley on the north side of the river. By 1850 the town had a population of 519 including Mexican, Irish, French, English and German inhabitants. Because of shipping and market interests, the town retained a cosmopolitan flavor for many years.¹⁹¹ Between Brownsville and Laredo were

¹⁸⁷ Alicia A. Garza and Christopher Long, "Brownsville, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hdb04.html> (accessed October 4, 2010).

¹⁸⁸ Montejano, 16.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

located many small ranching communities, but their populations remained small until the arrival of the railroad in the early twentieth century.

Early Education in the Spanish Colonies of the Northern Rim

The history of education in the lower Rio Grande Valley at first glance appears to have begun in the twentieth century after the arrival of Anglo agricultural commercialization ventures, or so it appears in many Texas history books.¹⁹² However, the lower Rio Grande Valley as part of the Spanish province of Nuevo Santander and later the Mexican state of Texas-Coahuila and Tamaulipas was part of the history of those entities. As such, it is appropriate to review the educational institutions that existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in these areas. Although records of the educational history of the lower Rio Grande Valley for the earliest time periods are almost non-existent, it is expected that similar conditions existed in the isolated *ranchos* between Laredo and Brownsville as existed in other areas of Nuevo Santander that had similar social, economic and political conditions.

Harsh conditions on frontier lands have always allowed very little time or energy for educational pursuits. Ranch life during pre-mechanized eras was very difficult, requiring long hours of labor, and poverty was universal. Most families had the minimum of household goods, and books and even paper were considered luxuries. Literacy was usually restricted to the clergy, government officials, and a few settlers who had been lucky enough to learn to read and write before migrating to the new settlements as colonists. Urban areas in the Spanish colonies had the best educational opportunities, but the northern rim of Spain's colonies, now known as the Southwest in the United States, had scarce resources to devote to the educational arena.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Alonzo, 5.

¹⁹³ Victoria-Maria MacDonald, *Latino Education in the United States: A Narrated History from 1513-2000* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 7.

The interest of the Spanish king in educating both the indigenous population and the Spanish colonists can be seen in his mandate to government officials of New Spain to make every effort to establish schools:

I have determined that schools be established where they do not exist as ordered by law and statutes: that the parents be induced, by the gentlest means and without the use of coercion, to send their children to the said schools...that the Presidentes and Audiencias look after the election of efficient teachers and the assignment of their salaries according to the population and conditions of the settlements...and that they ask the priests to persuade their parishioners with the greatest gentleness and affability, of the advantage and expediency of their children learning Spanish for their better instruction in the Christian doctrines and polite intercourse with all persons.

--- Royal Orders from King Charles III, November 5, 1752¹⁹⁴

Even though the Spanish monarchy was most interested in the education of his subjects in the New World, the reality was that formal schooling was the exception rather than the rule because of the scarcity of funds and qualified teachers.¹⁹⁵ Additionally, most colonists felt that the right to educate their children belonged to them or to local officials that they could influence, not to distant authorities that would determine what their children should learn. Interestingly enough, the same battles are fought today with state school boards and with federal authorities regarding curriculum issues.¹⁹⁶

During the Spanish colonial era, three forms of education emerged: formal secular education through settler's schools, religious-based education given at the mission schools, and informal education.¹⁹⁷ The most common and widespread form of education was that received at the mission schools. The Spanish set out to Christianize the indigenous inhabitants of the New

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹⁶ Zahira Torres, "Teaching More About Latinos," *Texas Capitol Report for the El Paso Times*, November 9, 2009, <http://elpasotimes.typepad.com/capitol/2009/11/state-rep-norma-chavez-told--texas-education-officials-wednesday-that-hispanics-warrant-a-more-promi.html> (accessed October 5, 2010). Also Heather Sells, "Texas Board Approves Conservative Curriculum," *CBN News*, May 24, 2010, <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2010/May/Texas-Adopts-New-Social-Studies-Curriculum/> (accessed October 5, 2010).

¹⁹⁷ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 9.

World, and that included not only instruction in the faith, but acculturation and assimilation through teaching of the Spanish language and European customs and mores. Also part of the mission school training was the teaching of the cultivation of the earth and of simple trades such as masonry, carpentry, blacksmithing and horticulture.¹⁹⁸ For the children of the settlers, the civil leaders and the military officers, a more formal secular education was given by special teachers hired for the job, or by those who were sufficiently educated themselves to serve as teachers. Instruction for the Spanish colonials included reading, writing, literature, history, science, rhetoric, philosophy, and mathematics.¹⁹⁹

However, the further away from the central governments in Mexico City, the more difficult it was to find qualified teachers. In the far northern reaches of the Spanish colonies where settlements were sparsely inhabited and virtually isolated, it was very difficult to maintain formal schooling on a consistent basis.²⁰⁰ Schools for the children of settlers were recorded as existing in San Fernando de Bexar (present-day San Antonio) in 1746 and 1789, when local schoolteachers petitioned for wages that were not always paid.²⁰¹ In 1802, Juan Bautista Elqueqabal, governor of San Antonio, required parents to send their children to school or face dire consequences. The townspeople responded by hiring Francisco Ruiz as schoolmaster. In 1812, the town's residents used donated funds to build a schoolhouse, and in 1815 it was recorded in the town council's documents that a teacher was needed to teach *Primeras Letras*, or

¹⁹⁸ James Diego Vigil, *From Indians to Chicanos: The Dynamics of Mexican-American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1998), 98.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

²⁰⁰ Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., "Culture and Education in the American Southwest: Towards an Explanation of Chicano School Attendance, 1850-1940," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 7, no. 2 (Spring, 1988): 5.

²⁰¹ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 12.

primary level instruction. Teachers were not always paid in coin; sometimes they received foodstuffs or housing in return for their services.²⁰²

A third form of schooling was non-institutionalized and informal, and resulted from the scarcity of teachers. This informal schooling was common, and took place when parents, older siblings and other relatives took the task of teaching younger children to read and write in the absence of more formal schooling. Sometimes, an educated neighbor or *amiga* (friend) would open her home for instruction. Other times, a priest or a soldier who could read and write might be the only person available to teach.²⁰³ As uneven as education was in the early era of Spanish colonization, literacy was evident with one-third of settlers and soldiers able to sign their names and write well enough to carry on civil and military matters. Archived communications with Spanish officials, the recording of census information, personal as well as business letters, and business transactions attest to the fact that Spanish colonists were educated on a par with Europeans of the time.²⁰⁴

Higher education was available in New Spain with several universities being established in the urban centers. The *Real y Pontificia Universidad de México*²⁰⁵ was founded in 1551, and the *Universidad de Guadalajara* was founded in 1792. After the independence of Mexico from Spain was accomplished in 1821, education was promoted at a national level. Unlike the United States system of government, the federal constitution of Mexico of 1824 specifically required education in Article 50, No. 1 for both primary and university schooling. The article mandated

²⁰² *Ibid.*, The teacher's salary in 1819 is recorded as "55 pesos, 4 reales, and a *fanega* (about two bushels) of Indian corn for the entire school term."

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰⁵ This university was founded as a religious institution which later was re-established in 1910 as a secular entity as the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, or *UNAM*. See UNAM history of the university website at http://www.100.unam.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=108&Itemid=77&lang=es (accessed October 13, 2010).

the establishment of colleges to teach the natural sciences, military science, political science, and the useful arts and languages.²⁰⁶

The educational system was a hierarchy with federal legislation requiring that it be implemented by the state governments. State governments then interpreted the laws and passed on regulations to the local governments who oversaw the financing, staffing and curriculum of the local schools. In 1833, the Mexican congress passed laws establishing normal schools (teacher training schools) and establishing school inspectors who would visit public schools to ensure proper implementation. Six national colleges were established, and an 1836 law required that each village establish public schools for the children, both boys and girls.²⁰⁷ In Mexico City and other large urban areas, both primary and secondary public schools were abundant by the 1830s and situated close to institutions of higher learning. Unfortunately, in the farthest flung reaches of the country, notably the northern rim, the rural nature of the settlements and the poverty of the people made establishing schools a difficult proposition.

By the early nineteenth century, all urban settlements in Texas had made attempts to establish schools and academies.²⁰⁸ The state constitution of Texas-Coahuila in 1827 required in Title VI, Article 215 that primary schools be established to teach “reading, writing, arithmetic, the catechism of the Christian religion, and a brief and simple explanation of this constitution and that of the republic.”²⁰⁹ The largest settlement in Texas, San Fernando de Bexar (later San Antonio), immediately purchased teaching resources and established schools with state funding as well as with donations from prominent citizens such as General Anastacio Bustamante.²¹⁰ Similar efforts were made in other settlements. In 1831, a circular was printed in both Spanish

²⁰⁶ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 37-38.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁰⁸ Calvert, de León and Cantrell, 36-37.

²⁰⁹ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 39.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

and English to petition for the raising of money to fund a school and a church in Nacogdoches. The fact that it was in both languages reveals the influence of Anglo settlers arriving in greater numbers during this time to colonize the Mexican state of Texas-Coahuila. Those who had no money contributed beans, nails, corn, a steer, the labor of oxen or of men.²¹¹

In the smaller, poorer communities, these mandates were often ignored because of the lack of funding and because ranchers saw little need to educate field hands and *vaqueros* (cowboys). In fact, some *rancheros* considered educating the poorer working class as dangerous, because of past experiences with uprisings led by educated Indians.²¹² In many cases, the well-to-do large landowners had tutors that taught the children until they were old enough to be sent away to schools in major urban centers such as Mexico City or even European cities. Because of the distances involved, some academies took in boarders, the children of richer families who could afford to send them away to school.²¹³ The middle class comprised of merchants, craftsmen, builders, and small farm or ranch owners employed teachers when they could but mostly taught their children at home or sent their children to the missions to be taught by the friars in classes separate from those of the *indios*, or indigenous peoples. The missions continued to teach the indigenous population with the prime purpose of indoctrinating them into the Catholic faith, as well as into the Spanish language, customs and culture.²¹⁴

The Republic of Texas and U.S. Annexation

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, an increasing number of Europeans began immigrating and settling in Mexico's northern states. Mexico had established a policy to

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²¹² Vigil, 96.

²¹³ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 9.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

welcome foreign settlers to help curb the Indian raids on settlements, particularly in Texas.²¹⁵ The Mexican government, short of funds after years of military expenditures, was happy at first to sell inexpensive land to Anglo settlers. The immigrant settlers were required to learn the Spanish language, convert to Catholicism and obey Mexican laws; requirements that they all agreed to follow. By 1830, over 25,000 Anglo settlers in Texas formed a vast majority compared to the 4,000 Mexicans.²¹⁶ The new settlers worried little about following the Mexican laws, and even imported slaves although Mexico had outlawed slavery since the 1550s.²¹⁷

The Anglo-Americans arriving in the northern Mexican states came with a variety of interests and intents. Some were “GTTs,” or “Gone to Texas” adventurers and outlaws that mostly came from the southern U.S. states, but there were also land speculators, merchants, farmers and European colonists.²¹⁸ One thing that characterized the majority of them, as Vigil (1998) states, was that “many of the new arrivals were aggressive, opinionated, domineering and intolerant. They made little effort to disguise their feeling of racial superiority and their belief that their democratic institutions were God’s bequest to a select few.”²¹⁹ Indeed, most revisionist historians describe the subsequent Texas independence movement as an extension of the Anglo belief in “Manifest Destiny.” Montejano states that in the Anglo Americans’ expectations, “the Anglo-Saxon nation was bound to glory; the inferior, decadent Indian race and the half-breed Mexicans were to succumb before the inexorable march of the superior Anglo-Saxon people.”²²⁰ The Mexican War was inevitable as the push of the United States to acquire all land from the Atlantic to the Pacific continued.

²¹⁵ Arnaldo de León, *The Tejano Community, 1836-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 4.

²¹⁶ Calvert, de León and Cantrell, 72.

²¹⁷ Acuña, 23.

²¹⁸ Montejano, 15.

²¹⁹ Vigil, 152.

²²⁰ Montejano, 24.

Mexico was experiencing its own internal conflicts as various military and civil leaders sought power in the years following the Mexican independence of 1821. Although Santa Anna was defeated at the battle of San Jacinto in 1836, most Mexican government officials refused to recognize Texas' independence. Therefore, between 1836 and 1846, constant skirmishes, forays, and raids continued on both sides of the Rio Grande, with the Mexicans winning some and the Texans winning some.²²¹ The contested southern boundary provided reason for dispute, and the area between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande River became a dangerous place to be. The Texas struggle for independence did not affect the settlements along the Rio Grande except to disrupt the livestock industry. Many Mexicans decided to flee south of the river to the more protected towns. The Texas Republic had declared all Mexican cattle herds to be public property, and many Anglo cowboys participated in "round-ups" to stock their ranches.²²² Mexican landowners were forced to relinquish their holdings in the face of unregulated looting and fraud. Faced with expensive legal battles to prove ownership whose outcomes were questionable, many chose to sell to American buyers at low prices, sometimes for pennies on the acre.²²³

The intentions of the United States to acquire Texas were well known to Mexico even before the Texas bid for independence. In 1825, the U.S. government had sent Joel Poinsett to Mexico to offer to buy Texas for one million dollars, an offer Mexico refused. President Andrew Jackson offered Mexico five million dollars to no avail.²²⁴ The unsettled state of affairs following the Texas revolution and Sam Houston's request for aid provided reason enough for the presence of U.S. troops in the disputed lands until Texas was annexed as a new U.S. state by

²²¹ Vigil, 152.

²²² Montejano, 30.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ Vigil, 151.

joint congressional resolution in December of 1845. Mexico recognized Texan independence and the U.S. annexation because they had little choice, but a dispute arose around the U.S. insistence on the Rio Grande being the southern boundary of the newly acquired territory rather than the traditionally recognized Nueces River. Mexico responded by breaking off diplomatic relations with the United States and Polk immediately sent General Zachary Taylor to the Rio Grande with 4,000 troops in preparation for armed conflict. Although there was opposition to the war in the United States, in May of 1846 Congress declared war and authorized 50,000 troops for combat.²²⁵

Mexico's government responded to Polk's sending of American troops to the Rio Grande River as an act of aggression and invasion of their territory, immediately instructing Mexican troops to repel the invaders. Since the United States claimed the south Texas lands, the U.S. viewed the Mexican soldiers' attack as an act of war. Historians have long argued as to the causes of the war, some seeing American expansionism and capitalist greed as the prime motivator, others seeing Mexico's refusal to negotiate with the United States as evidence of their bad faith in negotiations. Many Americans viewed Mexicans as an inferior and feeble race unworthy of governing any lands.²²⁶

Hostilities in the lower Rio Grande Valley continued as Taylor's American troops garrisoned at Fort Brown attacked Matamoros across the Rio Grande River with superior manpower and firepower. Taylor's army of regulars and volunteers attacked Matamoros, its artillery killing hundreds of innocent civilians with *la bomba* (bomb). Alfred Hoyt Bill in *Rehearsal for Conflict* in 1947 described the taking of Matamoros by U.S. troops wherein Taylor was unable to control his volunteers:

²²⁵ Acuña, 45.

²²⁶ Calvert, de León and Cantrell, 110.

The regulars regarded the volunteers, of whom about two thousand had reached Matamoros by the end of May, with impatience and contempt...they robbed Mexicans of their cattle and corn, stole their fences for firewood, got drunk, and killed several inoffensive inhabitants of the town in the streets.²²⁷

Gathering experience that would later serve him in the Civil War, Ulysses S. Grant served in the American forces and later wrote:

Since we have been in Matamoros a great many murders have been committed, and what is strange there seems to be very weak means made use of to prevent frequent repetitions...all the Texans seem to think it perfectly right to impose on the people of a conquered City to any extent, and even to murder them where the act can be covered by dark...how much they seem to enjoy acts of violence too!²²⁸

Many Valleyites have stories about the terrible atrocities committed upon the innocent, tales passed down to them by their great-grandparents. These remembrances passed into literary works written by several Mexican-Texan authors such as Américo Paredes and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith.²²⁹ American attitudes toward Mexicans in this war reflected their ideologies about racial superiority and inferiority and God-given rights to conquest and domination; ideologies that would later be imposed upon educational institutions in the lower Rio Grande Valley and which would impact Anglo treatment of Mexican-American students in their school districts.²³⁰

Mexico was forced to concede defeat in 1847 after Monterrey and Mexico City were taken by U.S. forces. Military losses on the Mexican side were counted at about 27,000, but civilian loss of life made the count much higher. Mexican officials negotiated a treaty with Nicholas Trist as U.S. Peace Commissioner. Half of Mexico's territory was ceded to the United States including present-day Texas, New Mexico, Nevada, and parts of Colorado, Arizona, Utah,

²²⁷ Ibid, 47.

²²⁸ Ibid, 47-48.

²²⁹ See Américo Paredes, *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1990) and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, *Klail City Death Trip Series* (Berkeley, CA: Justa Publications, 1980).

²³⁰ San Miguel, "Let All of Them Take Heed," 2-3.

Wyoming and Oklahoma, with the Rio Grande River acknowledged as the southern boundary of Texas. President Polk was not satisfied and wanted more land, but the treaty was submitted to the U.S. Senate and it was ratified on March 10, 1848.²³¹ Most disagreements during negotiations centered on Articles VIII, IX and X that dealt specifically with the rights of Mexicans in what became the United States. Under these articles they could choose to stay or leave to Mexico or elsewhere; about 2000 left and most remained. Article IX guaranteed the remaining Mexicans full rights as citizens of the United States. Article X, which was refused by the U.S. Senate, contained guarantees protecting the property titles of the Mexican citizens. Although assured that property rights would be honored, later events proved that the Americans had no intention of honoring those rights.²³² Many Chicano historians have argued that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 spelled the beginning of U.S. discrimination of Mexican Americans. Martha Menchaca of the University of Texas argues that the United States' subsequent violation of many parts of the treaty racialized the status of Mexicans. She states, "they did not give Mexicans the political rights of White citizens...a legacy of racial discrimination followed."²³³

Peace did not last long after the U.S. Mexican War. Thirteen years later, Texas was embroiled in the Civil War as hostilities broke out in 1861 between northern and southern states at Fort Sumter in South Carolina.²³⁴ The Union immediately sought to blockade all Confederate ports to cut off supply routes as well as strangle the southern economy. During the Civil War, the Rio Grande River was the only route left for southern cotton exports and other trade. The Union army landed at Brownsville in 1861 and subsequently fought several battles and

²³¹ Acuña, 51.

²³² Ibid., 52.

²³³ Ibid., 53.

²³⁴ Jerry D. Thompson and Lawrence T. Jones III, *Civil War and Revolution on the Rio Grande Frontier: A Narrative and Photographic History* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2004), 3.

skirmishes to ensure control of the river.²³⁵ The last battle of the Civil War in 1865 was fought at Palmito Hill, northeast of Brownsville, after Lee had already surrendered to the North. After the war, the area saw an increasing number of Anglo immigrants, many of them ex-servicemen.²³⁶ Many married into Mexican landholding families, and most acquired ranches and did well when the cattle industry boomed after the Civil War. The cattle market had its ups and downs, however, and many south Texas ranchers turned to farming in order to stay afloat during downturns in beef prices. By the end of the nineteenth century, cattle raising was no longer as profitable as it had once been, and commercial farming began to appear in south Texas as agricultural technological innovations promised profits.²³⁷ Ranchers and farmers turned to cotton and sugar cane, and some ventured into vegetables such as Bermuda onions which brought better returns for their investments.²³⁸ During this transitional period between 1850 and 1900, many south Texas Mexican landowners began to lose their holdings as the new Anglo order took hold. In 1850, the rural Mexican population in south Texas was 34% ranch-farm owners, 29% skilled laborers and 34% manual laborers; by 1900 the numbers had changed to 16% ranch-farm owners, 12% skilled and 67% manual laborers.²³⁹ Many Mexican elite were land-rich but poor in capital, and were unable to withstand the vicissitudes of the cattle market. Under Anglo domination, many found themselves having to sell land to pay off tax arrears, costs of court-ordered surveys of boundaries, costs of court litigation and other debts.²⁴⁰ As Anglo ranchers bought up more and more land, they fenced in water sources and small ranchers were

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, iii.

²³⁷ Montejano, 51-52.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 106. In 1898, farmer T.C. Nye in Dimmit County reported netting over one thousand dollars per acre on his experimental crop of Bermuda onions. Other farmers at the time were making cotton profits of about fifteen dollars an acre, which convinced many that new crops should be considered.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

left without water. They could dig wells but that took too much money, and many began to sell out to the larger spreads such as the Kings, the Klebergs, and the Kennedys.²⁴¹

Race relations in the lower Rio Grande Valley between the Anglo Americans and the Mexican Americans in the mid-nineteenth century when Anglos were few were fairly amicable. At first, the Anglos posed no threat and Mexican elite landowners were generally welcoming because the Anglos brought business. There were intermarriages for strategic reasons, and Anglos also became attached to Mexican families through the sponsoring of children in baptism and other Catholic rites, or the *compadrazgo* alliances.²⁴² As the Anglos became more numerous and acquired more ranches and businesses, the relationships changed. Altercations related to land loss and spillover activities as Mexico underwent numerous armed conflicts added to the uneasy tensions between Anglo and Mexican Americans. Some Anglos still felt that killing a Mexican was justified as revenge for the Alamo and Goliad.²⁴³ In 1863, the *Fort Brown Flag*, a newspaper in Brownsville, stated that “we are opposed to allowing an ignorant crowd of Mexicans to determine the political questions in this country...”²⁴⁴ in debating whether Mexican Americans should even be allowed to vote. In 1889, a visiting Englishwoman, Mary Jaques, wrote letters home saying that Anglos did not consider Mexicans as human and almost gleefully lynched them. She stated that the Mexican “seems to be the Texan’s natural enemy; he is treated like a dog, or, perhaps, not so well.”²⁴⁵ There are many instances of the brutality shown to Mexican Americans by Anglo Americans during the latter half of the nineteenth century, many

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁴³ de León, *They Called Them Greasers*, 77.

²⁴⁴ Montejano, 39.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

too gruesome to recount, but which may be found in Arnolde de León's monograph, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900*.²⁴⁶

During the last half of the nineteenth century, the resentment garnered against all things Mexican due to feelings of revenge and distrust after three wars did not promise economic, political or social status to many Mexican Americans.²⁴⁷ After wars, the problem of what to do with the remaining defeated peoples is usually solved by extermination, assimilation or a solution that falls somewhere between these two extremes.²⁴⁸ In Texas all of the above occurred, as many prominent and less prominent families were expelled and dispossessed of their lands. Many others lost their lives in the unsettled years following the three wars of the nineteenth century, and Mexican Americans found themselves subjugated through intimidation and terror that was imposed through agencies of the government such as the Texas Rangers.²⁴⁹

Ostensibly formed to ensure peace and protection for the inhabitants of the state, some historians feel that the Texas Rangers were highly romanticized by the press as heroes of law and order but were in reality terrorizing abusers of power that stirred up more trouble than was necessary.²⁵⁰ The history of the Texas Rangers dates back to 1835 when an unofficial unit of ten men was gathered by Stephen F. Austin to provide law and order to the new Austin colony. Since then the group has been disbanded and reinstated numerous times depending on the political situation in Texas. After Texas' involvement in the Civil War, many of the Rangers' myths were born regarding their prowess as law enforcement officers.²⁵¹ Recent historians have re-examined the legends and discovered that despite the fame of their deeds, the Texas Rangers

²⁴⁶ de León, *They Called Them Greasers*, 78.

²⁴⁷ Montejano, 25.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

²⁵⁰ Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hands*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), 31.

²⁵¹ Jerry D. Thompson, *Cortina: Defending the Mexican Name in Texas* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2007), 1-3.

often used ruthless methods such as inducing confessions through torture and executing alleged bandits on the spot without benefit of judicial procedures.²⁵² After years of reported incidents of summary executions and brutality, an investigation in 1919 by the Texas Legislature found that in the time period between 1910 and 1919, between 300 and 5,000 people of Hispanic descent had been killed by Texas Rangers. The Texas government took action to screen applicants more closely, disband the special Texas Ranger groups, and to institute a means of registering complaints against injustices they may have committed.²⁵³

The actions of the Texas Rangers were a manifestation of the anti-Mexican attitudes that were widespread in the southwestern part of the United States after the war with Mexico. These attitudes developed from various sources.²⁵⁴ As a conquered people, Mexicans who were newly incorporated into the United States as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo resented their new overlords. The dispossession of their lands by continuously entering Anglo American immigrants to the area did little to encourage egalitarian feelings. The Anglo Americans regarded the Mexican Americans with suspicion and distrust, since they were most recently their hated enemies in battle. Religious prejudice also influenced relations between the Anglo Americans who were mostly Protestant and Mexican Americans who were mostly Roman Catholic. Another reason for dislike of Mexican Americans was the question of race.²⁵⁵

According to Arthur L. Campa,

²⁵² Montejano, 127.

²⁵³ Charles H. Harris III and Louis R. Sadler, *The Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution: The Bloodiest Decade, 1910-1920* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 105.

²⁵⁴ Gonzales, 84.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

Cultural, political, and religious differences tended to polarize Mexicans and Anglo Americans, but the most persistent reason for the prejudice felt by Americans was that Mexicans were dark-skinned people. Despite the rhetoric used to rationalize prejudice in the Southwest, the lack of acceptance of darker skins by most Europeans is by and large the most obvious.²⁵⁶

Likely an outcome of the Social Darwinism movement sweeping Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, widespread racism based on skin color was prevalent in the United States at the turn of the century. The Civil War and emancipation of African Americans led to harbored resentment against dark-skinned people by Southerners and everywhere Southerners had migrated, which included all of Texas.²⁵⁷

Therefore, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the native Mexican population of Texas came to occupy a “distinctly inferior and subordinate position in this new order.”²⁵⁸ As Texas educational institutions began to accommodate all schoolchildren, Anglos felt justified in regarding Mexican American schoolchildren as mostly dirty, slow, lazy, and not deserving of better educational facilities or instruction.²⁵⁹ Indeed, some historians determined that the conquered people would be “grateful for the energy and freedom that United States governance would provide.”²⁶⁰ It was by conquest, they argued, that the United States became one of the tutors of backward peoples.²⁶¹ Determined to ignore, use for personal gain, or assimilate the Mexican Americans; Anglos set out to properly educate their new subjects.

²⁵⁶ Arthur Campa, *Hispanic Culture in the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 184; as quoted in Gonzales, p. 84.

²⁵⁷ Arnaldo de León, *Mexican Americans in Texas: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1999), 36.

²⁵⁸ San Miguel, “*Let All of Them Take Heed*”, 2.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶⁰ MacDonald, “Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, or ‘Other?’,” 370.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Mexican American Education Under the New Regimes

According to David Montejano in *Anglos and Mexicans in The Making of Texas, 1836-1986*; after the Texas Revolution, the Anglo Texans quickly realized that education was needed to properly subjugate the Mexican Americans who had only recently been their hated enemies.²⁶² The land displacement that followed the Texas Revolution and the Mexican-U.S. War ensured that Mexican Americans were relegated to the lowest economic levels. Most Mexican Americans were forced to work the lands that they had once owned. By 1858, Anglos had gained almost ninety percent of the lands not seized as public lands by the state and federal governments.²⁶³ Anglo dominance continued through the passage of laws to restrict the use of the Spanish language. In 1856 law restricting the use of Spanish in courtrooms left many Mexican Americans unable to properly defend themselves in any civil or criminal proceedings. The School Law of 1870 mandated English as the language of instruction for all public schools.²⁶⁴ However, this state requirement was not followed uniformly throughout the state; both German immigrants and Mexican Americans maintained instruction in their native languages, especially in rural areas that could not be readily monitored. In 1871, state superintendent of education J.C. DeGress modified the law to allow two hours a day of instruction in German, French or Spanish if the schoolchildren were unable to fully understand English instruction.²⁶⁵

Although Texas used the supposed lack of any public system of education in its Texas Declaration of Independence in March of 1836;²⁶⁶ it, too, was hard pressed to provide a system

²⁶² Montejano, 30

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ San Miguel, "Culture and Education," 6.

²⁶⁵ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 59.

²⁶⁶ In its list of grievances, the Texas Declaration of Independence of March 1836 charged the Mexican government with the following: "It has failed to establish any public system of education, although possessed of

of education for some time after the end of the revolution. In the aftermath, Sam Houston was too busy to become deeply interested in founding a public system of education.²⁶⁷ Although several tracts of land were set aside to endow educational institutions, there was little ready money made available to build schoolhouses, recruit and train teachers and purchase instructional resources. The only institution founded through the land grant policy established by the Texas Congress of 1839-1840 was the semi-public San Augustine University.²⁶⁸ Nacogdoches University had been founded previously in 1833 through financing provided by the Mexican government. The first tax-supported public schools were started in Galveston and in Corpus Christi in 1846, but the superintendent and teachers had to be imported from New Orleans due to the lack of qualified staff. This experiment only lasted a few years, and regardless of the rhetoric, nothing much was done until the passage of the Common School Law Act of 1854.²⁶⁹

In 1839, Ezekiel W. Cullen, chairman of the House Committee on Education for the Republic of Texas stated, “it is one of the first and paramount duties of Congress to provide a system of general education where every class can like receive the benefits and blessings of education.”²⁷⁰ Apparently, he only included Anglo-Americans and other European immigrants in that declaration, for African Americans and Mexican Americans were excluded from educational opportunities for some time after the Texas Revolution and subsequent annexation to the United States. African Americans were to remain slaves until the end of the Civil War, and Mexican

almost boundless resources...and although it is an axiom in political science, that unless a people are educated and enlightened, it is idle to expect the continuance of civil liberty, or the capacity for self-government.” See *Texas Public Schools, 150 Years: Sesquicentennial Handbook – 1854-2004* (Austin: Texas Education Agency, 2005), 36.

²⁶⁷ *Texas Public Schools Sesquicentennial Handbook* (Austin: Texas Education Agency, 2005), 37.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

Americans were received with hostility if they attempted to enroll in public schools.²⁷¹

According to I. Blea in *Toward a Chicano Social Science* (1988), “Chicanos were excluded from education, or their education was inferior. Political participation was impossible, and they lost the land (the basis of their wealth). Chicanos suffered religious discrimination, shootings, hangings, and general violence.”²⁷²

There were conflicting arguments regarding the education of Mexican Americans in the last years of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, it was agreed that assimilation of Mexican Americans could best be brought about through education where they could learn the English language and Anglo social customs and virtues. This process had worked well in the northeastern United States with European immigrants.²⁷³ On the other hand, an educated Mexican American population could be trouble in the political arena, in the courtroom during land adjudication disputes and could better compete in business ventures. Also, Mexican Americans seemed to resist assimilation; after all, they had three hundred years of history in the area compared to the relative newness of the Anglo Americans. In Texas, therefore, Mexican Americans experienced many changes in Anglo attitudes toward their education during the last decades of the nineteenth century.²⁷⁴

During these transitional years of the last decades of the nineteenth century, the use of the Spanish language was allowed and Spanish-surnamed teachers are listed for the counties of San Bexar, El Paso, Duval and Nueces.²⁷⁵ Many Mexican Americans who had become accustomed to institutions sponsored by the Catholic church preferred to enroll in private or parochial schools rather than in public schools. In Brownsville, the Incarnate Word Catholic school was

²⁷¹ Vigil, 1998, 162.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 59.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ San Miguel, “*Let All of Them Take Heed*,” 7.

established in 1853 by four Catholic nuns who taught only females between the ages of five and eighteen years of age. Although it was under Catholic auspices, the school also allowed the enrollment of non-Catholics including “Protestants, Jews, and Infidels.”²⁷⁶ Enrollment increased at the school and in 1893 it listed three hundred twenty-five day students and twenty-eight boarders, or children who were provided living quarters at the institution. Tuition ranged from as little as fifty cents a day to fifteen dollars a month for the boarders. Because the school was only for females, the curriculum included music, painting, everyday sewing, and embroidery.²⁷⁷ There were also parochial schools for boys established in Brownsville during this time. In 1872 three Mexican teachers and three Anglo teachers under the direction of Catholic priests established St. Joseph’s College in Brownsville. Because of a lack of funding sufficient to pay the teachers’ wages, the sisters of the Incarnate Word took over St. Joseph’s College in 1887.²⁷⁸

In Galveston and San Antonio, Ursuline nuns established schools in the early 1850s where the curriculum included all academic subjects as well as Spanish, English and French. In addition to boarders who paid tuition, the school also had free day classes for the benefit of Mexican children, reported to exceed three hundred in number when the Ursuline nuns reluctantly turned over their school to the Sisters of the Incarnate Word.²⁷⁹ In San Antonio in 1852, the Brothers of St. Mary established a school for young men. This institution offered advanced studies in Latin, history, algebra and philosophy and eventually became present day St. Mary’s University. In 1888, the Brothers of St. Mary also founded a preparatory school for boys, the San Fernando Cathedral School. Austin was also chosen by the Brothers of St. Mary

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 9.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 61. See also Carlos E. Castañeda, *The Church in Texas Since Independence, 1836-1950*, vol. 7 of *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936* (Austin, TX: Boeckmann-Jones, 1958), 294.

who founded St. Edward's Academy for boys in 1870s, a school that would become St. Edward's College in 1885.²⁸⁰

In the second half of the nineteenth century, many Protestant churches began sending missionaries to the Rio Grande Valley. As part of their proselytizing efforts, they established Protestant parochial schools in several Valley towns. In Brownsville in 1852, Melinda Rankin, a Protestant lay missionary, established the Rio Grande Female Institute where she taught English classes, all the regular academic subjects and Bible studies. It had a reported enrollment of about 40 female students.²⁸¹ The Presbyterian Church also operated a school in Brownsville under the direction of Mr. and Mrs. Carrero. Instruction was in Spanish with English taught as a second language. In Laredo in 1880 a Methodist school for boys called the Holding Institute was established which included first through twelfth grades and which specialized in teaching non-English speaking students. The school was known for using "American-born Mexican" teachers who proved to be excellent instructors for Mexican students.²⁸² Episcopal churches opened many industrial training schools for boys throughout the Southwest, many of which continued into the twentieth century. Many Protestant schools, however, were discontinued in the twentieth century as state public education became more widespread.²⁸³

In 1856, Hidalgo County created three school districts in alignment with the three election precincts. Elections were held that year for school trustees. Records for that year indicate that a few months later, 215 children were attending school. Although not always in session, Laredo had more than ten schools and a dozen teachers by the 1860s. After the state constitutional convention of 1870 and the renewed emphasis on education, the communities in

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁸¹ San Miguel, "Culture and Education," 8.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

the Valley began plans to establish schools in the area. In a letter written by John McAllen to G.D. Kingsbury, he said that “we are about to establish a school system...we will be in want of a great many teachers...all persons are compelled to send their children at least four months.” In Zapata, some recall that justice of the peace Antonio Barrera and his wife arranged to teach classes to the neighboring children during the late nineteenth century.²⁸⁴

An interesting glimpse at the history of education in a part of the lower Rio Grande Valley through the 1960s has been given admirably by Dr. Arnulfo Simeón Martínez in his completed dissertation entitled *History of Education in Starr County*.²⁸⁵ Although the dissertation focuses on Starr County, it gives as a historical background information on education in the lower Rio Grande Valley during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Martínez himself was in a good position to provide such information, having being elected to serve as Starr County School Superintendent in 1946. At the time of his dissertation in 1966, he had served 20 years in that position. Dr. Martínez also relied extensively on an unpublished paper by Florence Johnson Scott entitled *The Development of Education in Starr County* written in 1934. Scott was an educator-historian well known for her later works on José de Escandón and the history of the lower Rio Grande River.²⁸⁶

Martínez explains that at the end of the Mexican War, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo created three new counties in the Rio Grande Valley in 1848 which were Webb, Starr, and Cameron Counties. In 1852, Hidalgo and Zapata Counties were authorized and created out of portions of Starr and Cameron Counties. The state of Texas in 1854 passed the Public School

²⁸⁴ Alonzo, 127.

²⁸⁵ Arnulfo S. Martínez. Dr. George I. Sánchez served as Martínez’s dissertation committee chair; other members of his committee were Dr. Carlton Boyer, Dr. William Drake, and Dr. Clark C. Gill.

²⁸⁶ Florence J. Scott, *The Development of Education in Starr County*, unpublished paper, 1934. See also Florence J. Scott, *Historical Heritage of the Lower Rio Grande* (Waco, TX: Texian Press, 1966) and Florence J. Scott, *Spanish Land Grants in the Lower Rio Grande Valley* (master’s thesis, Austin: University of Texas, 1935).

Law which set out to establish a system of education. In addition to setting aside some monies for a school fund, the law required that a board of school commissioners be named for each county “whose duty shall be to form their respective counties into school districts of convenient size.”²⁸⁷ Additionally, the assessor and collector of each county in the state was to make out a list of all the free white population in his county between the ages of six and sixteen years, for which the county would receive state monies. Three elected school trustees were to then apply the state monies toward payment of teacher’s salaries and other school needs. Martínez describes how the Starr County district trustees were elected and subsequently formed three school districts in Starr County. The trustees in District One which included Rio Grande City were all Anglo-American, and the trustees in District Three were all Mexican-American. This implies that in certain areas of Starr county, the Anglo Americans held political power while in another part, the Mexican Americans held political power. Apparently there were not enough children in District Two to elect trustees because none are listed.²⁸⁸ The number of scholastics reported that school year in Starr County was 509.²⁸⁹

A similar thesis was completed in 1942 by Robert Daniel Beane called *A Brief History of the Educational Development of Hidalgo County Texas*. Beane served as Hidalgo County Superintendent of Schools as well as Secretary of the Hidalgo County School Board in 1941-1942 and was able to use his position to gather data regarding the history of education in Hidalgo County. The study covers a ninety-year time period, from 1852 and the creation of Hidalgo County to 1942 when the author completed his master’s thesis.²⁹⁰ The study is divided into a brief historical introduction of the Spanish colonization of the area and follows with descriptions

²⁸⁷ Arnulfo S. Martinez, 46.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 50.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Beane, i.

of the six Common School Districts (hereafter abbreviated to CSD) which still existed when he completed the work in 1942 which included Relampago CSD No. 1, La Villa CSD No. 2, Palm Garden CSD No. 9, Run CSD No. 14, Valley View CSD No. 17, and Monte Alto CSD No. 19. He then describes and gives the history of the eleven Independent School Districts (hereafter abbreviated to ISD) which included Alton ISD, Hidalgo ISD, Progreso ISD, Donna ISD, Edcouch-Elsa ISD, McAllen ISD, Mercedes, ISD, Mission ISD, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD, Sharyland ISD, and Weslaco ISD. He adds then two Consolidated Independent School Districts (abbreviated to CISD) which are Edinburg CISD and Tabasco CISD and a County-Line District which is the Lyford County-Line District.²⁹¹ He also includes briefly information about church schools, teacher's organizations and training, the Interscholastic League, music meets and curricular changes as well as including tables on tax rates, enrollments, state apportionments, and lists of superintendents and ISD Board members, and principals and CSD Board members.²⁹²

According to Beane, throughout the turbulent period during the Republic of Texas and the subsequent Mexican War and the Civil War, little progress was made in Hidalgo County regarding educational endeavors. The land area was too vast, the population too small, and the communities too spread out in Hidalgo County to adequately address educational needs.²⁹³ With the School Law of 1876, the county governments were made responsible for the provision of educational facilities for scholastics in each county. Educational attempts were disorganized and slow to take effect. For example, even though the Republic of Texas in 1840 had provided for four leagues of land in each county to be school lands, it was not until 1880 when the certificates for the four leagues of school land for Hidalgo County were presented to the Commissioner's

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, iii.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, v.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

Court.²⁹⁴ The lands were located in the western central portion of the county and were sold in 1906 to John Closner at one dollar per acre which raised funds of \$18,000 to be used for county education purposes.²⁹⁵

Hidalgo County was organized on August 10, 1852. By researching the names of county officials and the various school districts, some determination can be made regarding the amount of political power that various groups held. For example, in 1867 four election precincts in Hidalgo County were made Common School Districts and election judges were appointed to preside over the election of school district trustees. The election judges were as follows: for District No. 1, Yndalecio Domínguez; for District No. 2, Thaddeus M. Rhodes; for District No. 3, Pacífico Ochoa; for district No. 4, T. P. Thompson.²⁹⁶ This would possibly indicate that in 1867 in Hidalgo County, political power was shared between Anglos and Mexican Americans.

The Community System set up by the School Law of 1876 was adopted by Hidalgo County and followed until 1895, when the Hidalgo County Commissioner's Court ordered that the county be changed from the Community to the District System. By 1878, from the county records it is known that monies were provided to purchase supplies for the several school communities in the county. The word "several" is the only indication that various school sites or schoolhouses had already been provided by 1878.²⁹⁷

The School Law of 1884 completely revised the previous school law and provided for the following measures:

- A state superintendent with general supervision over all the common schools was to be elected.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 5.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 6.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 7.

- All counties in the state except fifty-three (Hidalgo County was among the fifty-three) were to be divided into school districts.
- Local taxation up to 20 cents on the \$100 valuation was authorized, provided two-thirds of the property owners voted for it.
- A state tax of 20 cents on the \$100 valuation of all property, or as much as needed to maintain schools for six months each year, was authorized.
- The scholastic age was set at eight and sixteen inclusively.²⁹⁸

Under this system, the County Judge was the *ex-officio* county superintendent in charge of attending to public school needs. The salary of the County Judge for this purpose in 1884 was \$121.00. In 1887, the office of County Superintendent was created by law, but the establishment of the office was left to the discretion of the County Commissioners. Consequently, Hidalgo County did not create the office of County Superintendent until June 14, 1894 when George W. Miller was appointed to the office.²⁹⁹ The office was abolished by the commissioners in 1896 when Miller resigned, at which time County Judge Juan M. de La Viña assumed the office of *ex-officio* County Superintendent.³⁰⁰ A new law in 1907 required a County Superintendent in every county with 2,000 or more scholastics, and Hidalgo County re-created the office on June 10, 1907.³⁰¹

According to Hidalgo County Commissioner's Court Minutes, by 1889 there were already nine schools on record in the county. These were at Relampago, Granjeno, Ojo de Agua, Havana, La Jara, Santa Anita, Hidalgo, Capote, and Agua Negra.³⁰² There may have been

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 10

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁰² *Ibid.*

others, but they are not found in Hidalgo County records. In 1893, the estimated scholastic census of the county based on school revenues was 2,355.³⁰³

In 1895 as previously stated, the Hidalgo County Court ordered that the county be changed from the Community System to the District System. The County Superintendent drew up boundary lines for four school districts which were approved by the Court. A few days later trustees were appointed for the districts as follows:

District No. 1: President Florencio Sáenz, Blas Olvera and A.N. Smith

District No. 2: President John Closner, John Lipscomb, and A. E. Chávez

District No. 3: President Frank Philibert, Yldefonso Villarreal, and José L. Gallardo

District No. 4: President Wm. F. Sprague, José Vega, and Jesús Vela³⁰⁴

The names listed can be interpreted to indicate that political power was still balanced between the Anglo and Mexican Americans at this time, but this was to change in the next century.

As the lower Rio Grande Valley entered the twentieth century, many changes were about to unfold. During the nineteenth and previous centuries, we find that education in Nuevo Santander, and later in Texas, was inconsistently available to any schoolchildren, whether Anglo or Mexican American. We do see that Mexican American parents attempted to educate their children as well as they were able to with what resources were available. Some children were able to attend public schools, but many attended private parochial schools. The children of the very poor attended school the least because survival was more important to the family and the children were needed to work. The middle and upper level families were more likely to send their children to school. Texas had passed laws that banned instruction in any language other than English, signaling a trend that the needs of Mexican American children were waning in

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 40.

importance. In most cases, public schools did not do as good a job of teaching Mexican American children as the parochial schools did, because in public schools the emphasis began to shift to the Anglo schoolchildren and their needs. As the Valley began to fill with more and more Anglo Americans in the twentieth century, Mexican American children would suffer segregation, inadequate school facilities and discriminatory attitudes from school boards, school administrators, and teachers.³⁰⁵

The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw the decline of the cattle industry and the beginning of a move to more farming ventures. The technological advancements of this era in the area of agriculture made the conversion of the arid lands of the lower Rio Grande Valley into a lush sub-tropical “Magic Valley” possible.³⁰⁶ The railroad expanded into Texas and connected Corpus Christi with Laredo and the Monterrey markets in 1881, and then connected the lower Valley with Corpus Christi and therefore northern markets in 1904.³⁰⁷ Iced boxcars were available now for shipping produce, large aquifers had been discovered to add water sources to the Rio Grande River water and innovations in irrigation indicated that commercialized agriculture had a good possibility of success.³⁰⁸ However, the coming of the railroad seemed to polarize the Anglo American and Mexican American communities. While the railroad promised market access to both cattle raisers and farmers, it also served to bring more Anglo Americans further south. The new Anglo Americans were North Atlantic venture capitalists who were instrumental in bringing down Midwest farmers to buy up farm tracts in the

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

Rio Grande Valley. The newcomers quickly picked up anti-Mexican attitudes from the older Anglo families, and saw Mexicans mainly as cheap labor to work their new farms.³⁰⁹

The political instability that continued in Mexico in the early 1900s as different *caudillos* sought to establish power bases caused many Mexicans to seek asylum on the other side of the border. As Mexico fully entered into a civil war in 1910, large numbers of people came to the United States legally or illegally to escape the mayhem.³¹⁰ Historians speak of push/pull factors to explain migrations, and in this case, the disorder and atrocities of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 combined with the need of Texas farmers for cheap agricultural labor operated to bring many Mexicans into the lower Rio Grande Valley.³¹¹ Evidence of the large numbers of immigrants can be found in official statistics which show that the Mexican American population increased from 71,062 in 1900 to 683,000 in 1930 in the American Southwest.³¹² Work could be found in the mines of southern Arizona and New Mexico, in the building of railroads in all of the southwestern states, and in the clearing of the land and the building of irrigation canals for agricultural purposes in Texas.³¹³ By the 1920s, ranchers and farmers in the southwestern states could not operate without the labor of the Mexican immigrants and they were considered “indispensable to the economic life of the Southwest.”³¹⁴ When work was seasonal, the Mexican American workers traveled to wherever work was available. Thus began the migratory patterns in the lower Rio Grande Valley of large numbers of Mexican Americans who stayed in the valley during the winter months but traveled further north during the spring and summer months.³¹⁵

³⁰⁹ de León, *They Called Them Greasers*, 31 – 32.

³¹⁰ Gonzales, 112.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² *Ibid.*, 121.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 123.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

The life of the migrant worker was very difficult. Most lived in isolated labor camps with no running water or adequate sewer facilities. In the 1920s they lived in tents or one-room shacks in the most abysmal of conditions. Disease was rampant, with many plagues and epidemics taking thousands during the 1920s.³¹⁶ Deep into poverty, the agricultural workers' prime concern was survival. There were few opportunities for advancement, and the cycle of poverty perpetuated itself when children were needed to work in the fields and were unable to attend school.³¹⁷ In the Rio Grande Valley, the Mexican laborer could never hope to acquire land as European immigrants did in northern states. Mexican laborers were paid less than Anglo workers for the same job, but Anglos rarely worked in the fields anymore after large numbers of Mexican laborers became available. Even if the Mexican laborer acquired enough money to buy land, the commercialized agribusiness farms would soon drive him out of business, as they did the wealthier land-owners a generation before.³¹⁸ Soon the cheap labor of the Mexican American became indispensable to the U.S. economy, and many forces conspired to keep the minority group at the lowest levels in order to benefit the corporate capitalist structure of the agribusiness ventures.³¹⁹ As indispensable as the Mexican American worker was, however, anti-Mexican feelings grew stronger. The most strongly felt hostility occurred in Texas, where memories of war battles combined with the southern attitudes toward dark-skinned people made life difficult for the Mexican American. Because they were actively discriminated against in public, where signs of "No Dogs and No Mexicans," kept them from restaurants, stores, and other public places, they tended to separate into their own "Mexican side of town."³²⁰ This contributed to their isolationism and the retaining of their culture and language. Anglos despaired of ever

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ San Miguel, "Culture and Education,"15-16.

³¹⁸ Gonzales, 136.

³¹⁹ San Miguel, "Culture and Education,"14.

³²⁰ Gonzales, 129.

assimilating Mexican Americans while at the same time shunning contact with them and effectively preventing assimilation.³²¹

The Great Depression had a profound impact on the entire country, putting most people into extreme economic hardship. The Mexican American workers who already lived in abject poverty saw little change in their economic state; but because jobs suddenly became scarce and because anti-Mexican sentiments already existed, Mexicans became a convenient scapegoat for the country's economic troubles.³²² Although many Mexican Americans were by now American citizens by virtue of birth, many political groups began speaking of deporting all Mexicans. The first World War in the early 1900s had produced a xenophobia and distrust of all "foreigners."³²³ Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Daughters of the Golden West and similar patriotic groups began to protest the presence of increasing numbers of Mexican Americans.³²⁴ Some Mexican Americans were rounded up, cheated of their wages and unceremoniously dumped across the border into Mexico; others further away from the border were put into "concentration camps," chained and put into work gangs.³²⁵ In some places, whites went into the labor camps, beat up men, women and children and ordered them to leave town.³²⁶ Today it is estimated that fully two million Mexicans and Mexican Americans were deported to Mexico between 1929 and 1939, or 60 to 75 percent of the Mexican American population in the United States at that time.³²⁷ Law enforcement agencies disregarded birth certificates showing native birth, as well as

³²¹ San Miguel, "Culture and Education,"32.

³²² Gonzales, 139.

³²³ Acuña, 181.

³²⁴ Gonzales, 147.

³²⁵ Acuña, 194.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid., 208.

property left behind and whether the person was healthy or ill, and deported anyone who “looked Mexican.”³²⁸

The New Deal programs instituted by President Roosevelt began to revive the economy, and by the 1940s, many Mexicans had returned to Texas to work in agriculture again. The farmers had been requesting changes to immigration law so that they could recruit cheap agricultural labor.³²⁹ The start of World War II created a manpower shortage as American males left to fight in Europe and Japan. Not only agricultural work but factory work opened many opportunities for immigrants so that employers frequently ignored restrictions.³³⁰ In 1942 the Bracero Program brought in workers for the commercial agricultural enterprises in the Southwest. Initiated through a presidential accord between Mexico and the United States, the Bracero Program was estimated to have brought in 4.8 million Mexican nationals to work in the United States during its twenty-two years of existence.³³¹ Historians have determined that the Bracero Program was considered successful because the workers were temporary male workers who did not bring their families, therefore avoiding the burden on local institutions such as schools.³³² Commercial farmers wanted a cheap labor force that could come in, work, and then leave when no longer needed.³³³ Alongside the legal importation of *braceros*, undocumented Mexicans continued to come to the United States in search of work. During the twenty-two years of the Bracero Program’s existence, Border Patrol agents apprehended and returned some five million undocumented Mexicans who did not come into the United States through the auspices of the program. When the Bracero program ended in the 1960s, farmers who had not

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid. 209

³³⁰ Acuña, 194.

³³¹ Gonzales, 175.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid., 176.

already done so switched over to “wetbacks” for their cheap labor source.³³⁴ The end of World War II had stimulated the U.S. economy and now attractive job opportunities enticed many Mexican nationals to look for work in the United States.³³⁵

World War II once again provoked a wave of xenophobia as the Cold War continued afterward. Distrust of all things foreign caused anti-immigration sentiments to rise, and one result was “Operation Wetback” when many undocumented workers were hunted down and deported. The program began in 1954 and lasted for several months during which over a million people were returned to Mexico.³³⁶ With the ending of the Bracero Program in 1964, however, illegal immigration would once again explode as push/pull factors worked to bring immigrants to look for work in the United States. American employers were rarely the ones that objected to immigrants, legal or otherwise, because they benefitted from the cheap labor source.³³⁷

World War II was to prove a turning point for many Mexican American males and their families. Many Mexican American males served in the military and were highly decorated for their service.³³⁸ Participation in the war made many Mexican Americans realize that they were fighting for a freedom they did not participate in at home. The fact that they had just fought the Nazis and their philosophy of racial superiority made Mexican Americans think hard about the discrimination they suffered at home.³³⁹ When the war was over, the returning males were able to take advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights and go to college. They were also able to take advantage of Veterans Administration (VA) loans to buy homes.³⁴⁰ By 1955, the Texas business

³³⁴ Wetbacks were so called because it was assumed that they swam across the Rio Grande River to the United States without proper documentation to live or work there and had wet clothing upon their arrival. See Gonzales, 178.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid. 180.

³³⁷ Acuña, 160.

³³⁸ Gonzales, 164.

³³⁹ San Miguel, *“Let All of Them Take Heed,”*114.

³⁴⁰ Montejano, 280.

world had begun to take notice of Mexican American consumers and their buying power. A special issue of the *Texas Business Review* of that year advocated eliminating discrimination at retail stores because Mexican Americans would surely resent it and shop elsewhere.³⁴¹ This was the beginning of a true middle class for Mexican Americans who not only dreamt of full participation in American life but who were now beginning to be educationally equipped to fight for it.³⁴²

In Texas, the years following the Civil War had proved disastrous for any educational efforts. The state's treasury was depleted, there was political chaos, and most public efforts were dedicated to restoring some political, economic and social order.³⁴³ In 1876, George Peabody, a wealthy philanthropist from New England, set up a fund of several million dollars to help southern states reorganize their education systems. As a result, in Texas a planning group decided to employ a state agent to visit the entire state to promote public education; a number of districts in different parts of the state were set up as demonstration centers of excellence; and the division of schooling into graded levels with appropriate curriculum and trained teachers was made a primary concern of the state.³⁴⁴ In 1879, the Sam Houston Normal Institute was established by O.M. Roberts to prepare teachers for their careers in education. Roberts was also instrumental in the districting of Texas schools in 1883, and led in the final establishment and opening of the University of Texas in that same year.³⁴⁵ During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, many Northerners began arriving in Texas, bringing progressive ideas in

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² San Miguel, "Let All of Them Take Heed," 115.

³⁴³ *Texas Public Schools Sesquicentennial Handbook*, 48.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 49.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 50.

education to the state but also causing many to compare Texas to the rest of the nation in educational endeavors.³⁴⁶

A report released in 1904 by Dr. W.S. Sutton in which Texas' educational system was compared to other states showed that Texas ranked 37th in per capital expenditure of the population for schools, 38th in the enrollment of the scholastic population in schools, 42nd in the number of school days of instruction and 37th in expenditure per child.³⁴⁷ Although urban areas of Texas seemed to do better, the main problem was in rural schools. The realization that education was poor in Texas prompted the meeting of educators and business leaders in *The Conference for Education in Texas* in 1907.³⁴⁸ This group realized that the state Constitution of 1876 did not provide direction or financial assistance in the establishment of a public educational system. As a result of the efforts of the conference members, four amendments were passed and in 1908 and 1909 major changes were effected that permitted the funding of school districts in rural areas. In 1910, the Biennial Report of the State Department of Education showed that education in rural schools was still in a deplorable state. With no compulsory attendance law, more than 46 percent of the scholastics who were enrolled were absent every day. More than 50,000 white and an unknown number of colored and Mexican American children were not even enrolled in any school.³⁴⁹ Buildings were in poor condition and teachers were poorly trained and underpaid. The instructional resources were inadequate. Governor Ferguson in 1915 supported the passage of a rural aid law, and in 1918 the ad valorem state tax for school purposes was raised in order to provide free textbooks for all the schools.³⁵⁰ The use of surveys to identify

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 51.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 52.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 53.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 54.

pressing educational needs in the state continued with the Public School Survey conducted with a legislative appropriation of \$50,000 in 1923.

The report was bound in six small volumes which urged that change be made in the organization of the State Board of Education. Various areas have subsequently undergone changes in the twentieth century as a result of this and other surveys. In 1928, an amendment was passed which established a state board composed of nine members to be appointed by the Governor with the approval of the Senate.³⁵¹ The structure of public education in Texas had been established through a County Unit System in 1839. This system was abolished and reinstated a number of times until in 1909 the district system became the legal format. The district system depends on local property values to generate taxes to be used for education purposes, and over the years some districts have developed some unusual shapes in order to maximize the tax base. In 1937, many of these bizarre school district maps were corrected.³⁵² The office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction was instituted by the Texas Republic and then abolished by the Constitution of 1876. In 1884, the office was restored but with a short two year term which prevented many office holders from effecting significant changes or long-range planning. By 1920 it was obvious that Texas' educational system needed extensive reform. But it would take another twenty years of floundering before significant changes would be made.³⁵³

The Great Depression of the 1930s and the two world wars had greatly affected educational systems in all of the United States. Subsequent fears during the Cold War focused a new awareness in education and the realization that only a highly educated population could hope to compete in new global economies that developed after the world wars.³⁵⁴ In 1947, the

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

Gilmer-Aiken Committee was formed to once again survey schools and determine which reforms were needed. The report issued in 1948 was called “To Have What We Must” and called for a new public school system model. Sweeping changes were incorporated which included five broad areas. The State Department of Education was dissolved and replaced with the Texas Education Agency which is still in existence today. The State School Board consisting of nine members appointed by the governor became a board of twenty-one members elected by popular vote. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction, an elected position, was converted to a State Commissioner of Education who would be appointed by the State Board of Education for a term of four years. The old system of “per capita” distribution of state funds was replaced by a plan based on the “economic index.” To assist in maintaining equity, a Minimum Foundation Program would help poorer areas of the state. The inclusion of funding based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA) would provide an incentive for school attendance. The final feature of the sweeping reform was to set up a minimum salary for teachers which paid “colored” teachers the same as “white” teachers for the first time.³⁵⁵

Prior to 1955, anyone who had graduated from high school was eligible to apply for a teaching certificate, with no specific subject area of expertise indicated. After 1955, a Bachelor’s degree was required with the implication that specialization of subject areas would impact on the hiring of the teacher.³⁵⁶ The recently formed Texas Education Agency decided that more rigorous standards for teachers was not enough, and set about determining what standards should be used to provide accreditation for district schools. Agency staff spent many months

³⁵⁵ *ibid.*

³⁵⁶ *ibid.*

traveling throughout the state to observe conditions and to gather input from district staff. Over 300 public schools and 20 institutions of higher education were visited.³⁵⁷

The Texas Education Agency records the first fifty years of education in Texas with very little mention of minority populations and their special needs. The reading of local or community histories also tell of teachers, administrators, buildings, and instructional resources at the “white” schools but only mention African Americans or Mexican Americans and the schools they attended in a limited context.³⁵⁸ Chicano and other historians in more recent years have returned to the literature and to primary sources to determine the status of education for Mexican Americans in Texas in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁵⁹ By the 1930s, there were sufficient numbers of Mexican American children in public schools to create a “problem.”³⁶⁰ According to Mike Boone, a tripartite educational system operated in the state of Texas in the early part of the twentieth century; the Anglo American, the African American and the Mexican American.³⁶¹ By the early years of the twentieth century, all African American children had segregated schooling; however, Mexican American children went to segregated schools in Brownsville, El Paso, and San Antonio, but in Corpus Christi they attended the same schools as Anglo children.³⁶² In many of the rural areas of Texas, Mexican American children were discouraged from attending school at all, or else attended “rancho” schools provided by the landowner. In these schools, the teachers were rarely trained but they did conduct instruction in

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ San Miguel, “The Status,” 18. Also Elizabeth Smith Harrison, *The History of Kyle, Texas Public Schools: 1911-1967* (PhD diss., Austin: University of Texas, December 2005), 31-35; also Marsha Lane Farney, *Promoting the Progress of Education: The History of Georgetown Public Schools, 1850-1966*, (PhD diss., Austin: University of Texas, May 2007), 277.

³⁵⁹ See Montejano, MacDonald, and San Miguel. Also Mike Boone, “A Review of Five Early Sources in the History of Mexican American Education in the Southwest,” *Journal of Philosophy and History of Education* 50 (2000): 19-25.

³⁶⁰ Boone, 19.

³⁶¹ Mike Boone, “The Other ‘Jim Crow’: Segregation of Mexican American Students in Texas Schools,” *Journal of Philosophy and History of Education* 49 (1999): 23-31.

³⁶² Boone, 1999, 25.

Spanish since the children knew little English, the buildings were poor with few supplies, and the school year was very short.³⁶³ The first report of a private school in Texas is mentioned by San Miguel in his research on school attendance by Mexican Americans in the Southwest.³⁶⁴ It was established at Martin's Ranch near Isleta in 1871, continued in existence until the 1890s, and was taught by E.N. Ronquillo.³⁶⁵ In 1897, a community school called the Colegio Altamirano was founded in Hebronville, Texas. This followed a pattern of private schools being established in local rural communities, taught by local citizens who spoke Spanish, because the public schools were teaching children in English with very little success as evidenced by lack of promotion.³⁶⁶ In his doctoral dissertation, Texas A & M student Thomas E. Simmons discovered that Mexican and Anglo children were separately educated in the local school districts in the Lower Rio Grande Valley as well as Central Texas and along the Gulf Coast but not so much in West Texas and the Texas Panhandle.³⁶⁷ Simmons also reported that by 1937, about 90% of the schools districts in south Texas were segregated.³⁶⁸

Mike Boone of Southwest Texas State University provides an excellent summary of the work of four important authors who investigated the schooling opportunities of Mexican American children in the American Southwest from the 1920s to the 1950s.³⁶⁹ These four authors were Herschel T. Manuel, Annie Reynolds, George I. Sanchez, and Wilson Little.³⁷⁰ In the 1920s, several surveys and reports with educational data were issued which Annie Reynolds later synthesized into a book that provides a regional overview of education in the southwestern

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ San Miguel, "Culture and Education," 5-21.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 10.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Thomas E. Simmons, *The Citizen Factories: The Americanization of Mexican Students in Texas Public Schools, 1920-1945*, (PhD diss., College Station: Texas A & M University, 1976), 119.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 124.

³⁶⁹ Boone, "A Review," 19-25.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 19.

states in the early part of the twentieth century.³⁷¹ As Reynolds looked over the various reports she concentrated on population distribution, school housing patterns, adequacy of teaching materials and teacher training, school enrollment and attendance and educational achievement. She documents the growth of Mexican American school enrollment in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. For the region, Reynolds states that Mexican American school population grew from 1.9% of the total population in 1890 to 9.6% in 1930, with Texas itself experiencing a percentage growth of 11.7%, much of it in larger urban areas.³⁷² Reynolds also described a widespread pattern of segregation of Mexican American schoolchildren in the five southwestern states. Neighborhood schools reflected the segregated nature of residential patterns, and there were either “colored” or “Mexican” schools separate from Anglo schools or there were separate buildings on the same campus which separated the groups.³⁷³ The reason given for segregating the Mexican American children was the lack of ability to speak or read English. Many children did not integrate into Anglo schools until the sixth through eighth grade, and in many cases, Mexican American children were not permitted to progress beyond the eighth grade regardless of English proficiency.³⁷⁴ A Texas survey openly stated that the Mexican children were given a shorter school year, inferior buildings and equipment and poorly paid teachers.³⁷⁵

Although the Mexican American children were separated in order to learn English, the teaching materials at the segregated schools did not include any materials that would facilitate the teaching of English. Teachers were rarely trained and were usually first-year teachers who moved on to other campuses once their first year was completed. Their training as teachers of

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

English as a second language was notably absent.³⁷⁶ Few Mexican American children were even enrolled in school, and those that were had very low attendance. Reynolds attributed this to the high level of poverty which required the children to work in the agricultural fields with their parents or take care of younger siblings while the parents worked; but Reynolds also noted the reluctance of school officials to actively seek to enforce compulsory attendance laws.³⁷⁷

Reynolds also documented the problems of lack of educational achievement in Mexican American students, most of who were held back in the lower grades for failure to learn English. She noted that in San Antonio 50% of the elementary students were Mexican American, but only 25% of the children entering junior high schools were Mexican American.³⁷⁸ School officials when questioned about Mexican American educational achievement were largely of the belief that these children were mentally inferior to white children. Intelligence testing was common practice at this time, with the tests given in English to children who did not speak the language and who obviously scored low.³⁷⁹ The solution to the “problem” of alleged low intelligence of the Mexican Americans was given by one school official who stated, “[they] should be placed together, and a specially prepared curriculum provided. This should include woodwork, domestic science, and other subjects properly arranged to help these children take their place in society.” The right place in society for Mexican Americans, in this superintendent’s view, was in skilled labor such as carpentry for the males and becoming maids for the females.³⁸⁰

A second author who investigated the education of Mexican American children was Herschel T. Manuel who in 1930 published *The Education of Mexican and Spanish Speaking*

³⁷⁶ Carlos E. Cortés, ed., *Education and the Mexican American* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 22-23. While Boone’s article summarizes the four studies done by Reynolds, Sanchez, Manuel and Little; this work edited by Cortés reprints each of the four reports in their entirety.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁷⁸ Boone, “A Review,” 20.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ Cortés, 53.

Children in Texas. As a University of Texas educational psychology professor, Manuel was interested in the issues related to educating this population. He found that approximately 52% of Mexican Americans in Texas were United States citizens who could trace their roots back to early Spanish colonization and described them as ranging from middle class levels to the lowest of poverty levels.³⁸¹ About half of the children had parents who worked in agricultural labor for low wages and who were forced to migrate to find work where available. Manuel noted that although school officials often used lack of intelligence or English proficiency as a reason to segregate the children, the Mexican American children did not exhibit the racial characteristics attributed to them as a group by these same officials; i.e. laziness, lack of ambition or a superstitious nature.³⁸² He acknowledged the differences in educational achievement, but attributed the lower achievement of Mexican American children to lack of adequate facilities, instructional materials, and trained teachers; as well as the lack of preparation for standardized tests administered in English.³⁸³ Manuel looked at the 1928-29 school year and estimated that of the approximately 187,000 Mexican American schoolchildren eligible to attend school, only half were enrolled in public schools and of these, only one-third were in daily attendance at school.³⁸⁴ Grade level retention was common in the primary grades, and many third graders were already 12 years old and ready to stop attending because they were frustrated by the lack of progress or because they were needed by their families to work.³⁸⁵ David Montejano explores the reasons for the Anglo insistence on segregating Mexican American schoolchildren and the ubiquitous pattern of retention in the 1920s and 1930s in Texas in his book, *Anglos and Mexicans in the*

³⁸¹ Boone, "A Review," 21.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Herschel T. Manuel, *The Education of Mexican and Spanish Speaking Children in Texas*, (Austin: The Fund for Research in the Social Sciences, 1930): 59-60.

³⁸⁴ Boone, "A Review," 21.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

*Making of Texas, 1836-1986.*³⁸⁶ According to Montejano, the needs of the farmers in south Texas in keeping a subservient class of worker available to them for stoop labor in the fields was a prime reason for the school patterns that Manuel observed.³⁸⁷

Montejano relies on a study done by Paul Taylor in the 1930s wherein farmers were asked about Mexican American laborers. Their comments revealed their true feelings about the necessity of keeping “Meskins” uneducated so that a labor force was assured when the farmers needed them.³⁸⁸ School officials understood the farmers’ needs and explained in one instance, “We don’t need skilled or white-collared Mexicans...the farmers are not interested in educating the Mexicans. They know that then they can get better wages and conditions. There isn’t a concerted effort against them but the white-collar man is not a common laborer.”³⁸⁹ Manuel encountered the same attitude in his survey work, as evidenced by the comment made by a superintendent in a segregated school district in south Texas, “If a man has very much sense or education either, he is not going to stick to this kind of work. So you see it is up to the white population to keep the Mexican on his knees in an onion patch or in new ground. This does not mix very well with education.”³⁹⁰ Taylor, as referenced by Montejano, also documents the discriminatory attitudes of some Anglos who did not think in terms of keeping the Mexican American in his place for labor reasons, but were simply hostile to the group as evidenced by the comment: “Why don’t we let the Mexicans come to the white school? Because a damned greaser is not fit to sit side of a white girl.”³⁹¹

³⁸⁶ Montejano, 191-195.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid, 191.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 193.

³⁹⁰ Manuel, 77

³⁹¹ Montejano, 194.

Manuel concluded his report by examining the many reasons why Mexican American children failed to attend school or remain there and acknowledged that extreme family poverty was the prime reason. He also noted, however, the hostile attitude of school officials and community toward Mexican American attendance at school, the lack of suitable clothing, the abysmal facilities with no running water or bathrooms, the migratory nature of many families, the discriminatory treatment received from administrators, teachers and other students where the groups were mixed, such as in the upper grades, and the lower levels of English proficiency of schoolchildren who were taught using the immersion method of “sink or swim.”³⁹² The Texas state superintendent of public instruction, Annie Webb Blanton, made her attitude clear when she stated in 1923, “In certain counties along our border are many men and women, born and reared in the Lone Star State, who speak a foreign tongue and cherish the habits and ways of another country...[they] have no right to do this...[they] must go back to the country which [they] prize so highly and rear [their] children there.”³⁹³

A third researcher and author who was influential in bringing the plight of Mexican American schoolchildren to the attention of academia was George Isadore Sánchez. George I. Sánchez worked as an educator from the age of sixteen when he graduated from high school and began teaching at the Yrrisarri *ranchería*³⁹⁴ near Albuquerque, New Mexico. He worked as a teacher, principal and administrator in Bernalillo County, New Mexico while he continued his studies. After various university teaching jobs and work with the New Mexico State Department

³⁹² Boone, “A Review,” 22.

³⁹³ San Miguel, 32.

³⁹⁴ *Ranchería* is a Spanish word used to indicate a native village in Spanish colonial times. When the Spanish explored the lower Rio Grande Valley in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they reported many Indian *rancherías* on both sides of the Rio Grande River. Later the term came to mean any small, rural settlement. In many parts of the Southwest and especially south Texas, the *ranchería* homes were *jacales*, or thatch-roofed huts made of sticks or poles daubed with adobe mud or clay. See Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy*, for more information on the early settlers in the Rio Grande Valley.

of Education, he was offered a professorship in Latin American Studies with the University of Texas, a position which he began in 1940. He continued work he had begun as an advocate of equal educational opportunities for Hispanic schoolchildren, and completed numerous research studies on the use of standardized tests for Spanish-speaking children, studies on rural and black education, and studies on the conditions and the effects of segregation and discrimination on minority children. He served as a member and consultant on many government committees, and belonged to numerous organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens and American Civil Liberties Union.³⁹⁵

George I. Sánchez completed his dissertation in 1934 at the University of California while working in New Mexico and used data from several southwestern states to investigate the education of bilingual children in school districts. He concluded that given the large and growing numbers of Mexican American schoolchildren in American schools in the Southwest, the population was large enough to merit the attention of school officials. His quantitative data indicated that Mexican American children were indeed lagging in educational achievement due to factors of a language handicap, low socioeconomic status and lack of equitable educational opportunities. He denounced segregation and stated that it was contrary to the stated purposes of public education. He recognized that the majority of Mexican American children were overage for their grade level and noted that this factor was positively related to the percentage of total school enrollment that is Spanish-speaking. In other words, the higher the number of Spanish-speaking students, the higher the number of these students who were overage for their grade level; a situation he suspected of being related to the socioeconomic status of the children.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁵ Martha Tevis, "George Isidore Sánchez," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fsa20> (accessed February 11, 2011).

³⁹⁶ George I. Sánchez, *The Education of Bilinguals in a State School System*, (PhD diss., Berkeley: The University of California, 1934): 39.

Later in 1951, as a University of Texas professor of education, Sánchez published a paper analyzing two landmark court decisions in Mexican American education and making an argument against the practice of segregation on educational grounds, as many school officials in Texas were wont to do in the first half of the twentieth century to justify segregation.³⁹⁷ The first case that occurred in California, *Méndez v. Westminster School District* in 1947, successfully used the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to prove that segregation was unconstitutional.³⁹⁸ This case helped pave the way for *Brown v. Board of Education* nearly a decade later. Thurgood Marshall had helped to prepare the NAACP's *amicus curiae* brief used in the *Méndez* case and was well acquainted with the legal arguments used in the case.³⁹⁹ The second case Sánchez analyzed was the *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District et al.* decided in 1948 in favor of the plaintiffs who contended that the defendant school districts were violating the plaintiff's constitutional rights once again using the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. However, in this case an exception was made for non-English speaking first grade students who had not attended school before; a condition which was to be used by unscrupulous school officials later to retain students in first grade for up to four years.⁴⁰⁰ Sánchez noted that there was more to education than just learning English, and the segregation of Mexican American schoolchildren was preventing them from receiving the same curriculum and

³⁹⁷ Boone, "A Review," 23.

³⁹⁸ George I. Sánchez, "Concerning Segregation of Spanish-speaking Children in the Public Schools," *Inter-American Education Occasional Papers IX* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1951) reprinted on the web at <http://archives.gov/exhibits/documented-rights/exhibit/section4/detail/concerning-segregation.html> (accessed October 14, 2010).

³⁹⁹ Vicki L. Ruiz, "South by Southwest: Mexican Americans and Segregated Schooling, 1900-1950," *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 2 (Winter 2001); reprinted on the web at <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/deseg/ruiz.html#Anchor-Sout-30795> (accessed August 24, 2010).

⁴⁰⁰ Boone, "The Other 'Jim Crow'," 32.

instruction that Anglo children regularly received, even after they had learned English. Sánchez's conclusions in this document were to be later used by attorneys in future segregation cases.⁴⁰¹

The fourth author to address the needs of Mexican American schoolchildren in the first half of the twentieth century was Wilson Little who published *Spanish-Speaking Children in Texas* in 1944. Although similar to Manuel's earlier work, Little focuses more on the demographics of Mexican Americans in Texas.⁴⁰² The source of Little's demographic data was the yearly school district reports required by the State Department of Education of the time. One notable difference is that the term "Mexican" is no longer used for the Mexican American population; instead, "Latin American" is used as a response to President Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural speech and the resultant Good Neighbor Policy that followed.⁴⁰³ Little found that the population of Spanish-speaking children was fairly evenly distributed across Texas in the mid-1940s, although most heavily concentrated along the border as could be expected and also some concentration in the large urban centers in Houston and Austin/San Antonio. Little estimated a 43% growth of the Spanish-speaking population since Manuel's study had been conducted.⁴⁰⁴ Little attributed some of the school population growth to the fact that the age of compulsory school attendance had changed in 1930 from 7 – 17 to 6 – 17. If he removed the six-year-olds, Little still showed a 31.18% growth rate. But one thing that had not changed was the lack of enrollment and attendance of all Mexican American schoolchildren. He estimated that only a little more than half of the eligible children were actually attending school. Of those that actually

⁴⁰¹ Boone, "A Review," 23.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.* The term "good neighbor" is actually credited to President Herbert Hoover as he made a goodwill trip to Latin America after his election in 1928. The United States had been criticized for armed interventions in various Latin American countries and both Hoover and Roosevelt sought to mend relations under pressure from corporations who had invested heavily in Latin American countries. See Calvert, de León, and Cantrell, 352, for additional information on the Good Neighbor Commission for Texas.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

attended, 68% were enrolled in grades 1 to 3, but the majority fell into the 6 to 12 year old range, which indicated that the retention rate was still very high.⁴⁰⁵ A large number of Mexican American schoolchildren were only attending between November and March, and then only sporadically. Undoubtedly, the migratory patterns of the parents who worked in seasonal agricultural labor greatly influenced this pattern of attendance.⁴⁰⁶ The fact that segregation of these children in most school districts continued did not surprise Little, but what did surprise him was the variety of practices and justification for those practices in segregating the Mexican American schoolchildren. One superintendent told him very candidly, “These children need five to six years of Americanization before being placed with American children. Their standard of living is too low---they are dirty, lousy, and need special teaching in health and cleanliness. They also need special teaching in the English language.”⁴⁰⁷

Texas state leaders as well as local officials had paid little attention to the education of “colored” and “Mexican” schoolchildren in the early part of the twentieth century when the population was smaller; but the increasing numbers of Mexican American schoolchildren after 1920 made the issue more and more troublesome. School officials referred to the situation as the “Mexican problem,” and the appearance of the surveys and reports, as well as the many Master’s theses that were written in the 1930s and 40s regarding the best way to deal with the growing numbers are a reflection of the growing concern with this population.⁴⁰⁸ The conclusions of these reports and theses acknowledged that segregation existed, and some tried to justify it on the basis of the language deficiencies of the children, but it became ever more evident that the problem was growing in magnitude and serious interventions were needed.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ San Miguel, *“Let All of Them Take Heed,”* 18.

Educational History of the Rio Grande Valley Prior to 1950

There are limited studies on the educational history of the Rio Grande Valley. Some writers on the general history of the lower Rio Grande Valley do mention briefly the educational ventures of various valley cities in the early part of the twentieth century. According to J. Lee and Lillian J. Stambaugh, who included a chapter on religion, education and cultural activities in their book *The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas: Its Colonization and Industrialization 1518-1953*, very little material was available to them on the history of early schools in the Valley.⁴⁰⁹ They did discover, however, sufficient information to compile a chronology of the initial development of the public education system in the lower Rio Grande Valley. This chronology follows:

- 1852 – 1854 The Rio Grande Female Seminary is established in Brownsville by Miss Melinda Rankin, a Methodist missionary.
- 1865 St. Joseph’s College is established in Brownsville by the Oblates of Mary, a Catholic order of priests that served in the Valley on horseback when the only large towns were Brownsville and Laredo in this area. The Oblates were known as the “Cavalry of Christ,” and they would visit the numerous ranch settlements between Brownsville and Roma to bring the sacraments to the faithful.⁴¹⁰
- 1865 The Texas Almanac reports no public schools in Hidalgo County.
- 1875 The Brownsville public school system is begun but for 15 years there are no regular school buildings; the district leases public or church buildings in which they hold classes.

⁴⁰⁹ Stambaugh and Stambaugh, 295.

⁴¹⁰ Rev. Edward Kennedy, O.M.I., *A Parish Remembers: Fifty Years of Oblate Endeavour in the Valley of the Rio Grande 1909-1959*, (Printed through the Diocese of Corpus Christi, 1959), 2.

- 1878 A Presbyterian school for Latin-American girls is run by native teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Corro. ⁴¹¹ The school was located on Washington Street. In 1893, the school has 60 pupils.
- 1888 Captain W. M. Kelly is president of the school board in Brownsville. He follows Richard King and Mifflin Kennedy in that capacity.
- 1888 Brownsville Superintendent of Schools is J.F. Cummings, who was brought in by board president Kelly. Cummings was an 1871 graduate of West Point but he had left the army to become involved in a railroad enterprise in Mexico. He taught in Galveston before coming to Brownsville, and was later recognized as an outstanding pioneer school administrator.
- 1888 Latin Americans make up two-thirds of the population of Brownsville; but in those days only a very few could either speak or understand English.
- 1888 – 1912 Cameron County School Superintendent was E.H. Goodrich, followed by José M. Canales, J. J. Callaway, W. F. Jourdon, and P. D. Kennamer.
- 1890 A high school building is erected on Ninth and Jefferson Streets in Brownsville.
- 1890 There are several schools established in the town of Hidalgo, then known as Edinburgh.
- 1890 The Hidalgo County school population is 1,687 of which 442 were enrolled and 307 attended regularly. There are two school buildings and 21 teachers working for an average monthly salary of \$50.00.

⁴¹¹ The name of the couple is believed to have been “Carrero,” as researched by Guadalupe San Miguel in *“Let All of Them Take Heed”* (see page 9). The Stambaugh and Stambaugh book contains many spelling errors in Spanish possibly due to the authors’ unfamiliarity with the language. The use of the word “native” by the authors is also interesting in its revelation of prevailing attitudes regarding Mexican Americans in the 1950s when they wrote their book.

- 1893 Instruction in Brownsville schools is offered up to nine grades. Students in grades first through third are not required to speak English. Boys in the upper grades are taught military drills. At the end of the first semester, 30 silver medals are awarded to outstanding students to be worn during the second term.
- 1893 The Brownsville faculty includes the following teachers: Mrs. T. H. Clearwater, Mary C. Butler, Minnie Duffy, Katie Kingsbury, Kate Willman, Hettie Dougherty, Mena Egly, Lily Willman, Nellie Kimball, Annie Scanlan, Clara Fernández, Sarah Kenedy, and Mary Wallace, who is a white teacher in the colored schools.
- 1896 The San Juan Plantation School's one teacher is named Mrs. W. L. Lipscomb.
- 1898 – 1920 Brownsville School Superintendents include, in order of service: T. P. Barbour, I. L. Chandler, T. P. Barbour, C. G. Hallmark, J. C. Wright, and Miss Lizzie Barbour.
- 1900 The only high school in the Rio Grande Valley is in Brownsville. It has 19 teachers.
- 1900 The Hidalgo County scholastic enrollment is 3,093 with 28 teachers. There are no independent school districts reported in the Texas Almanac of that year.
- 1900 Starr County reports 2,000 scholastics, 25 teachers, but no high school. The county superintendent of schools from 1907 to 1925 is Sam P. Vale.
- 1902 – 1914 R. A. Marsh is both Hidalgo County judge and county superintendent of schools. He is followed in service by J. S. Bunn.

- 1904 In an article in the Texas Almanac, Marsh said that Hidalgo had a fine brick school building and employed three teachers. Hidalgo County was divided into four school districts each in which there were eight to 12 schools.
- 1904 In this year the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railroad opens from Brownsville to Mission, called the Sam Fordyce branch. New towns spring up along the railroad, the first of which is Mercedes in 1904.
- 1907 San Benito establishes a school with 49 pupils and with Miss Kate Purvis as the teacher.
- 1908 J. Scott Brown is elected San Benito superintendent followed by R.W. Woodward, J. J. Callaway, C. E. Thomas, A. O. Strother and J.H. Head.
- 1907-1908 The first school in Harlingen is taught by Miss Jesusa García and has 20 students. School executives include Mrs. Lillian Baldrige, Charles E. Williams, W. E. Sturgeon, A. B. Tyson, W. F. Jourdon, and J. T. Foster.
- 1908 McAllen's first school is opened by teacher Miss Adela Wells and has 20 pupils.
- 1908 The Mercedes Independent School District is organized with E. L. Horton as superintendent, followed by J. W. Hamlett, J. W. Massey, J. E. Briggs, Theo Dietl and Miss Nannie Mer Buck.
- 1908-1909 The first Donna school opens. It is a one-room shack with Miss Olive Vertress as teacher. There are 20 pupils.
- 1909 The first school opens in Mission with George Wolfram as teacher to 22 pupils.
- 1909 – 1911 W. H. Snow is superintendent of Donna schools with one assistant and 50 pupils. There are also 30 Latin American students in one school taught by Miss Edith Hall.

- 1910 The Edinburg Independent School System is created with two teachers and 25 students. The first principal is Mrs. Munroe, followed by Miss Mabel Umland, A. E. Kilpatrick, J. S. Bunn, L. T. Bunn, D. H. Womack, Ben Dyess and W. E. Foster.
- 1911 Pharr opens its first school with Mrs. Ella Howard as teacher to 9 pupils. Mrs. D. E. Mayfield serves as principal, followed by J. S. Humble.
- 1911 San Juan opens its first school with 50 pupils. The principal is Mr. Bartie Moore, followed by Mrs. D. V. Sheffiedl and A. J. Stephens.
- 1911 – 1912 W. T. Hammer is superintendent of schools at Donna with 3 assistants and a new \$16,000 brick building with 8 rooms.
- 1912 The Mission Independent School District is created with C. E. Godby as superintendent, followed by E. W. Nance and Sidney L. Hardin.
- 1912 – 1921 J. M. F. Stephens is superintendent of schools in Donna.
- 1915 The Pharr and San Juan school districts consolidate. A \$40,000 brick building is erected to serve 143 pupils. A. B. Bunn is superintendent, followed in 1916 by R. B. Fore.
- 1917 McAllen builds a high school building at a cost of \$100,000. H. Clay Harvey is superintendent, followed by J. C. Chapman and Ed R. Bentley.
- 1919 Alamo joins the Pharr and San Juan consolidation to become the P.S.J.A. system.
- 1920 A Weslaco elementary school is opened by Mrs. D. W. Day and two assistants under the supervision of the Donna school district. Two more teachers are added

by the end of 1920 and in 1921 the Weslaco Independent School District is organized with a student enrollment of 524. The superintendent is H. Tarpley.⁴¹²

Stambaugh and Stambaugh finished up their report on the school districts of the lower Rio Grande Valley by providing the combined scholastic population of the four counties in the Valley, Starr, Willacy, Cameron and Hidalgo County, as reported by the Texas Education Agency for the indicated years:

Table 2.2 Scholastic Population of the Four Counties in the Lower Rio Grande Valley

<u>Year</u>	<u>Scholastic Population</u>
1880	3,890
1900	11,306
1920	30,180
1940	62,629
1950	82,832

Source: J. Lee Stambaugh and Lillian J. Stambaugh, The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas: Its Colonization and Industrialization 1518-1953, (Austin, TX: the Jenkins Publishing Co. San Felipe Press, 1964).

It should be noted that the scholastic population only represented those children who were eligible for free public education based on their age, and not those children who had actually enrolled in school.

Not all school districts in south Texas were segregated in the first part of the twentieth century. Montejano's study of segregation based on an economic history of south Texas reveals that those counties where a ranching way of life was still followed were more likely to have higher numbers of Mexican Americans with economic and therefore political power. This translated into maintaining integrated schools rather than segregated schools, although there were

⁴¹² Stambaugh and Stambaugh, 295 – 305.

still isolated communities where school segregation may have been practiced. Montejano states that in those counties that were more based on a farm economy rather than ranching, there was a higher concentration of Anglos, undoubtedly the newcomers who had been recruited to south Texas by land developers to partake in vegetable, citrus and cotton farming. In the predominantly farm counties, because there were more Anglos with economic and political power, segregated schools were the norm. The following chart shows Montejano's findings and support his conclusions that ranching counties had integrated school systems and farm counties had segregated school systems as a result of the number of Anglos in each county:⁴¹³

Table 2.3 School Segregation in South Texas Counties, 1928

<u>Integrated</u>	<u>% Anglo</u>	<u>Segregated</u>	<u>% Anglo</u>
Zapata	1.0	Cameron	34.4
Jim Hogg	14.8	Hidalgo	29.0
Brooks	17.2	Kleberg	44.4
Webb	10.6	Jim Wells	42.5
Duval	8.4	Willacy	37.7
Starr	3.6	Nueces	49.9
		Dimmit	24.7
		Zavala	30.3

Source: Based on Herschel T. Manuel, *The Education of Mexican and Spanish-speaking Children in Texas*, 70-75, 160-165 as referenced in David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836 – 1986*, 169.

From the information in Table 2.3 above, it is noted that of the four counties in the lower Rio Grande Valley, Starr County had integrated schools while Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy Counties maintained segregated school systems. Montejano maintains that in ranching communities, close relationships between the *patron*, or landowner, and his *vaqueros* (cowboys) and other workers had been established. In the farm counties, the farmers who employed

⁴¹³ Montejano, 169.

Mexican laborers who were usually migratory did not form close relationships with their workers. The opposite was usually true, and the farmers considered the Mexican laborers as “inferior” but necessary.⁴¹⁴ Conducting a study on farm labor in 1930, Paul S. Taylor asked farmers about Mexican laborers and some responded, “You can’t beat them as labor...[they have] the qualities that go to make a good servant...we don’t want them to be associated with us, we want them for labor...the Chilis are creatures somewhere in between a burro and a human being.”⁴¹⁵ These comments support Montejano’s assertions that Anglo farmers and Mexican laborers rarely formed close bonds. When asked about schooling for the children of the Mexican laborers, farmers responded, “We don’t need skilled or white-collared Mexicans...if these get educated, we’ll have to get more from Mexico.”⁴¹⁶

The first half of the twentieth century in Texas education was marked by varying degrees of segregation practiced against both African American and Mexican American schoolchildren. In most towns of the Rio Grande Valley, the areas north of the railroad line were clearly marked on early maps as “Mexican” neighborhoods.⁴¹⁷ School facilities on the “Mexican” side of town were never equitable to those on the Anglo side of town. The buildings were generally older, made of wood instead of brick, overcrowded, with substandard furniture and equipment. The instructional materials used in the “Mexican” schools were often “hand-me-downs” from the Anglo schools, and there were never enough books for every child as there were in the Anglo schools.⁴¹⁸ The teaching staff was usually inexperienced, with no credentials, and lacked

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 159 and 161.

⁴¹⁵ Paul S. Taylor, “Mexican Labor in the United States,” (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 47-48. The 1930 study was reprinted in 1970.

⁴¹⁶ Montejano, 193.

⁴¹⁷ Guadalupe San Miguel, “Mexican Americans and Education,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/khmmx>), (accessed February 14, 2011).

⁴¹⁸ Boone, “The Other ‘Jim Crow’,” 27.

adequate training. Attendance by Mexican Americans was sporadic because of poverty, the migration of the families for work purposes, and disinterest due to the bad conditions at school.

San Miguel documents that by the 1940s more than 122 school districts in fifty-nine Texas counties had segregated schools for Mexican American children.⁴¹⁹ Local administrators, who were hired by local school board members who were elected by the community, regardless of their personal feelings had to honor the wishes of the community or else be ready to move on to another job. Many administrators considered the Mexican American children to be mentally challenged and they developed discriminatory measures reflected in their assessment and tracking practices in dealing with them. They believed in the Anglo consensus that Mexican American children were culturally backward, language deficient and intellectually inferior, and that they would hold back the Anglo children if they were allowed into their schools and in their classes.⁴²⁰

The curriculum given to Mexican American children was problematic on several levels. Because they were considered mentally challenged, they were more likely to get vocational and general education than they were college preparatory material. This diminished greatly their chances of a postsecondary education. In addition, the textbooks used in the first half of the twentieth century reflected Anglo ideology and distorted or completely left out any minority cultural heritage. Mexican Americans were depicted as the enemy when studying Texas history or U.S. history of the mid-eighteenth century.⁴²¹ Although most teachers felt that they were helping to Americanize the children, they tended to disparage and devalue Mexican culture which made the children feel even more inferior.⁴²² Leon R. Graham, in his master's thesis

⁴¹⁹ San Miguel, "Mexican Americans and Education."

⁴²⁰ Boone, "The Other 'Jim Crow'," 31.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Vigil, 219-220.

comparing Latin American students to English Speaking students in the Mercedes Independent School District, confirms that the segregation of Mexican American students was occurring in Rio Grande Valley schools including Mercedes when he says:

In the early days of the Lower Valley, there was a tendency to place as many Latin American students as possible in the oldest school buildings of the districts and to provide inexperienced teachers many of whom had never before been in actual contact with Latin American people. Very little attempt was made to encourage attendance as, in many cases, the buildings and the teaching staff were woefully inadequate. Latin Americans were not encouraged to enter high school and when they did, they were given little consideration. They were not treated as individuals and were expected to measure up to the English speaking standards, even though many had serious language handicaps and very undesirable home study conditions.⁴²³

Graham is describing the “perplexing problem” of Latin American students in Mercedes, who continue to be “more retarded than English speaking children.”⁴²⁴ Graham then states that in the last two decades, which would be approximately the years 1918 – 1938 (since he writes the thesis in 1938), there has been “a decided change.” He says that boards of education and school administrators have “come to realize that Latin American youths are American citizens,” and that they must eventually become productive members of society and that schools must therefore “give the Latin American the same chance to become a useful citizen that the English speaking child enjoys.”⁴²⁵ He goes on to say that where segregation is practiced, well equipped school buildings have been provided for the Latin Americans. Experienced, trained teachers who no longer seek transfers to the other side of town are happy to remain in the Latin American school where they consider the instruction of Latin American children their life’s work.⁴²⁶ In Graham’s statement of the problem, he says that regardless of the changes in Mercedes, Latin American

⁴²³ Graham, 4.

⁴²⁴ Graham is not referring to mental capacity here but rather to the fact that many of the Latin American children are being retained in the same grade level for many years and are not making adequate progress through the school system.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 5.

children still present an educational challenge because they are not progressing in ways comparable to the English speaking children.⁴²⁷ From Graham's information, it seems that the Mercedes Independent School District reflects very closely the conditions prevalent in the rest of the state of Texas for the first half of the twentieth century. However, there are indications that there existed a strong faction of Mexican American citizens, probably from the middle class, who insisted on a more equitable education for their children. The information Graham himself gives as well as the Lucille Cuellar Graham anecdote in Kathleen Neal Carroll's dissertation regarding a confrontation between Mexican American parents and the school superintendent seem to indicate that there was some resistance to segregation.⁴²⁸

Part III. Educational History of Mexican Americans Post – 1950

Organizations for Civil Rights

During the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican Americans had not stood idly by and accepted segregation and discrimination. There were isolated instances of boycotts, journalistic writings and legal challenges, although they accomplished little to change Anglo attitudes and practices.⁴²⁹ As early as 1911, a political conference was held in Laredo called the *Primer Congreso Mexicanista* where Mexican American issues were discussed, among them school segregation.⁴³⁰ A small but growing middle class of Mexican Americans was becoming educated enough to seek enough political power to change matters, and many mutual aid societies were founded that discussed matters but had little power. It was not until 1929 that a permanent statewide organization was formed, with many members who were middle-class, college-educated professionals and business owners who were able to raise sufficient funding to

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁴²⁸ Carroll, 153.

⁴²⁹ San Miguel, "Let All of Them Take Heed," 68.

⁴³⁰ Calvert, de Leon, and Cantrell, 268.

fight legal battles. This organization was the League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC.

Although there were many more organizations that fought for civil liberties, LULAC was the first of three organizations that made a big difference in the fight for equal educational opportunities for Mexican Americans. LULAC sought to provide more than just social services to the Mexican American community as the mutual aid societies did. The organization was more concerned with the creation of a group of politically-active citizens who would participate fully in the political, economic and social institutions of the United States.⁴³¹ Their emphasis was to be accepted by the dominant Anglo society as full American citizens while still retaining their Mexican cultural heritage. Their commitment to eliminating school segregation and obtaining equal educational opportunities for Mexican American children was at the forefront, because they understood that only an educated Mexican American populace could hope to achieve first class citizen rights.⁴³² LULAC also believed that the blame for the problems of Mexican Americans often resided in themselves, for failing to stand up to Anglos when they suffered humiliation or discrimination. They also highly promoted the learning of English as necessary to advance in U.S. society.⁴³³

The second organization which has had and continues to have a great impact on the Mexican American's efforts for social justice is the American G.I. Forum. Returning Texas veterans from World War I who experienced disillusionment at the discrimination they faced at home were some of the founders of LULAC.⁴³⁴ It was World War II, or rather in its aftermath,

⁴³¹ San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 70.

⁴³² Vigil, 230.

⁴³³ San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 73. Also LULAC website at <http://www.lulac.net/about/history/history.html> for more information on the history of the organization, its milestones and biographies of its presidents.

⁴³⁴ Vigil, 234.

that figured into the founding of the American G. I. Forum in 1948. Returning World War II veterans were frustrated and perplexed to find that after having given their service to preserve freedom and democracy as first class citizens, they were returning home to second class citizen status because of racial and ethnic discrimination. They were refused service at all white restaurants, and could only use public swimming pools on certain days to allow time to clean the pool before Whites used it.⁴³⁵

Although Mexican Americans were the most highly decorated ethnic group during World War II, returning servicemen found that their military honors meant nothing to the Anglos back home.⁴³⁶ Many returned home to find the same type of racism that they had fought to eradicate in Nazi Germany. They often encountered signs such as the one below:



Figure 2.6: Discriminatory Sign in Dimmit, Texas Diner, 1949. The Lee Russell Photograph Collection, [Untitled, 1949], The Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

San Miguel tells of an incident in 1946 when Joseph Robles Ramón and Alfonso Galindo Robles, two veterans of WWII, experienced discrimination in Helotes, Texas. They had stopped

⁴³⁵ de León, *They Called Them Greasers*, 27.

⁴³⁶ San Miguel, "Let All of Them Take Heed," 115.

in at a bar and grill and asked for a sandwich and were told that they had orders not to serve Mexicans. Joseph talked to the bartender in a nice way and told him he had served in the United States Marine Corps, had been wounded overseas, and was now totally disabled. The bartender told him it made no difference and told him to leave.⁴³⁷

Many Mexican American servicemen found themselves experiencing difficulties obtaining veteran's benefits through the G. I. Bill of Rights of 1944. Many of them turned to Dr. Hector P. García, a decorated World War II veteran who was advocating for Mexican American civil rights through organizations like the Corpus Christi League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC organization. Dr. García met with 700 other WWII and Korean War veterans to found the American G.I. Forum in March of 1948.⁴³⁸ The organization became involved in the case of Felix Longoria, a serviceman from Three Rivers, Texas who was refused the use of a funeral home and burial in his home town by the Anglo community. Dr. García appealed to Senator Lyndon B. Johnson who was unable to change the minds of the Three Rivers community but who made arrangements for Longoria to be buried with full military honors at the Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.⁴³⁹ The case provided the G.I. Forum with national attention, and the organization was subsequently able to expand its efforts to fighting discrimination and racism in the areas of employment, jury selection, poll tax practices, school segregation and farm labor.⁴⁴⁰ The G. I. Forum stated in its constitution that its main purpose was to "strive for the procurement of all veterans and their families, regardless of race, color, or

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Lyndon Baines Johnson grew up in the Texas Hill Country and after college served one year as a teacher at a one-room school in Cotulla attended by impoverished Mexican American children, a fact which made him sympathetic to Hispanic struggles for equality and desegregation. For a more detailed description see Lewis L. Gould, "Lyndon Baines Johnson," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fjo19>) (accessed February 24, 2011).

⁴⁴⁰ Norman Rozeff, "Hector Pérez García," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fga52> (accessed February 21, 2011).

creed, the equal privileges to which they are entitled under the laws of our country.”⁴⁴¹ With its motto of “Education is our Freedom,” The G.I. Forum declared its commitment to fight to provide equal educational opportunities to Mexican Americans.⁴⁴² The G.I. Forum was able to provide support and assistance to many plaintiffs in court litigation proceedings attempting to eliminate school segregation.

Both LULAC and the G.I. Forum exerted extensive efforts to eliminate discrimination at all levels. As organizations founded by educated middle class businessmen and some professionals, they found that the fight against discrimination required funding to pay for court litigation. LULAC had committed itself to non-violent protests, using newspaper articles, letters of protest, communication with state officials, and meetings with school district administrators and board members to try to eliminate segregation and discriminatory practices.⁴⁴³ The American G.I. Forum had followed much the same protocols, but both organizations realized that they would have to file lawsuits and provide support to plaintiffs if any change was to be had. They engaged in court battles in many instances, but it was the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, or MALDEF that made a difference.

In 1967, civil rights lawyers answered the call of organizations such as LULAC and the American G.I. Forum to provide legal assistance to Mexican Americans who had experienced racism and discrimination in various venues. The “soft” tactics of letters of protest, walk-outs and discussions were having little effect in changing school segregation and other forms of discrimination, so the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) was established to provide the funding for legal solutions to the problems experienced by Mexican

⁴⁴¹ San Miguel, *“Let All of Them Take Heed,”* 116.

⁴⁴² Arnolde de León, “Mexican Americans,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pqmue> (accessed February 22, 2011).

⁴⁴³ San Miguel, *“Let All of Them Take Heed,”* 116.

Americans in schools, in their jobs, in public places such as theaters and restaurants and through police brutality. By the 1970s, MALDEF had begun to win court battles in political rights, employment discrimination, educational opportunities and inequitable school finance.⁴⁴⁴ In 1968 with the assistance of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Pete Tijerina, the Executive Director of MALDEF, was able to secure a 2.2 million dollar grant from the Ford Foundation in order to provide a variety of legal services to Mexican Americans. The fund was used for such projects as educational research programs, the production of a newsletter informing Mexican Americans of their legal rights, and to set up a scholarship fund in order to educate more lawyers for social justice.⁴⁴⁵

Court Litigation for Equal Educational Opportunities

The first legal problem for Mexican Americans as they sought equal status and therefore equal educational opportunities was the test of “whiteness.” The status of being white ensured a set of privileges and benefits that many minorities sought.⁴⁴⁶ In 1897, in *In re Rodriguez*, a federal district court in Texas upheld the right of Mexicans to naturalize under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.⁴⁴⁷ It was a difficult decision for Judge Thomas Maxey who attempted to use the plaintiff’s phenotype to determine “whiteness.” During the trial he pointed out that Rodríguez had dark eyes, black hair and high cheek bones and declared that he could be classified with copper colored or red men. The judge did not judge him to be an Indian, because, he said, Rodríguez “knows nothing of the Aztecs.”⁴⁴⁸ In the end, however, he determined that

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Teresa Palomo Acosta, “Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jom01> (accessed February 21, 2011).

⁴⁴⁶ Steven H. Wilson, “Brown over ‘Other White’: Mexican Americans’ Legal Arguments and Litigation Strategy in School Desegregation Lawsuits,” *Law and History Review* 21, no. 1 (December, 2009): 4. Printed online at http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lhr/21.1/forum_wilson.html (accessed December 31, 2009).

⁴⁴⁷ Ferg-Cadima, 12.

⁴⁴⁸ Wilson, 5.

Mexicans were to be considered white for purposes of naturalization.⁴⁴⁹ However, the judicial designation of “white” did not impact racial or ethnic bias, and people of Mexican descent continued to experience it.

In the 1920s when farmers needed agricultural workers, the notion of the “whiteness” of Mexicans was used to relax immigration restrictions. The designation of “whiteness” came to be used by state officials later to group African and Mexican American children together in a school and declare the system integrated while not one Anglo was enrolled in that school. Mexicans came to be known as the “other white” race and court litigation stressed “due process” under the Fourteenth Amendment rather than “equal protection.” While small victories were won using this strategy, it did little to change actual conditions and segregation of Mexican Americans continued with minimal changes of terminology in school board minutes.⁴⁵⁰

In 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson* had established “separate but equal” as permissible, and the lawyers for Mexican American school desegregation cases sought to establish that as “other white,” they should be allowed to integrate with Anglos and not be kept separate in Mexican schools on the other side of the tracks.⁴⁵¹ In Texas, the state legislature in 1893 enacted a statute which provided separate but “impartial public free schools for white and colored” children. The state law defined the “colored” class to include “all persons of mixed blood descended from Negro ancestry.”⁴⁵² The determination of the “whiteness” of Mexican Americans in Texas was made by local custom and bias. If Mexican Americans were “white,” reasoned some Anglos, then they were of an inferior branch.⁴⁵³ Many of the early cases, *Romo v. Laird* in Arizona, *Independent School District v. Salvatierra* in Texas and *Alvarez v. Owen* (known as the Lemon

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

Grove Case) in California gave relief only in a local sense. What they did do was give school officials ideas on how to continue lawfully segregating students of Mexican descent, such as migrant status and language handicaps as reasons to separate the children.⁴⁵⁴

When the efforts of civic groups such as LULAC and the American G.I. Forum to protest, write letters to the editor, and ask for discussions with school officials failed, they felt compelled to resort to litigation. In 1905, Texas had passed a law that required that teachers use the English language exclusively in the classroom. School officials used the excuse that Mexican American children were not proficient in English as an excuse to separate them from the Anglo children. By the time LULAC was organized in 1929, approximately ninety percent of the public schools in south Texas were segregated and “Mexican schools” were well established.⁴⁵⁵

In 1930, LULAC filed the first suit to challenge the segregation of Mexican Americans in *Del Rio ISD v. Salvierra*. LULAC asked for an injunction against the school district because the Mexican American children were in a separate elementary school. The superintendent defended the segregation by saying that most of the children were of migrant families and did not attend the entire school year. Also, many of them had an English language deficiency and both conditions would lower the students’ self-esteem if they attended the Anglo school and could not keep up. Although initially the injunction was issued, in a later appeal, the Texas Court of Civil Appeals voided the injunction. Anglo migrant children were not made to attend the separate school, and LULAC charged separation based on the Mexican American children’s ethnicity.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁴ Ferg-Cadima, 14.

⁴⁵⁵ Wilson, 7.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

George I. Sánchez later stated that the *Salvatierra* case served to legalize the segregation of Mexican American children up to the third grade.⁴⁵⁷

A court case in California next proved to be pivotal in the litigation battle for desegregation. In 1947, Latino plaintiffs with assistance from African American, Japanese American and Jewish communities filed *Méndez v. Westminster*. Contrary to the situation in Texas, the California Education Code allowed school districts to segregate “Indian children and children of Mongolian parentage.” In 1880, African American children had been removed from the list, although they continued to be segregated also. Because California Attorney General Webb categorized Mexicans as Indians in 1930, they were also subject to segregation, and by the end of the 1920s, they had become the most segregated school children in California public schools.⁴⁵⁸ Not only were they physically separated from Anglo children, they also had a special curriculum that tracked the boys into vocational and industrial courses such as bootmaking and blacksmithing and the girls into sewing and homemaking. School zoning was arranged to send Mexican American children to the Mexican schools, but if Anglos happened to fall into that zone, they requested and were granted transfers to all-Anglo schools.⁴⁵⁹

In 1943 in Orange County, Gonzalo Méndez had leased the sixty-acre farm of a Japanese family that had been forcibly relocated to an internment camp during WWII. Because he had to work, he asked his sister Sally Vidaurri to enroll his children in school when she went to take hers. The children were all fluent in English, but when they went to register, the Vidaurri children who were lighter skinned and had a “French-sounding surname” were allowed to enroll, and the Méndez children were told they had to enroll in the “Mexican school” because they had a

⁴⁵⁷ Cynthia E. Orozco, “*Del Rio ISD v. Salvatierra*,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jrd02> (accessed February 19, 2011).

⁴⁵⁸ Ferg-Cadima, 15.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

language handicap. The Mexican school was a little shack, infested with flies because of a cow pasture next to it with no recess equipment and surrounded by a wire fence with an electric current running through it, ostensibly to keep the cows from roaming.⁴⁶⁰ The parents were outraged and soon gathered together several Mexican American parents to present a petition to the school board requesting the end of segregation. The Westminster school board offered a special exception to the Méndez children, but Méndez was angry that the Mexican school was not discontinued and he decided to pursue legal action. School transfer requests by other parents were repeatedly ignored. He asked a local group called the Latin American Organization formed of returning WWII veterans to assist. Using personal funds, Méndez contacted a Los Angeles attorney, David Marcus, who had a reputation for challenging park and pool segregation; and they both gathered plaintiffs from surrounding areas. In 1945, the group filed a class action suit against the Westminster, Santa Ana, el Modena and Garden Grove school districts. They charged that their due process and equal protection rights under the Fourteenth Amendment had been denied. The school officials tried to justify the segregation on the grounds that the Mexican American children were not members of the “white race.” They then used the English deficiency argument when the court declared that Mexican Americans were members of the white race. On February 18, 1946 Federal District Judge Paul J. McCormick ruled in favor of Méndez and the other plaintiffs declaring a violation of the Mexican American children’s rights under the Fourteenth Amendment.⁴⁶¹ However, the court had also allowed segregation based on pedagogical reasons that were dependent on the results of scientific testing of the students.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.* 22.

California districts then began administering “scientific tests” that determined that Mexican American children were intellectually inferior and had language deficiencies.⁴⁶²

Following the California case closely, in 1948 LULAC filed suit against Bastrop and three other school districts in Texas in the *Delgado v. Bastrop* case. The segregation of the children was upheld, but the judge determined that the children could be separated from Anglo children on the same campus only and in the first grade only for language deficiency causes determined by the use of standardized scientific tests administered to all children.⁴⁶³ Although it was a major victory for LULAC and other Mexican American organizations, segregation and discrimination continued in Texas under *de facto* if not *de jure* conditions.

The next important segregation case was *Hernández v. State of Texas*. The case was not a school segregation case, but was brought forward on the grounds of discriminatory practices in the selection of trial juries. In 1950, Pete Hernández was accused of the murder of Joe Espinosa in Edna, Texas. He was tried by an all-white jury and found guilty, with the verdict upheld by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. The case was appealed to and accepted by the U.S. Supreme Court. Hernández’s lawyer was Gus García who, assisted by other lawyers supplied by LULAC and the G.I. Forum, argued that no Mexican American had served on a jury in twenty-five years, and that Mexican Americans were being discriminated against as a class apart. Chief Justice Earl Warren reversed the conviction, delivering the unanimous opinion of the court that there was a distinction between “white” and “Hispanic” and that under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, Hernández’s civil rights had been violated.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ V. Carl Allsup, “*Delgado v. Bastrop ISD*,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jrd01> (accessed February 21, 2011).

⁴⁶⁴ V. Carl Allsup, “*Hernández v. State of Texas*,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jrh01> (accessed February 20, 2011).

The *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case was decided in 1954 by the U.S. Supreme Court in which the segregation of African Americans was declared unconstitutional through the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. When reviewed a second time, the court attached the phrase “with all deliberate speed” for the carrying out of desegregation. The phrase was used to delay desegregation for at least ten years, and the outcome of this case which directly impacted African Americans did not change things for Mexican Americans either.

The *Delgado* case had prohibited the segregation of Mexican American children to a separate campus on the basis of race, but had allowed separate classes on the same campus and only in the first grade if tests determined that it was pedagogically necessary. The Texas State Superintendent of Public Instruction, L.A. Woods, had been sympathetic to the Mexican American cause. In 1949, with the passage of the Gilmer-Aiken Act, the Texas legislature created the Texas Education Agency to replace the State Department of Education, and created the office of Commissioner of Education, replacing Woods with J.W. Edgar who took a more conservative stance.⁴⁶⁵ As the situation stood, the “whiteness” test had been met by Mexican Americans, but this did little to prevent discrimination and school segregation. In spite of the winning of several key pieces of litigation, Texas school officials found creative ways of ensuring that the segregation and discrimination of Mexican American schoolchildren continued.⁴⁶⁶

Since the *Delgado* case had allowed children to be separated in first grade, school officials had found ways to retain Mexican American children in first grade through the creation

⁴⁶⁵ V. Carl Allsup, “*Hernández v. Driscoll CISD*,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jrh02> (accessed February 21, 2011).

⁴⁶⁶ Wilson, 12.

of multiple levels within first grade. This enabled segregation by having a pre-first or “beginners” grade, then a low first, mid-first, and high-first through which children progressed only by passing “English proficiency” tests. This created a staggering amount of retention and failure for Mexican American children, many of whom dropped out in frustration long before reaching fifth grade.⁴⁶⁷ In 1957 the American G. I. Forum took the case of a child named Linda Pérez who had been assigned to the segregated first grade to learn English when she was already highly proficient in the language. No test had been administered to her to determine her proficiency. In fact, James de Anda, the lawyer who took the case, found many other Mexican American children who spoke English in the district who had not been allowed in the Anglo school. In this case, *Hernández v. Driscoll CISD*, the court condemned Driscoll CISD’s discriminatory practices, but ruled that segregation was permissible based on the use of pedagogical tests. Segregation based on arbitrary reasons, however, was not admissible.⁴⁶⁸

The *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi ISD* in 1970 was the first case to extend *the Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 decision to Mexican Americans. After being classified as “other white” and “a class apart,” with minimal changes to desegregation practices, the *Cisneros* case recognized Mexican Americans as a minority group that was being discriminated against by virtue of their ethnicity. Discrimination against Mexican Americans under this criteria was declared unconstitutional. Carl Allsup explains that:

⁴⁶⁷ Allsup, *Hernández v. Driscoll CISD*.

⁴⁶⁸ Wilson, 15.

Judge Woodrow Seals found that the [Corpus Christi] school board consciously fostered a system that perpetuated traditional segregation. This included a system that bused Anglo students to schools out of their neighborhoods, renovated old schools in black and Mexican-American neighborhoods rather than building new ones, assigned black and Hispanic teachers to segregated schools, and limited hiring of such teachers at other schools; the school board also lacked a majority-to-minority busing system. Judge Seals cited the "other white" argument as adjacent proof of segregation, but relied primarily on the application of unconstitutional segregation of Mexican Americans as an identifiable minority group based on physical, cultural, religious, and linguistic distinctions.⁴⁶⁹

Mexican American activists were under no illusions that the court ruling would change segregation practices in Texas. The prior favorable court decisions had been resisted by the Anglo community and if segregation was no longer allowed by law, it certainly continued in fact through creative discriminatory practices. In any case, the favorable decision in the *Cisneros* case had finally established a precedent that would allow Mexican Americans to pursue in earnest equal educational opportunity, a struggle that would include the bilingual, bicultural instruction battle and the many school district funding issues.⁴⁷⁰

The *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby* litigations were a series of cases filed beginning in 1984 by the MALDEF organization in protest of school financing practices in Texas. The school funding system had not been changed since the passage of the Gilmer-Aiken Act in 1949. The plaintiffs declared that the state's school funding practices discriminated against students in poorer school districts. In a previous lawsuit in 1971, *Rodriguez v. San Antonio ISD*, the U.S. Supreme Court in a 5-4 decision had failed to provide relief to poorer school districts by overturning a lower state court's decision finding the Texas school financing system was unconstitutional.⁴⁷¹ In 1989 the Texas Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Edgewood plaintiffs and ordered the state

⁴⁶⁹V. Carl Allsup, "*Cisneros v. Corpus Christi ISD*," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jrc02> (accessed February 22, 2011).

⁴⁷⁰Wilson, 27.

⁴⁷¹Cynthia E. Orozco, "*Rodriguez v. San Antonio ISD*," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jrrht> (accessed February 20, 2011).

legislature to implement an equitable system by the 1990 – 1991 school year.⁴⁷² The legislature produced a plan nicknamed the “Robin Hood” plan because it redistributed proper tax monies from richer school districts to poorer school districts. The wealthy school districts protested and filed suit, and in 1993 a plan was finally presented which was declared constitutional and which provided several options from which school districts could choose. Although the new system has provided more educational funding to poorer school districts, several suits have since been filed to change the system.⁴⁷³

Bilingual Education Instruction in Texas

The long standing mandate that English was the only language of instruction permitted in Texas classrooms was finally dismantled by legislation introduced by State Representative Joe Bernal of San Antonio in 1968. The new law allowed voluntary implementation of bilingual instructional programs.⁴⁷⁴ Early experimentation such as the Little Schools of 400 developed by Felix Tijerina and LULAC in the 1950s had shown promising results. This program had been aimed at pre-school children and had attempted, mostly successfully, to teach Spanish speaking children 400 basic English words before they entered first grade.⁴⁷⁵ Then in 1974 with *Lau v. Nichols*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that simply providing the same all-English program to all students regardless of their English proficiency levels violated federal requirements to provide

⁴⁷²Teresa Palomo Acosta, “*Edgewood ISD v. Kirby*,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jre02> (accessed February 22, 2011).

⁴⁷³In 2001, a group of Texas school districts mounted a lawsuit that became known as *West Orange-Cove CISD v. Neeley*. When the case went to trial in 2004, over 300 school districts were involved as plaintiffs or plaintiff interveners. Plaintiff school districts argued that, because they must levy the maximum property tax rate to maintain equity and adequacy, the local property tax had become equivalent to a state *ad valorem* tax, which is prohibited by the Texas Constitution. They also argued that the state finance system underfunded public education, preventing the districts from meeting their responsibilities to promote the General Diffusion of Knowledge. In September 2004, the Travis County District Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and set a date of October 1, 2005 for the Texas Legislature to remedy the unconstitutional aspects of the school funding system, including unconstitutional aspects of facilities funding. See <http://www.investintexaschools.org/schoolfunding/history.php> and <http://www.equitycenter.org/> for additional information on state funding issues.

⁴⁷⁴Wilson, 28.

⁴⁷⁵San Miguel, “*Let All of Them Take Heed*,” 140-141.

equal educational opportunity to all students.⁴⁷⁶ In 1981, MALDEF successfully challenged the law that made bilingual language programs voluntary. As a result, Texas required bilingual education programs to be offered at the elementary level and English as a second language (ESL) programs to be offered at the secondary level. The legislation was complete in addressing procedures for student identification and placement, setting exit criteria, and obtaining increased state funding based on numbers of students served.⁴⁷⁷

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and Texas soon followed in 1969 in repealing separatist statutes.⁴⁷⁸ Mexican Americans soon realized that state school officials had no intentions of providing leadership in the development of bilingual programs.⁴⁷⁹ Dr. Severo Gómez, Assistant Commissioner and in charge of bilingual education development two years after the passage of H.B. 103 said, “Everyone pays lip service to bilingual education...but getting genuinely involved in working for it, that’s another thing entirely.”⁴⁸⁰ In 1971 in response to pressure from State Representative Carlos Truan and others, the State Board of Education revised the Statewide Plan on Bilingual Education which provided better funding and statewide training of teachers in bilingual education methodology.⁴⁸¹ Support for bilingual education from state officials wavered until 1981 when in the case of *United States v. State of Texas*, Judge Justice found that discrimination against Mexican Americans was severe in the Texas public schools and that the state had failed to fully “remove the disabling vestiges of past *de jure* discrimination.”⁴⁸² The Court further ordered that a plan of “relief” be developed and specified

⁴⁷⁶ *Lau v. Nichols*, No. 72 – 6520, Supreme Court of the United States 414 U.S. 56, (January 21, 1974), <http://www.nabe.org/files/LauvNichols.pdf> (accessed on January 21, 2011).

⁴⁷⁷ Wilson, 29.

⁴⁷⁸ San Miguel, “*Let All of Them Take Heed*,”195.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 201.

what the plan must contain: required bilingual instruction for all children of limited English proficiency, procedures for identifying these students, comprehensive exit criteria based on test scores, and the monitoring of the compliance with bilingual programs by the Texas Education Agency on a regular basis.⁴⁸³ After much deliberation and argument, on June 1, 1981, the Texas legislature finally approved S. B. 477, the Bilingual Education expansion bill.⁴⁸⁴

There has been considerable controversy nationally over the effectiveness of bilingual instructional programs, with research studies that purportedly prove its effectiveness and those studies that prove its ineffectiveness. The research conducted by notables Stephan Krashen, James Crawford, Jim Cummins, Virginia Collier and others support the effectiveness of bilingual education.⁴⁸⁵ Assertions that bilingual instruction is pedagogically sound have been contradicted by researchers such as Christine Rossell and Keith Baker.⁴⁸⁶ The biggest critics of bilingual education are “English Only” proponents who wish to make English the official language of the United States by law.⁴⁸⁷ The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has stated that English-only laws are inconsistent with the First Amendment right to communicate with or petition the government and with the right to equality.⁴⁸⁸ In states that have passed legislation making English the official language, incidents have occurred by people who misinterpret the symbolic character of the statute. In 2004 a teacher in Scottsdale, Arizona who claimed to be enforcing English immersion policies allegedly slapped students for speaking Spanish in class.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 202.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 209.

⁴⁸⁵ Sharon Cromwell, “The Bilingual Education Debate, Part I and Part II,” *Education World* (1998), http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr049.shtml (accessed on February 24, 2011).

⁴⁸⁶ Christine Rossell, “Teaching English Through English,” *Educational Leadership*, (Dec. 2004/Jan. 2005): 32 – 36.

⁴⁸⁷ Cromwell, “Part II.”

⁴⁸⁸ “The Rights of Immigrants – ACLU Position Paper,” American Civil Liberties Union (September 8, 2000) <http://www.aclu.org/immigrants-rights/rights-immigrants-aclu-position-paper> (accessed February 3, 2011).

⁴⁸⁹ Anne Ryan and Ofelia Madrid, “Hispanics Upset by Teacher’s Discipline,” *The Arizona Republic*, (January 17, 2004), <http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/0117teacher17.html> (accessed February 3, 2011).

The Mexican American Civil Rights Movement

The mutual aid societies and later organizations such as LULAC, the American G.I. Forum and MALDEF helped make inroads against the discrimination of Mexican Americans, and the legal battles fought and won were milestones in the struggle for equality. But the strategies of the older generation of Mexican Americans were replaced by more militant strategies in the 1960s and 1970s. The younger generation of Mexican Americans, many of them college students, were frustrated by the slow pace of change. Even though federal and state legislation and court mandates declared segregation and discriminatory practices as illegal and unconstitutional, Mexican Americans continued to be treated as second-class citizens. The younger activists formed organizations such as the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (MEChA, Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán),⁴⁹⁰ and the more militant Brown Berets as part of a Chicano Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁹¹ These younger activists disagreed with the older Mexican American organizations as to strategy and tactics for obtaining equal rights and sponsored school walkouts or “blowouts,” protest marches, and political activism through *La Raza Unida* party.⁴⁹²

The Chicano Civil Rights Movement was to reach deep south Texas in 1968 with the Edcouch-Elsa High School Walkout. Influenced by “blowouts” in East Los Angeles, California, and Crystal City, Texas, over 190 students walked out of the Edcouch-Elsa High School in the lower Rio Grande Valley in November of 1968 in protest of what they termed an “unjust

⁴⁹⁰ Aztlán was the mythical birthplace of the Aztec nation believed to be located in the Southwestern United States. Activist Chicanos who sought to reclaim ancient land rights used the name symbolically, but many critics have accused MECHA members of being separatist. See M.E.CH.A. website at <http://www.nationalmecha.org/about.html> (accessed February 20, 2011).

⁴⁹¹ Arnoldo de León and Robert A. Calvert, “Civil Rights Movement,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pkcf1> (accessed February 24, 2011).

⁴⁹² Calvert, de León, and Cantrell, 409.

educational system.”⁴⁹³ Miguel and Francisco Guajardo in their 2004 article, “The Impact of *Brown* on the Brown of South Texas” describe the event in the following words:

On the morning of November 14, 1968, at precisely 8:10, a number of Mexican American student protesters stormed out of the classrooms chanting "Walkout! Walkout!" thus igniting a massive student boycott of Edcouch-Elsa High School. More than 150 students followed as they chanted phrases of protest against what they charged was an unjust educational system. The Edcouch-Elsa High School Walkout of 1968 became the tipping point (Gladwell, 2000) in a shift of power from White (Anglo-American) to brown (Mexican American) in south Texas. After decades of a dominant segregationist culture throughout the region, Mexican American high school students in this agricultural community forcefully challenged the power structure in the schools and in the community at large.⁴⁹⁴

The walkout provided national media attention to the demands of the students for equal educational opportunities, and with the legal assistance of MALDEF eventually helped to motivate changes in school policies.⁴⁹⁵ A similar walkout in Crystal City, Texas called attention to the fact that contrary to the opinion of many Anglos, Mexican Americans desired a better quality education and an opportunity to have access to college.⁴⁹⁶ Student demands both in Edcouch-Elsa and in Crystal City included the need for more Mexican American teachers, counselors and administrators and the implementation of bilingual and bicultural programs for Mexican American students.⁴⁹⁷

Since the 1980s, Mexican Americans have made steady educational progress and have expanded their sphere of influence into the political arena and the academy. Chicano Studies programs are available at major universities across the country and the number of Mexican American college graduates has increased.⁴⁹⁸ Mexican American schoolchildren are no longer

⁴⁹³ Guajardo and Guajardo, 501 – 526.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 506.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 523.

⁴⁹⁶ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 247.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 247-248. Also Guajardo and Guajardo, 509, 515; and San Miguel, “*Let All of Them Take Heed*,”

⁴⁹⁸ San Miguel, “*Let All of Them Take Heed*,” 217.

legally forbidden to speak Spanish in school, and no more signs that say, “No Mexicans served here” are seen in restaurants. Although changes have occurred in Texas schools during the last half of the twentieth century, San Miguel asserts that much remains to be done. “As long as Mexican Americans are denied their rightful place in this society they will continue to pursue the American dream of equality for all.”⁴⁹⁹

Recent waves of Latino immigrants in the 1990s to Southwestern states have revived anti-Hispanic feelings in many places. The English-only movements, the dismantling of affirmative action programs in the California and Texas university systems and the school officials’ attacks on Chicano studies programs in Arizona schools are some of the symptoms of a continuation and perhaps an acceleration of anti-Hispanic feelings.⁵⁰⁰ The tendency to blame the current economic ills on immigrants is on the rise, and conservative media demagogues and the blogs of the Internet reveal lingering and perhaps growing feelings of antipathy to Mexican Americans and other Latinos in recent years.⁵⁰¹ Proposals to change the U.S. Constitution so that children of undocumented residents are no longer granted U.S. citizenship is another indication of anti-Mexican feeling, according to Thomas Kochman and Jean Mavrelis who conduct corporate diversity training.⁵⁰²

The anti-Hispanic feelings are felt in Texas also, as evidenced by the State Board of Education (SBOE)’s recent re-vamping of the social studies curriculum to reduce the number of

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁰⁰ MacDonald, *Latino Education*, 276.

⁵⁰¹ David Weigel, “Fear of a Brown Planet,” *Reason* 38, no. 4 (August, 2006). See also Husna Haq, “Hispanics abandon Arizona, fleeing economy, immigration law,” *Yahoo News* at <http://news.yahoo.com/s/csm/307229/print> (accessed June 10, 2010).

⁵⁰² Thomas Kochman and Jean Mavrelis, “Feeling the Pain—A Mexican Perspective,” *Talking Cultural Diversity Discussion Board*, <http://www.talkingculturaldiversity.com/index.php/2010/08/06/feeling-the-pain%e2%80%94a-mexican-perspective/> (accessed August 20, 2010).

African American, Hispanic and other minority leaders studied in history classes in the state.⁵⁰³ The SBOE is accused of imposing its conservative ideology on Texas curriculum, to which Dr. Don McLeroy, leader of the conservative faction on the Board, responded, “We are adding balance. History has already been skewed. Academia is skewed too far to the left.”⁵⁰⁴ Mary Helen Berlanga, an Hispanic state school board member from Corpus Christi, Texas, said, “They... just pretend this is a white America and Hispanics don’t exist... they are going overboard, they are not experts, they are not historians... they are rewriting history, not only of Texas but of the United States and the world.”⁵⁰⁵ The effects of the Texas SBOE changes to the curriculum affect more than just Texas history classes. Because Texas is one of the nation’s largest buyers of textbooks, textbook companies will change their textbooks to accommodate Texas curriculum and thereby influence the study of history in a large number of U.S. states.⁵⁰⁶

The Huffington Post on May 13, 2010 reported that:

Numerous attempts to add the names or references to important Hispanics throughout history also were denied, including one amendment that would specify that Tejanos died at the Alamo alongside Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie. Another amendment deleted a requirement that sociology students ‘explain how institutional racism is evident in American society.’ Democrats did score a victory by deleting a portion of an amendment by Republican Don McLeroy suggesting that the civil rights movement led to ‘unrealistic expectations for equal outcomes.’⁵⁰⁷

It is evident that the struggle for equal educational opportunity by minority groups is far from over. As political factions change and gain power at different levels of government, the pendulum will continue to swing from one extreme to the other.

⁵⁰³ James C. McKinley, Jr., “Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change,” *The New York Times*, (March 12, 2010), <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html> (accessed July 12, 2010).

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁷ “Texas Textbook Massacre: Ultraconservatives Approve Radical Changes to State Education Curriculum,” *The Huffington Post*, (May 13, 2010), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/13/texas-textbook-massacre-u_n_498003.html#s73765&title=Thomas_Jefferson_Whos (accessed February 25, 2011).

Summary of Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study is to investigate the educational history of the Mercedes Independent School District during the twentieth century with a focus on the education of the Mexican American children who attended school in the district. The design of the study as qualitative historical research within a Critical Race Theory and LatCrit framework will best serve to discover the educational opportunities or obstacles experienced by the children. LatCrit theory is a branch of Critical Race Theory that deals with Latino issues, and its emphasis on the use of participant narrative or counter-storytelling is appropriate for this study. Mexican American schoolchildren often experienced discrimination in the schools in the lower Rio Grande Valley as well as in other parts of the United States during the twentieth century, but anti-Hispanic feelings began long before. The history of education in the Southwestern part of the United States has largely ignored Mexican Americans and has become the focus of scholarly study only within the last few decades. In order to understand the social, economic and political factors that influenced the education of Mexican American children in the Mercedes ISD, it is necessary to understand who the Mexican Americans are and revisit the history of the region and the events that shaped Anglo-Mexican attitudes and actions in this century.

The review of the literature for the first half of the twentieth century includes several works which treat the Mercedes school district. The historical record of scholarly works on the Mercedes school district is limited to Leon R. Graham's master's thesis in 1938, *A Comparison of the English Speaking and Latin American Students in the Mercedes, Texas Schools*. Other works which include references to the school district's educational history are Robert D. Beane's *A Brief History of the Educational Development of Hidalgo County, Texas* and the Stambaugh's *The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas: Its Colonization and Industrialization 1518-1953*. All

other references to the Mercedes school district and the education of Mexican American children is brief and restricted to indicating that segregation was practiced from grades one to four in the 1930s. D.T. Armour and Herschel Manuel mention the district by name in their list of districts in south Texas with segregation practices. No other works mention the school district by name, and it therefore remains to the investigations of this study through interviews and a review of archival documents to determine the state of Mexican American education in the Mercedes school district.

A review of the literature from the second half of the twentieth century reveals no direct references to the Mercedes ISD, but scholarly articles are found on Mexican American organizations which combated segregation, of the court battles fought to stop discriminatory practices such as school segregation, and the particular issues of bilingual education and school financing which impacted Mexican American education in the Rio Grande Valley. Chicano activism occurred in a neighboring school district through a 1968 walkout at the Edcouch-Elsa High School, an incident which could not have done otherwise than trouble the school officials in the Rio Grande Valley. The literature also reveals that the struggle is far from over, and with immigration issues a resurgence of anti-Hispanic feelings have been noted.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Descriptions of persons, places and events are at the foundation of qualitative research, according to Frankel and Devers. They assert that, “qualitative research is best characterized as a family of approaches whose goal is understanding the lived experience of persons who share time, space, and culture.”⁵⁰⁸ Denzin and Lincoln state that, “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world ... [and] consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible.”⁵⁰⁹ Thus, the educational experiences of Mexican American schoolchildren in the Mercedes Independent School District are best researched using the qualitative method. One purpose of qualitative research is to promote a deep, holistic understanding of a particular phenomenon. This comes, as Denzin and Lincoln state, from “the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials ... personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions ... [and] historical texts.”⁵¹⁰ This study provides insight into the local meanings that activities and practices had for the participants, the Mexican American schoolchildren of the Mercedes Independent School District.

The data collected is narrative in nature, as the participants recount life experiences within the context of their educational years. In order to ensure the validity of the narrative

⁵⁰⁸ Richard M. Frankel and Kelly Devers, “Qualitative Research: A Consumer’s Guide,” *Education for Health* 13, no. 1 (2000): 113.

⁵⁰⁹ Denzin and Lincoln, 3.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

discourse, detailed descriptive data from various participants was collected that was cross-checked for consistency from participant to participant. Additionally, a study of archival documents such as school yearbooks, graduation pictures, school board minutes, and newspaper articles added structural corroboration and coherence as well as referential support. Collected data were analyzed to discover emerging themes. Atkinson and Delamont, contributors in Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, assert that "data [should] be analyzed and not just reproduced and celebrated."⁵¹¹ An analysis of the data shows definite trends and patterns, and emerging themes are described at length in the final chapter of this study.

The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the relationships of individuals in a particular setting. Qualitative research can help to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation. The most common qualitative research methods are participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups.⁵¹² Because this research was historical in nature, it was not feasible to conduct participant observation because the setting and actions of the participants had already occurred in the past. In-depth interviews, however, were utilized to allow participants to recall their personal histories, school experiences and their perspectives and reactions to their experiences in the school setting of the Mercedes Independent School District. The type of data generated by this qualitative research method included hand-written field notes, audio recordings, and typed transcripts of the collected audio recordings and notes. Although the majority of the data collection was narrative, there were also some quantitative data collected, such as the demographics of Mercedes High School graduates, participation numbers in school clubs and organizations, and comparative academic achievement

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 823.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

data. The study design was interactive, that is, data collection and research questions were adjusted according to what was learned. For example, a review of high school yearbooks led to including certain questions in the interviews in order to clarify some points. Interview questions were generally open-ended with appropriate probes to allow spontaneity and adaptation in the interaction between the researcher and the study participant.⁵¹³

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory, also known as CRT, and its spin-off LatCrit Theory that is specific to Latino issues served as part of the theoretical framework for this study. Although the beginnings of CRT are in the movement of legal inquiry into race, racism and power, the applications of Critical Race Theory have spread into the social sciences including education.⁵¹⁴ Solórzano and Yosso state that, “the use of a CRT framework in education is relatively recent.”⁵¹⁵ They trace the first use of CRT principles in education to William Tate’s 1994 autobiographical article “From Inner City to Ivory Tower: Does My Voice Matter in the Academy?” in the journal *Urban Education*.⁵¹⁶ Then in 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate co-authored “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” in the *Teachers College Record*. In 1997, Daniel Solórzano wrote the essay entitled, “Images and Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping and Teacher Education” in the *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Then in 1998, the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* sponsored a special issue on CRT in education. In the early years of the twenty-first century, numerous scholars made presentations on CRT in education on professional panels at conferences across the nation and subsequently published articles. In 2002 the journals

⁵¹³ Ibid., 705.

⁵¹⁴ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (NY: New York University Press, 2001), 8 – 12.

⁵¹⁵ Solórzano and Yosso, 471.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 483.

Qualitative Inquiry and *Equity and Excellence in Education* dedicated special issues to CRT in education. In 2004, the American Education Research Association conference symposium, “And We Are Still Not Saved: Critical Race Theory in Education Ten Years Later” marked the tenth year anniversary of CRT use in educational research.⁵¹⁷

In following the genealogy of Critical Race Theory, scholars acknowledge that CRT “draws from and extends a broad literature base of critical theory in law, sociology, history, ethnic studies and women’s studies.”⁵¹⁸ After 1987, CRT emerged from criticisms of Critical Legal Studies or the CLS movement. These criticisms were expressed by scholars such as Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman and were based on the argument that CLS “did not listen to the lived experiences and histories of those oppressed by institutionalized racism.”⁵¹⁹ At first, CRT scholarship focused its critique on the slowness of the legal system to address Civil Rights legislation violations. Most challenges were focused solely on a Black/White binary and did not take into account the experiences of other minorities and people of color such as Native Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Chicanos and Latinos. Over time, Critical Race Theory has expanded to address the issues and problems encountered by not only other people of color but also themes such as sexism and classism.⁵²⁰ The theoretical offspring of Critical Race Theory include TribalCrit, AsianCrit, LatCrit, FemCrit, QueerCrit and even WhiteCrit.⁵²¹

LatCrit Theory emerged when Latino law professors began meeting informally after other meetings of the Hispanic National Bar Association, the Association of American Law Schools or Critical Race Theory workshops. Early proponents of LatCrit Theory called attention

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Tara J. Yosso, “Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (March 2005): 71.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

to the fact that conventional and even critical approaches to race and civil rights were not addressing the problems and issues of bilingualism, immigration reform and educational discrimination of more immediate concern to Hispanic or Latino groups.⁵²² In compiling an annotated bibliography of LatCrit scholars, Jean Stefancic identifies several themes that are covered by this theory. These include 1) a critique of liberalism for failing to address the Latino condition; 2) the power of storytelling to reflect Latino culture; 3) revisionist interpretations of U.S. civil rights law and progress; 4) critical social science that takes into account the centuries of cultural blending and conflict of the *mestizo* consciousness of Latino culture; 5) structural determinism, in particular its tendency to maintain the status quo; 6) intersectionality, or the exploring of the intersection of race, gender, class and sexual orientation especially with Latina feminist scholars; 7) gender discrimination unique to Latino culture known as *machismo* which often results in violence for Latinas; 8) Latino/a essentialism, or the question of the social construction of race and ethnicity with this group; 9) language and bilingualism, or the Spanish language as a unifying element in Latino communities; 10) separatism and nationalism, or the issue of preserving diversity and cultural integrity; 11) immigration and citizenship, and nativist alarm and profiling of certain immigrants; 12) educational issues, or the lack of Latino representation at all levels in education; 13) critical international and human rights law, especially in countries that are state-centered and traditionally male-dominated; 14) Black/Brown tensions, African American and Latino allies or rivals; 15) assimilationism and the colonial mindset, or the effect of Eurocentrism and the effect of dominance on the behavior and thought of the conquered and/or colonized; 16) Latino/a stereotypes, directed against people of color in popular culture---the movies, the media, and literature; and 17) criticism and response, or

⁵²² Jean Stefancic, "Latino and Latina Critical Theory: An Annotated Bibliography," *California Law Review* 85, no. 5 (October 1997): 424.

criticism of Latino consciousness by outsiders to the LatCrit movement.⁵²³ As a group with little political power, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican Americans suffered racial discrimination in school settings throughout the Southwestern United States, as revealed in the review of the literature in the previous chapter.⁵²⁴ This theory provided an appropriate lens with which to investigate the instances in which schoolchildren of this ethnic group suffered discrimination in the Mercedes Independent School District.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model that was used in this study to conduct the historical research and organize the findings was adapted from R. Murray Thomas's political ecology model of education as utilized by Guadalupe San Miguel in his 1987 article, "The Status of Historical Research on Chicano Education," which presented six major categories or elements of education.⁵²⁵ In this research study these six categories, studied and described through the lens of Critical Race Theory, presented a holistic, well-detailed picture of Mexican American education in the Mercedes Independent School District during the twentieth century.

In explaining his political ecology model of education, Thomas described how many theorists for some time had viewed politics and education as separate entities that influenced each other. Thomas instead viewed education as "enveloped within an environment of politics...the educational enterprise, from its location within that environment, conducts transactions with the several political groups that most prominently populate this same ecological

⁵²³ Ibid., 425 – 428.

⁵²⁴ See articles and books by Manuel, Little, Sánchez, San Miguel, Boone, Montejano, Alonzo, Acuña and de León (among many others) for descriptions of the educational discrimination of Mexican Americans in the twentieth century in the Southwestern United States.

⁵²⁵ San Miguel, "The Status of Historical Research," 467 - 480.

setting.”⁵²⁶ Thomas viewed education as a political system itself, with groups and subgroups that are interrelated and which influence each other; and as an entity that interacted with political players from without as well. Thomas used his matrix in a comparative study of the school systems in eleven nations in 1983 using more than twenty categories and sub-categories. San Miguel adapted and streamlined the model to facilitate viewing and analyzing an educational system through six categories. The six categories are 1) access to public education, 2) the character of the schools, 3) school achievement, 4) curriculum and instruction, 5) administrative practices, and 6) minority responses to discrimination.⁵²⁷

These six categories, however, are broad and subject to interpretation, and the author modified this model to accommodate the research questions. For example, access to public education within this study was interpreted as the opportunities or obstacles that Mexican American schoolchildren encountered in attending the school of their choice, as well as the quality of the education they received at the segregated schools. The character of the schools was interpreted to mean not only a physical description of the buildings, classrooms and equipment; but also a description of the school culture and climate; or the prevailing attitudes, practices and policies, particularly in view of the fact that the Mercedes Independent School District espoused the segregation of Mexican American children from the Anglo American children in the schools in many ways. School achievement was interpreted as attaining high marks and passing grades, being promoted, being on grade level, and graduating from high school. There was, however, another mark of school achievement considered that is not necessarily academic. The successful social participation of the students in their everyday school experiences was seen in this study as another mark of school achievement, one that was

⁵²⁶ R. Murray Thomas, *Politics and Education: Cases from Eleven Nations*, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 1-18.

⁵²⁷ San Miguel, “The Status of Historical Research,” 468.

decidedly preparatory for life. How students interacted socially, in particular during their high school years, often set the stage for how they would interact in later life. Student participation as a club or class officer was important in developing leadership skills that would serve students later in life. Therefore, school achievement was seen as both academic and social in nature for the analysis of findings.⁵²⁸ Curriculum and instruction were researched to determine whether textbooks, programs and courses of study were heavily biased in favor of Anglo American history, cultural beliefs and values; and whether the curriculum taught represented Mexican Americans in as positive a light as it did Anglo Americans. The instructional component was researched to determine whether the teachers were certified and qualified to teach, their instructional methods, and their attitudes toward as well as expectations of Mexican American children. Administrative practices were viewed as those actions taken not only by superintendents and principals; but also by counselors, librarians, and other adults including school board members (but excluding teachers, whose actions were viewed under curriculum and instruction) who were responsible for the education of the students. Finally, the minority responses to discrimination were viewed through another research question which asks what the attitudes, perceptions and reactions were of not only the Mexican American schoolchildren but also of their parents regarding their educational opportunities and obstacles.

In Figure 3.1 which follows, the author constructed a graphic representation of the conceptual model followed in the development of this dissertation. The historical study of education was viewed through the lens of Critical Race Theory on both macro and micro levels and progressed from the 1500s to the current time, utilizing Thomas's six categories in his political ecology model of education to guide the research, as adapted by Guadalupe San Miguel

⁵²⁸ Ibid. Also Jeanne Lee Stacey, *Ethnic Identification and Social Interaction*, (abstract, PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, January, 1991), iv.

and as defined and described above. The use of this model helps to provide the reader with a context and detailed description of the Mercedes Independent School District during the twentieth century and provides a deep understanding of the opportunities or obstacles that Mexican American schoolchildren experienced in that school district.

The timeline at the top of the graphic represents the author's decision to include in the review of the literature the history of Mexican American education in the Rio Grande Valley before the Mercedes ISD was formed in 1908. The underlying layers of history help to define the context that existed in the region when the Mercedes ISD first began to operate as an independent educational entity. The primary source data collected through the archival document review and the interviews are then presented through a chronology of events in which the span of one hundred years from 1908 to 2008 is divided into three historical time periods. The historical events are layered showing the impact of national and state events on local events. The findings are then organized and presented using the six categories mentioned above, a process which facilitates answering the research questions. The historical events and the analysis of the data are constantly filtered through the lens of Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Theory. The theoretical framework sets the critical tone of the study which is focused on Mexican American educational history. The entity at the center of the graphic in this study is the Mercedes Independent School District. Chapters Four and Five further provide an explanation of the conceptual model as examples are gathered from the data.

The graphic representation of the conceptual model follows below.

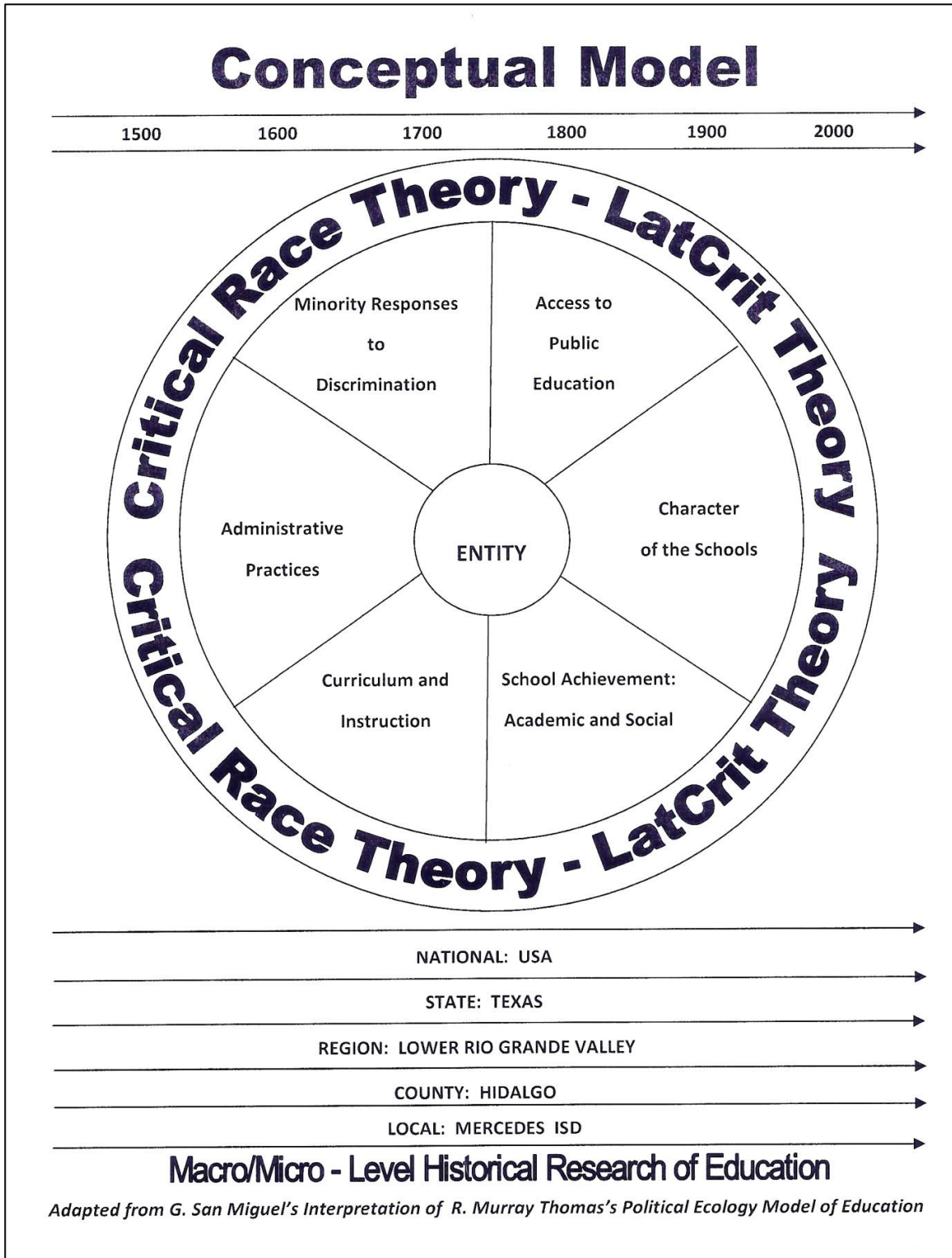


Figure 3.1 Conceptual Model

Historical Research

Traditional historians have often viewed conducting historical research in education by educators in a critical manner.⁵²⁹ John L. Rury recalls that Bernard Bailyn “derided the field for its narrow preoccupation with public education and a teleological interpretive framework, treating all history in light of the development of contemporary schools.”⁵³⁰ Bailyn, who twice won the Pulitzer Prize for History, called educational historians “unimaginative” and “incompetent as historical researchers and writers.”⁵³¹ Bailyn had singled out Elwood Cubberly, professor and dean at Stanford University School of Education in California who wrote on the history of public education, as a prime example of the field’s problems. Although Cubberly had pioneered in the development of the field of educational administration as a formal area of study, Bailyn charged that his historiography methods were weak and therefore he was not a “real” historian.⁵³² Rury argues, however, that historians of education must be recognized as a “distinctive scholarly community,”⁵³³ essential to the work of gaining a “more expansive understanding of the educational process and a careful explication of social influences on learning.”⁵³⁴

A new direction for the history of education was the “revisionist” wave of the 1960s and 1970s, when traditional views of history were challenged. In the field of educational history, writers such as Michael Katz, Clarence Karier, Paul Violas and Joel Spring argued that public schools were not “heralds of freedom and democracy,”⁵³⁵ as earlier educational historians such as Cubberly had maintained, but also served as “instruments of ideological domination and

⁵²⁹ John L. Rury, “The Curious Status of the History of Education: A Parallel Perspective,” *History of Education Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 571.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 572.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, 586.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 587.

economic exploitation.”⁵³⁶ They noted that social and economic elites had an important role in the formation of educational policies, and the schools tended to help “reinforce class distinctions and safeguard the existing social structure.”⁵³⁷ The revisionist historians viewed educational institutions as reflecting the society of the time. Revisionist historians were largely influenced by the Civil Rights Movement and questioned the motivations of social institutions such as schools and universities in maintaining the status quo.⁵³⁸

The questions must be asked, then, whether it is better to be a “real” historian in order to adequately conduct historical research in the field of education; or whether it is better to be a “real” educator, who trains in historiography or historical research methods in order to render a scholarly product. The historian who has never been an educator may find that the educational field and its special idiosyncrasies cause him or her problems in interpreting people, practices and policies encountered in the research, particularly if a qualitative methodological approach is used⁵³⁹. It is interesting to note that a recent inquiry into the membership of the History of Education Society reveals that 68 percent of their membership is located in schools or colleges of education, while fewer than 20 percent were in history departments. The editors of the *History of Education Quarterly* supplied the information that about 62 percent of the subscribers who receive the journal at their offices are employed in schools or colleges of education, while 28 percent are in history departments.⁵⁴⁰ It must be debated, however, that graduate students in the colleges of education, and especially those who work on Master’s theses and Doctoral dissertations, have received more than adequate training in the conducting of educational

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 588.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 590. However, it should be noted that the inquiry did not reveal the affiliations of those who received the journal at a home address.

research, including the field of historical research. Indeed, the majority of graduate textbooks on educational research include at least a partial section on conducting historical research, and the educator who wishes to pursue this type of educational research will naturally seek additional information on historiographical methods.⁵⁴¹

An excellent source of information on conducting research on the history of education can be found in Gary McCulloch and William Richardson's *Historical Research in Educational Settings*, published in 2000. These authors deplore the methodological disputes that have kept more educators and historians from undertaking the historical research of education.⁵⁴²

According to McCulloch and Richardson, historical research is an important means of understanding and addressing contemporary issues in education. It is very easy to take for granted the structures, practices and policies we have today in educational institutions. These authors maintain that we must understand that these structures, practices and policies developed historically, and that they were established for particular purposes that were social, economic and political in nature, and which may no longer be relevant or useful today.⁵⁴³ They assert that, "by investigating the development of modern state-sanctioned educational systems, it can demonstrate that the nature of those systems was not inevitable and is not predetermined, or indeed immutable."⁵⁴⁴ The historical research of education allows us to deconstruct what Tyack and Tobin described as the "grammar of schooling," wherein certain institutional practices have become rigid and resistant to change, such as the traditional comprehensive high school.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴¹ John W. Cresswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd Ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 204-205. Also W. N. Suter, *Introduction to Educational Research: A Critical Thinking Approach*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 325 – 327.

⁵⁴² Gary McCulloch and William Richardson, *Historical Research in Educational Settings*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 3.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁴⁵ David Tyack and William Tobin, "The 'Grammar' of Schooling: Why Has It Been So Hard to Change?," *American Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (September 21, 1994): 453.

Therefore, historical research of education allows us to investigate the beginnings of practices and policies that permeate school districts today and allow us to propose changes that are beneficial to contemporary students.⁵⁴⁶

The title of this study immediately qualified it as historical research of an educational institution. In reading Leon R. Graham's 1938 comparison study of the English-speaking and Latin American scholastics of the Mercedes Independent School District, many questions arose regarding the people, practices and policies behind the quantitative data that he presented. When he stated that only 14% of the Latin American schoolchildren were on grade level, one must ask how that state of affairs came to be.⁵⁴⁷ What factors were preventing the Latin American children from making adequate progress yearly? It is known from his information that the school district segregated Mexican American schoolchildren from Anglo American schoolchildren to some extent, but we don't know how many Mexican American schoolchildren were allowed to attend South School, the Anglo school, and why some were allowed and not others. From other data in the school district, it is known that the Mercedes High School had a Mexican American Valedictorian as early as 1928, and others followed in later years.⁵⁴⁸ What factors permitted these Mexican American students to brilliantly succeed while many others dropped out of the school system by the sixth grade, or languished for three or four years in the same grade? It is also not known whether the conditions in Mercedes were unique or usual compared to other lower Rio Grande Valley school districts of the twentieth century. Conducting historical research can serve to answer these and many other questions regarding the Mercedes Independent School District of the lower Rio Grande Valley.

⁵⁴⁶ McCulloch and Richardson, 6.

⁵⁴⁷ Graham, 85.

⁵⁴⁸ "Wall of Fame," Mercedes High School Graduation Pictures, Mercedes High School, Mercedes, Texas.

Research Questions

Although many questions may arise regarding the educational experiences of Mexican American schoolchildren in the Mercedes Independent School district, the main purpose of this study was to answer the following four questions: 1) What educational opportunities and obstacles were experienced by Mexican Americans in Mercedes, Texas during the twentieth century? 2) What were the schools like that were attended by the Mexican American schoolchildren in Mercedes, Texas? 3) What perceptions, attitudes and reactions did the Mexican American parents and schoolchildren have regarding the schools they attended and the educational opportunities and obstacles they experienced? and 4) Which individuals played important roles in the educational history of the Mercedes, Texas schools? In answering these questions, a cognizant, coherent historical description of the Mercedes Independent School District developed that helps to expand our understanding of what Mexican American schoolchildren experienced educationally in the lower Rio Grande Valley. The totality of their experiences included both opportunities for educational progress and obstacles to their attainment of an equal educational experience.

Data Collection Procedures

Conducting historical research required standard investigative procedures. The first of these was a search of secondary sources of information, or those books, articles and other previously written studies on the subject being investigated. The second step was to research primary sources including archival documents, such as newspaper articles written in the time period being investigated, photographs, maps, and artifacts of the era. In researching the Mercedes Independent School District, items such as school board minutes, high school yearbooks, teacher attendance books, attendance maps, and school achievement reports at the

local, county and state levels provided vital information. These primary sources of information helped to tell what happened in the past and why. The third important step was to interview those persons who actually lived through the events being researched. Although human lifetimes can limit the time span being investigated, many interviewees relating events also recalled things their parents or other older relatives told them, helping to expand the time frame of the primary data collected.⁵⁴⁹ Interviewing participants who lived in the Mercedes Independent School District revealed not only facts about events, persons and things but also reveal the attitudes, perceptions and feelings attached to the facts, adding a dimension not always found in quantitative studies.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is less formal than in quantitative research. The researcher becomes the data collection instrument through the analysis of historical documents and through the use of the interview.⁵⁵⁰ Interview questions, although guided by the research questions, were constructed to be open-ended in this study to allow the respondent to more fully detail his/her answers. The researcher responded to what the participant said and tailored the subsequent questions to information the participant provided. The researcher was able to utilize the flexibility provided by qualitative research methods in probing the initial participant responses to extract in deeper detail the occurrences being recalled but also to extract the feelings, perceptions and attitudes of the participant or those persons the participant was describing. The researcher was a careful listener, and was ready to adapt questioning techniques to accommodate the participants' individual personalities and styles.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁹ Meredith D. Gall, Joyce P. Gall, and Walter R. Borg, *Educational Research: An Introduction*, 7th Ed., (New York: Allyn & Bacon, 2002), 513-539.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 514.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 516.

The establishment of a closer relationship between researcher and participant assisted in securing more elaborate and detailed responses to the questions. Because the researcher attended Mercedes schools herself and is a fellow alumnus of many of those interviewed, it was possible to establish a greater rapport that facilitated the securing of pertinent data through the interviews and questionnaires. The opposite could also certainly be true, if the interviewee felt uncomfortable speaking about situations and persons with which the researcher was familiar.

Site and Setting

The Mercedes Independent School District is located in the town of Mercedes in Hidalgo County in the lower Rio Grande Valley of deep south Texas, approximately five miles from the border with Mexico. It is located in a Borderlands area where “language, religion, traditions and other aspects of American and ...Mexican society come together to create a unique blend.”⁵⁵² The geographic area of the lower Rio Grande Valley encompasses a roughly elongated triangular shaped region containing four counties at present: Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron and Willacy. The town of Mercedes, which was founded in 1907, is located in the southeastern corner of Hidalgo County, almost midway between the larger cities of McAllen and Harlingen on both Business and Expressway Hwy. 83, shown in Figure 3.2 in the map below:

⁵⁵² Yolanda G. Romero, “Discovering Tejano History,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 3 (Spring, 1997): 131.

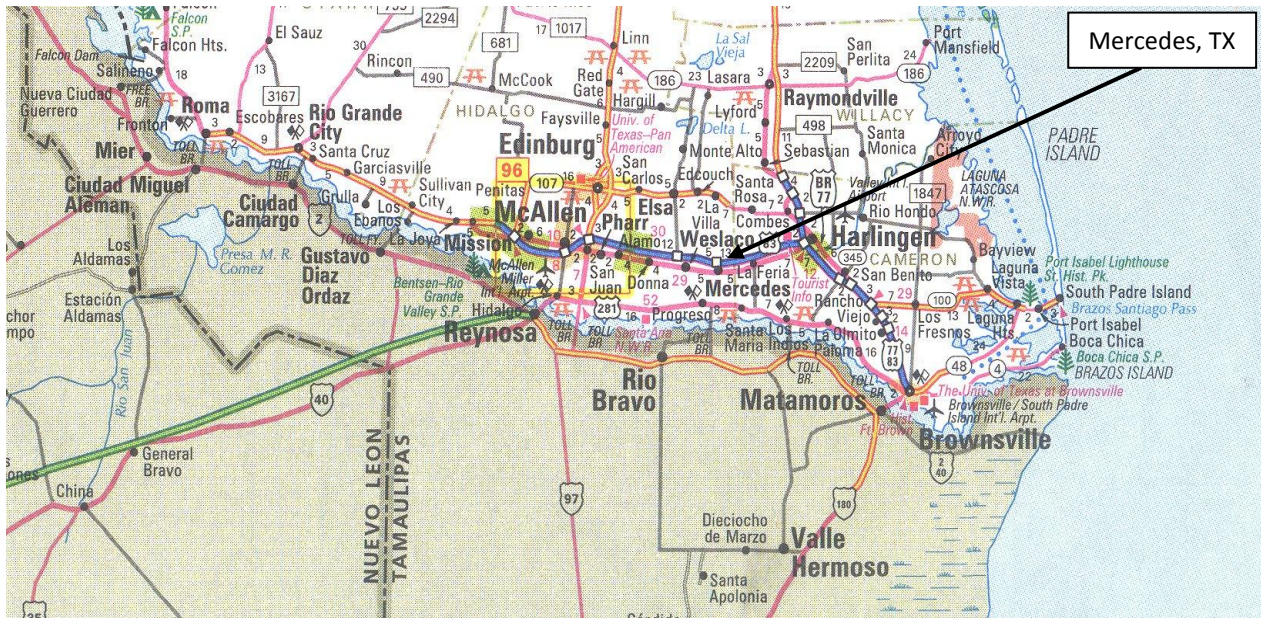


Figure 3.2 Map of the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. Courtesy of “Escape to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas,” The Cities Of Website, <http://www.thecitiesof.com/texas/theriograndevalley/lgriograndemap.html>, (accessed February 16, 2011).

For the school year 2009 – 2010, Mercedes ISD had a total of 5,545 students of which 99.1%, or 5,496, were identified Hispanic and only 33 were identified as non-Hispanic white.⁵⁵³ In contrast, in 1907-1908 there were about 60 “American” children in a school south of the railroad tracks and about 150 children in the “Latin-American” school north of the railroad tracks.⁵⁵⁴ Even though there were more Latin American schoolchildren enrolled, the south school facilities were much larger and in better condition than the north school. On a Sanborn map created for fire insurance purposes in 1917, the south school where Anglo children attended is labeled as “lights – electricity,” while the north school where Latin American children

⁵⁵³ “January 2011 School District Summary - Mercedes ISD,” *Texas Education Agency Lonestar Reports*, <http://LonestarReports.com> (accessed February 8, 2011).

⁵⁵⁴ Beane, 52-53. Beane uses the then-popular phrase “Latin-American” to identify the Mexican American schoolchildren, also known as “Spanish-Speaking” schoolchildren in some works of the time. He uses “American” children to distinguish those children who are “English-Speaking” and who are later referred to as “Anglo” or “Anglo-American” by Hispanic writers, even though the majority of Hispanic children were American citizens, too.

attended is labeled as “lights – none.”⁵⁵⁵ There is preliminary evidence, therefore, that segregation existed in Mercedes schools at one time, and that facilities were not only separate, but also unequal. The research questions in this study revolved around the type of segregation that existed, how long it lasted, and how those affected perceived it.

Although the Mercedes Independent School District was founded in 1908, several educational venues existed for any persons living in the geographical area prior to that year.⁵⁵⁶ The founding of the school district did not take place in a vacuum. The prior history of the area affected the institutional structures, the curriculum, the administration, and the means of access to the public education afforded by the district upon its establishment. It was essential to delve deeper historically in order to better understand the entity that the Mercedes Independent School District became. The research therefore included a history of all educational ventures conducted in the area prior to 1908 in order to better set the stage for the descriptions regarding the school district. Providing historical information on the education of the surrounding areas served to provide reference points in order to determine whether the Mercedes Independent School District was unique in any way, or normally representative of the education of the lower Rio Grande Valley. The inclusion of broader historical research provided the reader with a better understanding of the context of the time period and of the geographical area.

⁵⁵⁵ Sanborn Mercedes Map 1, 1917, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, http://www.cah.utexas.edu/services/finding_items/sanborn_mno.php (accessed February 14, 2011).

⁵⁵⁶ See Beane’s work on *The Educational History of Hidalgo County*, Martinez’s *History of Education in Staff County*, San Miguel’s *“Let All of Them Take Heed,”* and Stambaugh and Stambaugh *The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas* among other works on education in the area prior to the Anglo American commercial agricultural development in the early 1900s.

Data Collection Methods

Sampling: Interviews

This study was based on historical research conducted on the Mercedes Independent School District. This was not a probability sampling so that statistical inferences could be made; instead it was a purposive sampling so that data could be collected that would answer the proposed research questions about the school district. The sampling was purposeful because those students who attended schools in the school district could best answer questions regarding the district and its history. Standard face to face interviews were conducted with those participants where it was feasible to do so, such as Mercedes alumni who currently live in the area and could be located and interviewed. For those Mercedes alumni and other participants who no longer live in the immediate area, electronic communication through the Internet or through phone calls was another method used to gather narrative data. The participant was also given the option to use standard United States mail to respond to an open-ended questionnaire with a stamped self-addressed envelope included to collect the information.

List of Participants

John H. Cresswell in his book *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* identifies the types of individuals who the researcher may choose to interview. “... one might identify a ‘marginal person’ who lives in conflicting cultures, a ‘great person’ who impacts the age in which he or she lives, or an ‘ordinary person’ who provides an example of a large population.”⁵⁵⁷ Based on criteria of accessibility, probability of response, and representative of a variety of experiences, the researcher made a preliminary list of possible interviewees or participants.

⁵⁵⁷ John H. Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1998), 111.

Those on the following list were named Group One and listed graduates who could be termed “successful” by virtue of meeting one or more of the following conditions: graduated from the Mercedes Independent School District (or later obtained General Educational Development certificates, or GEDs), attended college or other post-secondary institutions, completed degrees, and/or experienced successful careers. This list included:

- Dr. Elisa de León Gutiérrez - 1948 Mercedes ISD graduate and Valedictorian; worked at the Texas Education Agency during enforcement of Bilingual Education mandate;
- Dr. Richard Rivera – 1963 Mercedes ISD graduate; current superintendent of schools at Weslaco ISD;
- Eddie Howell, Sr. – 1966 Mercedes ISD graduate; award-winning novelist and filmmaker of *Por Unos Elotes: Harvest of Redemption* and *Life Rocks and Rolls*;
- Dr. Daniel Treviño, Jr. - current superintendent of Mercedes ISD and former student and teacher in the district;
- Vito Buenrostro – currently retired; worked as a social studies teacher at the Weslaco ISD;
- Juventino I. de León – currently retired; brother of Elisa de León Gutiérrez; attended Mercedes schools and obtained a GED certificate later in life; owned a barber shop in Mercedes, worked as a bus driver and custodian at the Mercedes ISD;
- Delia R. de León – currently retired; attended Mercedes schools and obtained a GED certificate later in life; owned a beauty shop in Mercedes, wife of Juventino I. de León;
- Juanita Elena Peña (Flores) – 1978 Mercedes ISD graduate; currently works as School Improvement Director for the Weslaco ISD; and

- Andrés Martínez - retired superintendent Donna ISD, musician, doctoral candidate, 1964 graduate of Mercedes ISD.

Group Two consisted of some persons of interest who were not available and/or accessible but who had at one time been interviewed for other purposes and whose interviews were archived and available. These interviews were used to add another dimension to the data collection. These interviews were either in audio or video format and available through university resources. These individuals were:

- Goldsby Poag Goza – 1927 graduate of Mercedes ISD; retired Mercedes ISD teacher, local historian;
- Dr. Hector P. García – 1932 graduate of Mercedes ISD; medical doctor, founder of the American G.I. Forum and civil rights activist;
- Angel Noé González – 1948 graduate of Mercedes ISD; former superintendent at Crystal City, Texas, in the period following protests; and
- Lorraine Kennedy - retired Mercedes ISD teacher.

Group Three consisted of persons who may not have attended Mercedes ISD schools, but who had important and relevant information regarding the Mercedes Independent School District or other Mercedes graduates. This group included:

- Monte R. Churchill – currently President of the Mercedes ISD School Board, former teacher, principal and superintendent of the Mercedes school district; and
- Imelda F. Guerra – although born in Mercedes, she did not attend Mercedes public schools and she graduated from Villa Maria High School in Brownsville, Texas; widow of former Mercedes superintendent Lauro R. Guerra, the first Mexican American superintendent of the school district.

The final group, Group Four, included those persons contacted through the social network Classmates.com. The opportunities provided in current times to gather additional data through the use of electronic means such as the Internet cannot be overlooked. There are numerous websites that provide social networking opportunities to persons who have something in common. A popular type of social networking site is that which provides connections to others who graduated from the same high school. One such website is www.classmates.com where, for example, Mercedes alumni can communicate with each other and plan reunions and otherwise keep in touch with classmates. This website was investigated by the researcher and was utilized to communicate with Mercedes alumni who were no longer living in the immediate area and could not be interviewed in person. An invitation to participate in the study was sent out and several Mercedes alumni responded. These were then sent the prepared questions, and several responded through either the classmates.com website or through email or telephone conversation. Because of the nature of the website, only those who were paying members, or “All-Access Passholders,” were able to be contacted through the website.

Members of Classmates.com who responded and participated fully were:

- Natividad Gonzales; 1958 Mercedes ISD graduate, currently retired; served 20 years in the military with service at the Pentagon and later worked for an international satellite communications company in Washington, D.C.;
- Arturo de la Cerda – 1960 Mercedes ISD graduate; currently retired; served 20 years in the military and later worked with the U.S. Postal Service;
- Olga Benítez – 1962 Mercedes ISD graduate; currently retired; served in the military for ten years then worked in several clerical and bookkeeping positions; and

- Dr. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith – 1946 Mercedes ISD graduate; award-winning novelist of the *Klail City Series*, and *Estampas del valle*; currently holds the Ellen Clayton Garwood chair in the English Department at the University of Texas at Austin.

All interviews were transcribed into a written record for analysis. In some cases, notes taken during telephone conversations were typed out into a written record. Some participants who were contacted through e-mail chose to write “essays” using the interview questions as guides. In one instance, a participant who was too busy to answer the interview questions referred the researcher to two works where he talks about Mercedes, Texas, and his school experiences in the Mercedes ISD.⁵⁵⁸

Because the researcher attended and graduated from the Mercedes school district, it is noted that personal values, biases and understandings as well as intimate knowledge of the setting may have been both an asset and a liability. While it may have been easier to establish a rapport with participants, it may also have affected the responses of the participants who may have wished to please the researcher, slanted the responses a certain way, or who may have even withheld information they were afraid to share with someone they knew or who knew their families. The researcher did, however, strive to maintain the maximum degree of objectivity that is possible in any qualitative research. Provisions were made to cross-check references, triangulate through the study of archival documents, and conduct member-checks for accuracy of the data collected.

⁵⁵⁸ Dr. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith at the age of 82 currently teaches a full load of literary writing courses in the English department at The University of Texas at Austin. He directed the author to a Foreword that he wrote in a book about the life of Dr. Hector P. Garcia, and a chapter he wrote on the Rio Grande Valley in an edited book. The information in these two literary pieces would serve as his “interview.” See Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, “Foreword,” in *Hector P. Garcia: Everyday Rhetoric and Mexican American Civil Rights* by Michelle Hall Kells, x-xv. Board of Trustees, (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University, 2006) and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, “Living on the River,” in *Mixing Race, Mixing Culture*, edited by Monika Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal, 213-226, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

As the data was collected through the interviews, a journal was kept by the researcher to record observations, questions that may have arisen regarding the verification of facts, or interesting impromptu anecdotes that may have been collected when recording equipment was not available (sometimes people found out that research was being conducted and they wanted to tell the researcher about an interesting incident when a recorder was not available). The journal entries were transcribed into a clearer printed format for inclusion in the data collection. While conducting an interview the researcher also noted and recorded observations of body posture, gestures or facial expressions that conveyed the emotions the participant was feeling. In a preliminary interview conducted last summer, for example, the researcher noted that every time the interviewee spoke about discriminatory practices, the voice was lowered. It was noted by the researcher that the interviewee appeared to feel uncomfortable talking about discrimination, possibly indicating a lingering fear of recrimination or retaliation based on past experiences.

Archival Documents

In addition to the primary source data collected through interviews and questionnaires of individuals who attended, graduated, or had experience with Mercedes schools, archival documents were also accessed for additional historical information. These documents included the Mercedes ISD Board of Trustees Agendas and Minutes, from 1908 to 2008; some newspaper clippings that were included in the Mercedes Board of Trustees volumes; letters written to the Mercedes School Board and the superintendents; and some Mercedes city publications and pamphlets, particularly those published during a special celebration such as the 25th, 50th, 75th, 90th and 100th anniversaries of the city. These were located at the Mercedes ISD Central Administration Offices, at the Mercedes public library, or the Dr. Hector P. García Memorial Library, at the offices of the local newspaper *The Mercedes Enterprise*, and in personal

collections that the participants provided. Many newspaper articles were collected at the Dr. Hector P. García Library in Mercedes in their special holdings of bound volumes of the *Mercedes News*, the *Mercedes Tribune*, and *The Mercedes Enterprise*, from 1921 to 2008.

An important source of primary data was photographs. Through the Library of Congress American Memory website, numerous photographs of the lower Rio Grande Valley and of Mercedes, Texas and its schools were accessed. In particular, the Robert Runyon Collection, which can also be accessed through the University of Texas at Austin, was especially pertinent and useful. The Lee Russell Collection was also used. This collection is available through the Library of Congress website and contains many photographs of the Depression Era, the migrant camps in south Texas, and some of school buildings, persons and events. Through the interviewing of participants some photographs surfaced and a few selected for use in the study. One participant had a collection of vintage postcards that were very interesting, but the quality of the photo was not good enough to reproduce in the study. All permissions were sought for the use of photos in personal collections. Other important sources of photographs on the school district were obtained from *The Mercedes Enterprise* archives, from the City of Mercedes photographic archives and from the Mercedes Independent School District archived photographs including the “Wall of Fame” graduate pictures at Mercedes High School, the Annual Yearbook *The Bengal*, and the archives of the high school newspaper, *The Tiger*.

When face to face interviews were not possible with participants, they were given the option to answer a questionnaire on their experiences in Mercedes schools. Because of time constraints and the busy schedule of many participants, it was not possible to complete all interviews in a face to face mode. Telephone conversations and email messaging were used as needed to complete the data collection.

Summary of Methodology

In order to answer the research questions for this proposal, a historical research approach within a qualitative research framework was selected. The research questions all focused on the educational experiences of Mexican American children in the Mercedes Independent School District of Texas. In order to inform the research questions, the methodology included data collection from primary and secondary sources. A review of the literature constituted a review of the available secondary sources of information on the dissertation. The primary sources included personal interviews with Mercedes alumni and a review of archival documents on the Mercedes Independent School District and its persons, practices and policies. Through the theoretical lens of Critical Race Theory and LatCrit Theory, which focuses specifically on Latinos; the access to public education, character of the schools, administrative practices, curriculum and instruction, school achievement and minority responses to discrimination were researched and analyzed. As a historical study, the school district's progress through various stages of development over time was investigated.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The collective memory of a community is a precious thing.

—Richard Montoya, 2003

Organization of Chapter Four

This study is a qualitative historical research of the Mercedes Independent School District with a focus on Mexican American education in the twentieth century. Chapter Four, Data Analysis and Interpretation, is organized to first describe the primary sources used in the data collection. It then presents the data collected by dividing it into three time periods to show change over time. The three time periods are 1908 – 1958, 1959 – 1978, and 1978 – 2008. These time periods were selected based on the trends and patterns occurring in Mexican American education in Mercedes and the trend-changing or pivotal events occurring at the end of the first two periods. As the findings are presented, an interpretation of the data is interwoven to present a rich description of the topic and to begin to identify emerging themes within the data.

Data Collection: Primary Sources

As qualitative historical research of an educational institution, the Mercedes Independent School District, this study used archival records and interviews as sources of primary data. The first of the archival records were the Mercedes ISD School Board Minutes, a collection of volumes currently housed at the district's central administrative offices. The volumes span a time period beginning with the first school board meeting held on June 13, 1908 when

handwritten records were kept in 11 x 14 inch ledgers and culminating with the computerized or digital records now kept in storage on computer discs, or CDs. The minutes for each meeting include a record of the proceedings as well as a listing of all financial expenditures made each month by the school district. As can be expected, the first meetings included a list of less than ten expenditures and the most recent include hundreds of expenditures made in a month's time for administrative and teacher salaries, facility maintenance, instructional materials, staff travel, staff professional development and assorted other expenses. The board minutes also include information about bonds issued for facility construction, election proceedings and oaths of office, and in some cases, newspaper clippings and correspondence sent to the school district from various entities.

A second valuable source of archival data was photographs. Many of these came from the "Wall of Fame" photos of Mercedes High School graduates currently housed at the Mercedes High School cafeteria. Other photographs used were in the Mercedes High School annual or yearbook, *The Bengal*, many of which are archived at the Mercedes High School Library. Personal photographs were sometimes obtained during the interviews of local Mercedes graduates, and many photographs were obtained from *The Mercedes Enterprise*, the local newspaper, particularly from their special anniversary editions in 1982 and 2007. All available photographs were digitally captured through the use of the researcher's camera or scanner and archived in the researcher's files. One other source of photographs was the social network www.classmates.com, which makes available to subscription clients several editions of the high school annual. Another valuable source of early photographs was the Robert Runyon Collection available through the American Memory digital collection of the Library of Congress and through The University of Texas at Austin library resources.

The town of Mercedes has had various local newspapers over the last one hundred years which include the *Mercedes Tribune*, the *News-Tribune*, the *Mercedes News* and *The Mercedes Enterprise*. Although the *Tribune* and the *News* have not been printed in many decades, the *Enterprise* is still being printed and delivered to Mercedes homes today. The Dr. Hector P. Garcia Memorial Library, the city's public library, houses many of the original editions of all three newspapers which were accessed by the researcher to search for items having to do with the school district. *The Mercedes Enterprise* issued a 75th Anniversary Edition in 1982 and a Centennial Special Edition in 2007 which contained much valuable historical information including a short history of the school district.

The final source of information was the data collected through interviews with twenty-one participants. These participants were chosen because of their attendance and graduation from the Mercedes ISD, or because of their experiential relationship with the school district as a parent, teacher, administrator or school board official. Some participants were chosen because they had key knowledge of the school district or its officials. A brief description of each participant follows below.

Dr. Elisa de León Gutiérrez graduated from Mercedes High School as Valedictorian of her class in 1948. She attended Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, and later graduated from The University of Texas at Austin. She worked as a chemistry and biology teacher in Rio Grande City Schools, as a hospital laboratory technician, and later as Director of Bilingual Programs with the Texas Education Agency. She is now retired and currently resides in Austin, Texas. Dr. Gutiérrez was interviewed in person at her home in Austin.

Dr. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith graduated from Mercedes High School in 1946. He attended the University of Texas at Austin where he obtained a B.S. degree, the New Mexico

Highlands University where he obtained a master's degree and the University of Illinois where he obtained his doctorate in 1969. He served in the U.S. Army in Korea. He was a high school teacher in Brownsville briefly, but since 1968 has been a university professor of modern languages, Chicano studies, and English language and literature. He has written many novels in both Spanish and English, most notably the *Klail City* series for which he has won numerous prestigious awards including the Quinto Sol Literary Award, the Premio Casa de las Americas Award for Best Novel, and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Texas Institute of Letters. He is currently the Ellen Clayton Garwood Professor in the English Department at The University of Texas at Austin and is still teaching a full load of English literature and literary writing courses. Dr. Hinojosa-Smith was contacted through the social network Classmates.com as well as through his university e-mail. Because his busy schedule precluded interviews, he directed the researcher to two pieces he has written on his recollections of Mercedes schools, a foreword that he wrote in a book about Dr. Hector P. García, and a chapter entitled "Living on the River," in *Mixing Race, Mixing Culture*.⁵⁵⁹

Juventino I. de León attended Mercedes schools and later obtained his General Educational Development (GED) Certificate after serving in World War II. Had he remained in school he would have graduated in 1941. He worked as a barber for many years before obtaining work in the Mercedes ISD as a custodian and bus driver for the Mercedes Independent School District. He is currently retired and resides in Mercedes, Texas. He and his wife, Delia Ruelas de León, were interviewed concurrently.

⁵⁵⁹ Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, "Foreword," in *Hector P. Garcia: Everyday Rhetoric and Mexican American Civil Rights*, Michelle Hall Kells (Board of Trustees, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, 2006). Also Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, "Living On The River," in *Mixing Race, Mixing Culture: Inter-American Literary Dialogues*, ed. Minoka Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

Delia Ruelas de León also attended Mercedes schools (North Ward Elementary) until the sixth grade and later obtained her GED Certificate. She would have graduated in 1946 had she remained enrolled. She worked as a beautician for more than fifty years and is currently retired and resides in Mercedes, Texas.

Natividad Gonzales attended Mercedes schools and was supposed to graduate in 1958, but in 1956 he joined the Air Force and made it a twenty-year stint. During his years in the military he completed his GED and some college hours and worked in Defense Communications at the Pentagon. After his military retirement, he went to work for an international satellite company where his bilingual skills served him well. He is currently retired and living in the mountains of Virginia. Natividad was located and contacted by the researcher through the social network Classmates.com and subsequently interviewed both through a telephone conversation and by email correspondence.

Arturo de la Cerda graduated from Mercedes High School in 1960 and immediately enlisted in the Army. He retired after a twenty-year career in the military and took advantage of the G.I. Bill to attend San Antonio College, after which he had a second career in the U.S. Postal Service. He retired in 2007 and currently resides in San Antonio, Texas. Arturo was located and contacted by the researcher through the social network Classmates.com. He was then interviewed through email correspondence.

Olga Benítez would have graduated from Mercedes High School in 1961 but became ill and had to wait to graduate with the Class of 1962. After graduating from high school she joined the Army and moved away never to return to the Rio Grande Valley. She attended the University of Oklahoma for some years but did not complete a degree. She is currently retired and lives in

Chicago, Illinois. Olga was located and contacted by the researcher through the social network Classmates.com. She was interviewed by telephone conversation.

Vito Buenrostro attended Mercedes schools and graduated from Mercedes High School in 1965. He attended the University of Texas Pan American and worked as a social studies teacher in Weslaco schools. He participated in the Mercedes Centennial Committee's Project entitled *Mercedes's Centennial Celebration of Good Living, 1907 – 2007* which was a compilation of family histories produced by a Centennial Committee to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Mercedes.⁵⁶⁰ He is currently retired and resides in Mercedes, Texas. Vito was interviewed through email correspondence as well as in person.

Eddie Howell, Sr. graduated from Mercedes High School in 1966. He attended the University of Texas Pan American and worked as a teacher and counselor in the Mercedes ISD until his retirement. After his retirement, he wrote the novel, *Por Unos Elotes: Harvest of Redemption* which was made into an award-winning film, *Broken Promises*. He has since written another novel, *Life Rocks and Rolls*, which was also made into a film set to be released soon. Eddie was interviewed in person.

Imelda Fernández Guerra, although a Mercedes resident from birth, attended Our Lady of Mercy Catholic School up to the eighth grade, then attended the Villa Maria High School in Brownsville as a boarder and graduated in 1958. She attended the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio and returned to live in Mercedes in 1971 when her husband, Lauro R. Guerra, became the first Hispanic Mercedes Superintendent of Schools. She is retired and currently resides in Mercedes, Texas. Imelda was unavailable for an interview but she wrote a personal recollection selection called "Memories of Growing Up In Mercedes" that appeared in

⁵⁶⁰ Armando C. Alonzo, ed. *Mercedes's Centennial Celebration of Good Living, 1907 – 2007*. Mercedes Centennial Book Project Committee, Mercedes, TX, 2007.

the locally bound book *Mercedes's Centennial Celebration of Good Living, 1907-2007*, a project of the Mercedes Centennial Committee in 2007.

Juanita Elena Peña graduated from Mercedes High School in 1978 and obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree at The University of Texas at Austin in 1983. She has been a teacher and district administrator in neighboring Rio Grande Valley school districts, and is currently employed with the Weslaco Independent School District as School Improvement Director.

Juanita was interviewed in person.

Dr. Daniel Treviño, Jr. graduated from Mercedes High School in 1981 and attended Texas A & I University in Kingsville, later completing a Master's in Educational Administration from Texas A & M University in Kingsville and a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from the same institution in 2007. He served as a teacher and administrator for many years in both the Mercedes and La Feria school districts. He currently serves as Superintendent of Schools in the Mercedes Independent School District, the first Mercedes High School graduate to earn that distinction. Dr. Treviño was interviewed in person.

Monte R. Churchill did not attend Mercedes schools, but he was a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent in Mercedes from 1964 to 1997 when he retired. He has served as school trustee in Mercedes since 2004. In his various capacities, he has grown to know the entire school district from many different perspectives. Mr. Churchill was interviewed in person. A more detailed description of his personal experiences and educational work in Mercedes is available later in this study.

Dr. Hector P. García (1914 – 1996) graduated from Mercedes High School in 1932. His parents were educated émigrés from the Mexican Revolution and in 1917 settled in Mercedes, Texas to run a dry-goods store with other family members. In 1932, García entered The

University of Texas at Austin, graduating with honors in 1936. He went on to study at the University of Texas at Galveston, earning his doctorate in medicine in 1940. He accomplished his residency at St. Joseph's Hospital at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. Upon completing his internship in 1942, García volunteered for combat in the army, where he was eventually transferred to the medical corps. After the war he opened a medical practice in Corpus Christi, Texas, and became involved in civil rights activism when he discovered the bad treatment returning Mexican American WWII veterans were receiving. He founded the American G.I. Forum in 1948 to address not only the issues of veterans, but also of civil rights for all Mexican Americans. He became an active member of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and served government posts under various U.S. Presidents on civil rights issues, and received numerous honors and accolades for his humanitarian work as well as his advocacy for Mexican American civil rights. He died in 1996 but his legacy lives on through his work. In 1992, Dr. García was interviewed regarding his life experiences in the filming of the documentary, *Justice for My People*. In this interview he talks about the discrimination that Mexican Americans suffered during the early part of the twentieth century. Several excerpts pertinent to Mexican American education in the Mercedes Independent School District are used in this study.

Dr. Xicoténcatl García provided a brief segment when he was also interviewed for the making of the documentary *Justice for my People* on his brother, Dr. Hector P. García. Dr. Xico García also became a medical doctor and returned to Mercedes to dabble in city politics in the 1950s. He later moved to Corpus Christi where he maintained a family practice. Dr. Xico García graduated from Mercedes ISD in 1942.

Angel Noé González graduated from Mercedes High School in 1948, although he was born in Edinburg, Texas and attended schools in that town. He attended what was then Edinburg Junior College and then went on to the University of Texas at Austin. He obtained his Administrator's Certificate at Texas A & I and also attended the University of Houston and Sam Houston State for his Master's degree. He worked as a teacher and administrator in various cities, worked at the Texas Education Agency and eventually became Superintendent of Schools at Crystal City in 1970. Currently Mr. González is retired and lives in Dallas, Texas, but remains active in directing a non-profit organization that provides educational services to school districts and scholarships to students. Mr. González was interviewed by Dr. José Angel Gutiérrez in 1997 for the Tejano Voices Project currently housed in the University of Texas at Arlington Library. "This project focused on the stories of struggle of Chicanos/as to gain political power," Dr. Gutiérrez explains.⁵⁶¹ Sections on Angel González's educational experiences in the Mercedes ISD are used in this study.

Lorraine Kennedy was a teacher for many years with the Mercedes schools. She was interviewed in 2002 by Lee Long for a history assignment on a small town completed at the Palo Alto College in San Antonio, Texas. She currently resides at John Knox Village in Weslaco.⁵⁶² A small portion of her interview is used in this study.

Dr. Richard Rivera graduated from Mercedes High School in 1963. He attended the University of Texas Pan American and Texas A & I University in Kingsville to obtain his teaching and administrator's certifications. He received his doctorate from the University of Texas Pan American in 2008, writing about the history of the Weslaco Independent School

⁵⁶¹ Angel Noé González, interview by José Angel Gutiérrez, CMAS 29, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington (June 23, 1997), <http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/TV.jsp?x=029> (accessed May 5, 2011).

⁵⁶² Lorraine Kennedy, interview by Lee Long, San Antonio, TX: Palo Alto College, Fall 2002, <http://www.accd.edu/pac/history/rhines/StudentProjects/2002/Mercedes/LeeLongMercedes.htm> (accessed July 19, 2010).

District in his dissertation. During a doctoral class in 2005, Dr. Rivera provided interviews on his Mercedes experiences as well as writing reflection pieces on his educational years in Mercedes.⁵⁶³ Dr. Rivera has been an educator with the Weslaco schools throughout his career and currently is serving his fifteenth year as Superintendent of Schools in the Weslaco school district.

Goldsby Poag Goza (1911 - 1992) was born in Mercedes, Texas and graduated with the Class of 1927. She attended Baylor College to obtain her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Spanish and returned to teach for many years in Mercedes schools. She retired in 1977 but developed an interest in history and joined the Hidalgo County Historical Society. She completed many projects for the organization, including the compilation of names inscribed on tombstones at numerous Rio Grande Valley cemeteries as part of a genealogy project. She was interviewed twice as part of an Oral History Project at the University of Texas Pan American. Only the information found in the 1987 interview by Crystal Marie Cantú is used for this study.⁵⁶⁴

Part I. Historical Period 1908 – 1958

The Mercedes Independent School District developed out of the precursor Hidalgo County Common School District Number 2.⁵⁶⁵ The town itself was established soon after the Sam Fordyce Branch of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway was completed in 1904. By 1907 the town of Mercedes was incorporated and on June 13, 1908, the first meeting of the newly elected school board trustees was held. The first school board trustees were Lytle Harrison, George S. Freeman, J.M. Johnson, Jr. (Sec/Treas.), Fred L. Johnston, G.K. Wattson, Fred J. Cutting, and S.P. Silver (Pres.).⁵⁶⁶ After several months of planning, they met in

⁵⁶³ Richard Rivera, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Mercedes, TX, July 14, 2005.

⁵⁶⁴ Goldsby Poag Goza, interview by Crystal Marie Cantu, Mercedes, TX, 1987.

⁵⁶⁵ Beane, 36.

⁵⁶⁶ Minutes, June 13, 1908.

September of 1908 to establish School # 1 and School # 2.⁵⁶⁷ The first four teachers hired were E.L. Horton as principal and teacher at School # 1, Fred L. Johnston (who resigned as school board member to accept a teaching job), Adelia Shields and Agapita Tijerina.⁵⁶⁸ School # 1 was located on the south side of town on the corner of Ohio Avenue and Third Street, and School # 2 was located on the north side of town on Hidalgo Street. Although the school board minutes for that meeting do not state it, later Mercedes school board minutes and maps describe the north side school as the “Mexican school”⁵⁶⁹ thereby clearly establishing a segregated school system.

In June of 1910, the school board underwent a complete restructuring after allegations of election irregularities appeared to cause five members to resign and five new members to be appointed to serve out the unexpired terms. In that same meeting, the school board minutes were corrected, and the term “Mexican school” was changed to “Preparatory school.”⁵⁷⁰ At that same meeting, it was decided to expend bond money in the amount of \$9,000 for a new school building on the south side to have eight classrooms for grades from elementary to high school, and \$4,000 for a new school building on the north side to have four classrooms for elementary grades only.⁵⁷¹ With no explanations given, the first years of the school district firmly establish the segregation of Anglo American and Mexican American schoolchildren. The later use of the word “preparatory” seems to indicate the trend in Texas at that time to separate Mexican children from Anglo children based on perceived language or other academic deficiencies.⁵⁷² Leon R. Graham, who served as teacher, principal and superintendent in Mercedes, states in his 1938 master’s thesis that even though the north side school had been established for Latin American

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., September 21, 1908.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Minutes, April 5, 1910. Also June 3, 1910. Also Sanborn Mercedes Map 1, 1917.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., June 11, 1910.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² San Miguel, *“Let All of Them Take Heed,”*46.

children, many children from the families of prominent Latin American citizens attended the south side school. “This was made possible because these Latin Americans often lived next door to English speaking families.”⁵⁷³ According to Graham, the school district board never passed any policies excluding Mexican Americans from the south schools, because “many of the Latin Americans had considerable political influence.”⁵⁷⁴ In fact, between 1915 and 1917, the school board minutes show that one of the school trustees is named Jesús M. García.⁵⁷⁵ There would not be another Mexican American trustee serving on the Mercedes school board until 1954.⁵⁷⁶

The city of Mercedes had established a form of residential segregation from its very inception, when the city fathers decided to require that residential structures on the south side cost a minimum of \$2,000, an amount which would have prohibited many Mexican Americans from living on the south side of town. This residential segregation was based on socio-economic factors, a condition which prevailed in most Rio Grande Valley towns for many decades. The original establishment of the town as indicated by early maps shows the railroad running east and west through town and serving as the dividing line between well-to-do and poorer residents. The north side of town, especially those areas close to the railroad, was used for buildings for industrial purposes, such as the ice house, packing sheds for the produce being shipped to markets up north, the cotton gin, warehouses and similar buildings. The residential lots that were available further north from the commercial buildings were much smaller and therefore more affordable than on the south side of town.⁵⁷⁷

In 1914, the school board enacted a policy wherein only teachers with a First Grade State Certificate, which was the highest level of certificate available, or teachers with a degree of

⁵⁷³ Graham, 14.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Minutes, May 5, 1915 to January 24, 1917.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., April 14, 1954.

⁵⁷⁷ Sanborn Mercedes Map 1, 1917.

similar rank were the only ones to be considered for employment with the school district for the following school year.⁵⁷⁸ Miss Buck followed through upon becoming superintendent in 1915 and whenever possible only hired highly qualified teachers.⁵⁷⁹ However, in later years, the school board minutes indicate that degreed or properly certified teachers were not always available.⁵⁸⁰ Records indicate that superintendents frequently had to telegram or write to agencies in Austin in order to secure teachers, and a high turnover rate of teachers was an early problem for the Mercedes school district.⁵⁸¹

A newspaper article printed in the *Mercedes Tribune* in 1921 describes the school election with the following,

A feature of the election was the interest taken by the rural population in the contest, about twice as many votes being cast by farmers and their families as by residents of the city of Mercedes. Very few Mexican votes were cast.⁵⁸²

The wording indicates that by the early twenties, a shift in political power to the rural population, or the farmers, had occurred in deciding the school board election. This could be expected since the Rio Grande Valley, including the town of Mercedes, was experiencing rapid growth due to the influx of large numbers of Midwestern farmers who were enticed into relocating through intense marketing campaigns by the American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company. It also seems to indicate that the Mexican American population did not have the political power at this time that it later acquired. The poll tax that was required for voting in Texas at that time

⁵⁷⁸ Minutes, March 9, 1914.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., August 31, 1921 and September 27, 1923.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., March 12, 1958.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 1909 – 1949.

⁵⁸² "Administration Wins in School Election," *Mercedes Tribune*, May 10, 1921.

undoubtedly deterred many from voting who could not afford to pay it.⁵⁸³ Another deterrent was the stipulation that only tax-paying property owners were allowed to vote in school elections.

Another newspaper article printed in the *Mercedes Tribune* in 1922 gives additional information about the early schools. It makes a comparison between enrollment figures in 1915 and in 1921 to show the growth in the school district. Table 4.1 is compiled from the information in the news article and gives enrollment information as well as staff information about the Mercedes school district. The table follows below.

⁵⁸³ Montejano, 279. Texas adopted and used a poll tax as a requirement for voting from 1902 to 1964 when it was abolished by the 24th Amendment. See “Historical Barriers to Voting,” http://texaspolitics.laits.utexas.edu/6_5_3.html (accessed May 10, 2011).

Table 4.1 Mercedes ISD School Enrollment and Other Data, 1915 and 1921

	<u>1915</u>	<u>1921</u>	
Total enrollment	335	1425	
Total South Grammar	150	622	
First grade	21	94	
Second grade	19	83	
Third grade	33	107	
Fourth grade	19	87	
Fifth grade	19	104	
Sixth grade	24	68	
Seventh grade	15	79	
High School	53	171	(grades 8 – 11)
North Side School	123	450	(grades 1 – 5)
Heidelberg School	9	64	(grades 1 – 5)
Kindergarten	0	118	

Teachers	12	29	
Buildings	3	7	
Schoolrooms	10	30	

Principals in 1921

High School	C.W. Taylor
Harriet Claycomb School (South Grammar)	Miss Marie Morrow
North Side School	Miss Marion Reiss
Superintendent in 1921	Miss Nannie Mer Buck

Source: Data from “Figures Show Growth of Schools,” *Mercedes Tribune*, March 29, 1922

Table 4.1 shows that between 1915 and 1921, the student population had exploded, causing problems of overcrowding in the schools that was echoed in the school board meetings of that year. It is interesting to note the importance given to the South School where the Anglo

children attend and the breakdown of the grade level information. A breakdown by grade level for the North Side School or the Heidelberg School is not given, possibly indicating less interest in those schools. The pupil/teacher ratio in 1915 is 28:1; by 1921 the pupil/teacher ratio is almost 50:1.

Another newspaper article later that month reveals where the overcrowding is occurring, something which is not indicated in the figures given above. According to an article published in the *Mercedes Tribune* in June of 1922, the scholastic census is 1,565 of which 1,273 are enrolled in school, an enrollment rate of 81.5%. The number of scholastics refers to all those students who are age-eligible for public schooling according to state law, and the number on which state school funding was based at that time. The article states that the Mercedes enrollment rate compared favorably to that of McAllen, Mission and San Benito. These towns were reporting an enrollment rate of 50% or less.⁵⁸⁴ This article does not explain why, but the enrollment of pupils was down from 1921 in which 1,425 were reported enrolled. Only 1,273 were enrolled in 1922. The article does say, "...the big thing for our school this year is the fact that with a smaller enrollment we had a much better attendance."⁵⁸⁵

The next few paragraphs identify the fact that the overcrowding is occurring at the North Side School, which is attended by Mexican American schoolchildren. The article states:

⁵⁸⁴ "Large Proportion of Scholastic Eligibles are Attending Mercedes Public Schools," *Mercedes Tribune*, June 14, 1922.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

At the North Side School it was found necessary almost immediately after the opening of school to provide more room. A three-room frame building was erected and three more teachers secured. Instead of buying more desks the carpenter made tables and benches which were used in two of the rooms. In spite of this, conditions remained congested in this school most of the year.

Regular attendance was secured as never before with the result of promotions as follows: Low First, 91; High First, 71; Second Grade, 117; Third, 21. Several night meetings were held and the building was packed. Many of the patrons are very much interested and anxious to help. A piano was purchased for this school and over half paid for by night entertainments and tamale sales. Because of the lack of work many were unable to contribute financially as they wished but all were more than willing to help with work.

Because of the vigilance of the teachers and the splendid assistance of the health officer no epidemic prevailed this year. Vaccinations were performed throughout this school and regular inspections by the teachers controlled sickness that otherwise might have proven serious to the school and community. The greatest increase in enrollment and attendance was in this school.⁵⁸⁶

It should be noted from the article that the North Side School is a frame building while the Harriet Claycomb School on the south side is made of stucco and brick, and instead of desks such as those used at the Claycomb School, the North Side students must use tables and benches made by a local carpenter. The article further reveals that some students apparently spend two or more years in first grade; yet no low and high first grades are reported for the south side school. The article seems to indicate, however, that the Mexican American parents are very involved and interested in their child's education because they work diligently to raise extra funds for school needs. No school clubs or organizations are mentioned at the North Side School.

In contrast, the south side school, now named the Harriet Claycomb School in honor of the superintendent's mother,⁵⁸⁷ shows the many activities promoted at that school through clubs and organizations. It reports:

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, September 15, 2007.

Boys' and girls' athletics were fostered ... match games were played ... the April Frolic given by this school netted a very substantial sum toward playground equipment ... Jr. Red Cross activities ... Jr. Boy Scouts were organized ... half-year classes were organized throughout this school ... twelve teachers [were] employed this year of which five were inexperienced absolutely.⁵⁸⁸

The high school also included organizations such as the Girl Reserves, Hi-Y Boys, Boy Scouts, Athletic Association, Dramatic Department, Spelling Club, Glee Club, Rotarians' Talks, and Texas Pageant for the students, and the State Teachers' Association for the teachers.⁵⁸⁹

According to the article, intelligence tests were given in first grade through high school, physical tests were given at all schools except at the Heidelberg school, and the Curtis' Arithmetic Tests and Monroe Silent Reading Tests were given to all students. The results of these tests were not reported in this article.⁵⁹⁰ The article further stated that the North School needed a teacher for sewing class and cooking class, the High school needed an Auditorium, the Harriet Claycomb School (south side) needed more student desks, and that the two cafeterias were maintained by the Parent Teachers' Association.⁵⁹¹

This article had been written in June of 1922, and the enrollment numbers for the 1921-1922 school year were now complete. Note that at that time, students graduated from high school after eleventh grade, not twelfth grade. Table 4.2 shows the enrollment numbers as follows:

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

Table 4.2 Mercedes ISD Student Enrollment, 1922

Kindergarten	105
First	452
Second	100
Third	119
Fourth	104
Fifth	87
Sixth	73
Seventh	62
HS Eighth	71
HS Ninth	35
HS Tenth	33
HS Eleventh	32
Total enrollment	1273

Source: Data from “Large Proportion of Scholastic Eligibles Are Attending Mercedes Public Schools,” *Mercedes Tribune*, June 14, 1922

In Table 4.2, it is interesting to note the “bottleneck” in first grade, possibly indicating large numbers of children retained in that grade level. Also, it could be said that if the pattern holds true over the years, the diminishing numbers at subsequent grade levels after first grade seems to indicate that students are dropping out every year, and a very small number finally reaches the last grade, which is the eleventh grade, and then graduate. A look at the Class of 1922 listing shows that all thirty-two graduates are Anglo American.⁵⁹² The previous Class of 1921 listed the first Mexican American graduate from the Mercedes High School, Mary Villarreal, who would later briefly become a school teacher in the Mercedes schools.⁵⁹³

Two more articles in the *Mercedes Tribune* in November of 1922 and in September of 1923 continue to report severe overcrowding with little done to alleviate the situation. The 1922

⁵⁹² Class of 1922, “Wall of Fame.”

⁵⁹³ Minutes, April 25, 1927.

article reports that “Gordon Damon of the State Department of Education made an inspection of Mercedes Schools. His one criticism was the schools’ overcrowded condition, especially in the first two grades.”⁵⁹⁴ The 1923 article reports that schools will open with few problems, except for that of “overcrowding throughout the district, in particular at North School.”⁵⁹⁵ Attempts by the school officials to have a school bond issue and subsequent tax increase in order to construct more buildings and address the overcrowding issue are met with resistance by community members. A town meeting was held in November of 1923 by school officials in order to answer community questions about the needed bond election. The newspaper article about the town meeting stated:

The crowded condition of the schools is due almost entirely to an increase among the children of Mexican parentage attending school, it was stated. The high school and the Harriet Claycomb grammar school are not overcrowded, Mr. Moffett [school board president] stated, but a badly overcrowded situation exists in the North Side school, where 452 pupils are enrolled in 9 rooms [50:1 ratio]. The Harriet Claycomb enrollment is 435 and the high school enrollment 204... Speaking for the board, Mr. Moffett stated that the question on which an expression of opinion was desired from the public was whether or not the time was ripe for the building of a new unit for the North Side pupils which would take care of the children of Mexican parentage up to and through the 7th grade ... The sentiment of the meeting seemed opposed to a bond issue in order to increase the North Side facilities or to provide an auditorium to the high school. No figures were presented to show what amount of tax increase would be needed to enable the schools to operate without showing a deficit.⁵⁹⁶

It appeared that the community attending, which consisted of representatives of various civic organizations, the majority of which had Anglo American patrons, did not feel that they should have to pay additional tax money in order to expand the North Side School where the entire enrollment consisted of “children of Mexican parentage.”⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹⁴ “Valley Schools are Above State Average,” *Mercedes Tribune*, November 1, 1922.

⁵⁹⁵ “Mercedes Schools Will Open Monday,” *Mercedes Tribune*, September 5, 1923.

⁵⁹⁶ “Sentiment of Meeting Against School Bond Issue; Tax Increase is Needed,” *Mercedes Tribune*, November 28, 1923. Also “Meet Does Not Favor Bond Issue,” *Mercedes News*, November 30, 1923.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

In 1924, the Mercedes schools were visited by an inspector from the State Department of Education, and the results of the report were published in an article in the *Mercedes News* with the title “Mercedes Complimented on Splendid School System.”⁵⁹⁸ Ironically, although the district is described in the headline as “splendid,” the article lists several recommendations regarding the deplorable conditions which exist at the North Side School. The recommendations read as follows:

That due commendation be given for the following indications of continued progress within the past year...two rooms and two teachers have been added to take care of the greatly increased enrollment in the school for Mexican children...It is indeed disappointing to find in Mercedes such badly ventilated, poorly lighted, antiquated buildings as those now used to house the Mexican children ... [It is recommended] that the rooms in the Mexican buildings be provided with shades and desks. The shades are an immediate necessity, for the glare in all rooms is extremely hard on the eyes.⁵⁹⁹

The addition of two rooms and two teachers mentioned above reduced the pupil/teacher ratio down to 45:1, a ratio that improved the previous year’s 50:1 ratio but that was still not conducive to student learning, considering the other reported conditions. School board minutes from the time period reported above indicate that the two rooms added to the school were built out of the lumber resulting from the tearing down of previous school buildings on the south side after building new stucco and brick buildings there.⁶⁰⁰ The disparities between the north side and south side schools are obvious, and no doubt upset many Mexican American parents who were unable to do anything about it, since they held no political power in city or school offices at that time.

In an archived interview with a Goldsby Poag Goza, a former 1927 graduate of Mercedes who later became a school teacher with the school district, the interviewer asked Mrs. Goza

⁵⁹⁸ “Mercedes Complimented on Splendid School System,” *Mercedes News*, February 22, 1924.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁰ Minutes, April 11, 1925.

whether there was any evidence of segregation or discrimination that she could see when she was growing up and later as a school teacher. Her reply was:

No, no, nothing ... I wasn't conscious back in those days ... in 1914 I was three years old ... and I was not aware of any of these things, because I grew up in a place where I played with ... Spanish speaking children and it never occurred to me that there was any difference ... and I have to thank Lou Saucedo, who lives around here, because she taught me Spanish ... because we had to play, we had to communicate ... and she learned English from me.⁶⁰¹

Mrs. Goza was a popular Spanish teacher at the Mercedes High School for many years who after retirement became interested in the city and school district's history. She contributed articles to *The Mercedes Enterprise 75th Anniversary Edition* and was active in the Hidalgo County Historical Association. Her articles regarding the school district's history never mention the condition of the North Side School in its early days, nor the fact that no Anglo children attended that campus.

In writing about living in the Rio Grande Valley, Dr. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, who attended Mercedes schools between 1934 and 1946, felt compelled to point out that racial injustice, discrimination and prejudice existed during his school years. However, he stated, "... I also think it incumbent on one to repeat that Texas Mexicans also discriminated against their own."⁶⁰² He went on to say, "in my youth, in Mercedes and in the other Valley towns without exception, racism was a given."⁶⁰³ He says that he attended North Ward Elementary School, "a one hundred percent Texas Mexican school with Anglo teachers."⁶⁰⁴ He remembers that even in the town's Catholic parochial school, racism existed. "In the 1920s ... my parents ... disenrolled my oldest sister, Clarissa ... [because] ... German Catholic families saw to it that Anglo and

⁶⁰¹ Goza, interview.

⁶⁰² Hinojosa-Smith, "Living On The River," 216.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 217.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., 218.

Mexican schoolchildren were to be taught in separate rooms.”⁶⁰⁵ Mrs. Kennedy, another former teacher in Mercedes, was interviewed for a college history class project in 2002. When asked to describe the town, she mentioned that there were two movie theaters in town, one on the south side and another on the north side. She added that:

The Hispanic population favored the north side theatre, which showed mainly Spanish movies. The south side showed movies for the Anglo populations. The theatres weren't actively segregated; they just preferred the north theatre.⁶⁰⁶

The comments about segregation and discrimination in the town of Mercedes and its schools reveals that while some thought that racism and discrimination existed, many members of both the Mexican American and the Anglo community may have been unaware of any disparities, did not consider these situations to be disparities, or else they did not wish to think about or admit to the inequalities they had to have known existed. It was the way things were, and few questioned the status quo at the time that they lived it. Many Mexican Americans felt that there was little they could do about it. Dr. Hinojosa-Smith commented that there may have been federal laws passed to address segregation and discrimination; to “improve our lot or that of any other group, [but] experience and common sense have demonstrated that laws that are not enforced are but words on paper.”⁶⁰⁷

Dr. Hector P. García, founder of the American G.I. Forum, was a 1932 graduate of Mercedes High School. His parents José and Faustina García were both schoolteachers in Llera, Mexico when the Mexican Revolution broke out in 1917. José's professional credentials as a schoolteacher were unrecognized in this county, so after settling in Mercedes where other family members resided, he opened up a dry goods store. Mr. García always promoted the importance of a good education to his children, and six of the children including Hector became medical

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 219.

⁶⁰⁶ Kennedy, interview.

⁶⁰⁷ Hinojosa-Smith, “Living On The River,” 225.

doctors through perseverance and hard work. Although Dr. Hector P. García passed away in 1996, he left many archived interviews, speeches and written works detailing some of his experiences in Mercedes schools. In various interviews conducted for the purpose of filming the documentary *Justice For My People* in 1992, Dr. García spoke about the acceptance of the status quo in Mercedes:

We lived across the tracks in Mercedes. See, it was an accepted fact at that time that all the Mexican students would go to the segregated schools. And nobody knew the difference, that it was unconstitutional. We went along and at school our main job was to get a good education. In other words, we were not fighting discrimination and segregation because we did not know that it really existed. It was an accepted fact that in South Texas we were divided by the railroad tracks. Mercedes was no different. We accepted the fact that we went to the segregated schools.⁶⁰⁸

Dr. Hector P. García went on to say that he was the sole Mexican American accepted to the University of Texas Medical School in Galveston in 1936. There were only one hundred applicants allowed admittance every year, and of those only one Mexican American was allowed in. “My brother, Dr. José Antonio García was the one in his year. Dr. Clotilde García, my sister, was one in [her] year.”⁶⁰⁹ Dr. Xicoténcatl Pérez García, Hector’s brother, was also interviewed for the same documentary. When asked to describe the atmosphere of what it was like being in Mercedes, Texas at that particular time as children growing up, he responded, “We went to a segregated school, the North Ward; it was during the Depression, and everything was hard. I have a picture of me and my brother C.P. García with a group, the North Ward Grammar School group there. We were both shoeless.”⁶¹⁰ The photo that follows was graciously loaned to the researcher by another member of that class, Juventino I. de León, who is pictured third from the right in the front row. Dr. Cuitláhuac P. García, brother of Xicoténcatl and Hector, is pictured in

⁶⁰⁸ Hector P. García, interview by KERA-TV South Texas Public Broadcasting System, Inc., Corpus Christi, TX, 1992, <http://www.justiceformypeople.org/drhector.html> (accessed June 27, 2010).

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ Xicoténcatl García, interview by KERA-TV South Texas Public Broadcasting System, Inc., Corpus Christi, TX, 1992, <http://www.justiceformypeople.org/drhector.html> (accessed June 27, 2010).

the front row with dark pants and no shoes. The teacher is Miss Alma Whatley, who taught in Mercedes schools for many years.⁶¹¹



Figure 4.1. Fifth Grade Class at North Ward Grammar School, 1935, Mercedes, Texas. Photo courtesy of the Juventino I. de León Personal Collection

Dr. Hector P. García often told the story that he was motivated to get a good education and become a medical doctor not only because of his parents' insistence on it, but also because a teacher once told him, "No Mexican will ever make an 'A' in my class." He never forgot this teacher's words, and this made him particularly sensitive to educational discrimination in later years as an activist with the American G.I. Forum.⁶¹²

⁶¹¹ Juventino I. de León, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Mercedes, TX, April 18, 2011.

⁶¹² "Hector P. Garcia, A Texas Legend," Website, University of Texas Medical Branch, <http://www.utmb.edu/drgarcia/educ.htm> (accessed October 14, 2010).

The decade of the 1930s was a very difficult time financially for the Mercedes school district and the community. In the May 8th, 1930 school board meeting, there were twenty-five teachers' contracts approved. Of these, twenty-two were females and three were males. Salaries ranged from \$100.00 a month to \$170.00 a month.⁶¹³ In September of 1930, it was discovered that the North Side School was badly overcrowded, and another teacher was hired at a salary of \$100.00 a month.⁶¹⁴ Even though finances were beginning to be strained, the board approved the purchase of twenty shoulder pads for the football team. In November of 1931, it was moved and approved that "all future contracts with ladies employed by this board, bear a clause stating that any lady teacher marrying during her term as teacher, automatically voids her contract for the balance of the same, without notice."⁶¹⁵ In March of 1932, the financial situation in the school district became so severe due to the Depression that measures were taken to reduce district costs. These included the elimination of one principal, the elimination of the position of department heads, the elimination of some teachers, the reduction of salaries, and the reduction of various items of operating expenses. Teachers' salaries went down to a range of \$84.00 a month to \$138.00 a month for the principal.⁶¹⁶ In April of that year, the board decided to "borrow from the teachers in payment of back salaries the sum of \$3,692.00 due on the February pay roll."⁶¹⁷

With the consistent overcrowding at North Elementary where all the children were Mexican American, it would be expected that the Mexican American community would protest the bad conditions at that school. If there were protests or complaints, they are not recorded in school board minutes until 1933. An apparent incident at one of the schools caused several local

⁶¹³ Minutes, May 8, 1930.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., September 29, 1930.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., November 12, 1931.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., March 15, 1932.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., April 10, 1933.

gentlemen to appear at the March 30, 1933 school board meeting with a complaint. The paragraph detailing the information reads:

Mr. A.S. Adame, Mr. Ben Zamora, Mr. A.N. Brown and Mr. J.M. Chapa, appeared before the board. Mr. Adame, through Mr. Brown and Mr. Zamora, presented a matter in which he thought his child might have been discriminated against in the schools. After a thorough explanation of the same, Mr. Adame expressed himself as being satisfied, and after understanding it, that his child had been treated with fairness and in the same manner as any other pupil.⁶¹⁸

Unfortunately, no further explanations are given, and the only interpretation that can be given this incident is that Mr. Adame appeared with three other men, one of which was presumably Anglo and the other two being Mexican American. He may have not felt comfortable addressing the board in English, and needed assistance in that manner, but we are not certain because the board minutes do not state that. The minutes do not elaborate on what Mr. Adame considered discriminatory, but the importance of the incident is that he felt compelled to approach the board with the matter, perhaps because the campus principal had not given him sufficient explanation or remedy to his problem. If Mr. Brown was present to help interpret, we can only assume that the other two Mexican American men may have also assisted in interpreting, or they may have been present to give support to Mr. Adame's case; perhaps because they, too, had some similar issues. Another possibility was that one of the men was Mr. Adame's legal counsel. One of the men, Mr. J.M. Chapa, was the first Mexican American male to have graduated from Mercedes High School in 1925, and was presumably better educated than many Mexican Americans in the town, at least through the American school system.⁶¹⁹ However, this can only be speculation and the incident is illustrated here because it is the first to appear in school board minutes regarding a perceived discrimination incident. This appearance at a Mercedes school board meeting by a

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., March 30, 1933.

⁶¹⁹ Class of 1925, "Wall of Fame." The first Mexican American to graduate was a girl, Mary Villarreal, who graduated in 1921. She later briefly taught in the Mercedes school district.

Mexican American parent claiming discrimination was very rare, and we can only wonder what the details of the incident were.

When writing about whether discrimination existed in Mercedes, Dr. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith stated:

The answer is yes, and it is also a complicated yes...[because] some Texas Anglos also discriminated socially against other Texas Anglos. The same applied among Texas Mexicans, particularly those in the professional class who looked down upon other Texas Mexicans.⁶²⁰

Dr. Hinojosa-Smith elaborated that the discrimination was often based more on the amount of wealth and place of residence than on the ethnicity, and that middle and upper class Mexican Americans often “rubbed elbows” with Anglos. He added that intermarriages often occurred, as in his family, and listed other Anglo surnamed Hispanics with last names like Werbiski, McVey, Handy, Howell, Reger, Champion, Billings, and Closner.⁶²¹

Another interviewee, Eddie Howell, whose grandfather Joseph Henry Howell married a young Hispanic widow in the early 1900s, reflected on the fact that his great-grandfather William Albert Howell had been very angry when his son had married a “Messican.”⁶²² He disowned his son and never spoke to him again. According to Eddie, his grandfather and father sometimes spoke bitterly about those days, remembering a time during the Depression when his grandfather wrote to his wealthy father and brothers in Ohio asking for help and was denied any assistance. Eddie laughs about a later time in the 1960s when the descendants of the Ohio Howells came to the Valley looking for descendants of Joseph Henry, and “they were in shock to see that the Howells down here were Hispanic.”⁶²³ Eddie goes on to say, “just knowing how my grandfather was treated...as far as being discriminated...has always inspired me to seek justice

⁶²⁰ Hinojosa-Smith, “Living On The River,” 215.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² Eddie Howell, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, McAllen, TX, December 29, 2010.

⁶²³ Ibid.

or to make people realize...we're all one human race.”⁶²⁴ Eddie also tells about the time as a young boy that he wanted to get a flat top haircut because his older brother James had gotten one. James, who was very fair-skinned, had gotten his flat top with a Weslaco barber. When Eddie who was not as fair as his brother tried to sit in the chair, the barber told him, “I don’t cut Mexicans’ hair; get out of here.”⁶²⁵ Discrimination in this case seemed to be based on skin color or appearance.

In 1934, an interesting item is included in a December Mercedes ISD board meeting. Apparently, a course was being taught, possibly in the evenings although no indication is given in the board minutes, called Vocational Adult Spanish. The course was taught by Beatrice Hinojosa and was intended to teach Spanish to adults who did not speak it. This implies that some Anglo adults, possibly those who employed Mexican Americans who did not speak English, were making consistent efforts to acquire some Spanish language skills. The motion was made that the \$20 allowance granted to Ms. Hinojosa as teacher of the course “be rescinded as the project had been approved.”⁶²⁶ This leaves some question as to the board action, on whether the amount was not allowed, whether the project itself was now cancelled, or whether the original project did not include a pay allowance for the teacher. However, several articles and notices in the Mercedes newspapers indicated an interest in some community members in learning Spanish.⁶²⁷

School board minutes also reveal that on several instances, some of the school janitors were referred to as “Mexican janitors.”⁶²⁸ In the September 10th, 1941 board meeting, a motion

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Minutes, December 12, 1934.

⁶²⁷ “Adult Spanish Classes,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, December 10, 1941. Also “Spanish Classes Today,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, November 23, 1950.

⁶²⁸ Minutes, March 11, 1937 and September 10, 1941.

was made and approved after discussion, and “the Mexican janitors were ordered to be paid \$1.50 per day for each day [of] work, and Mr. Bradshaw was to be paid \$54.00 per month.”⁶²⁹ If the Mexican janitors worked all thirty days in a month, their monthly pay would be \$45.00, but it was probably less than that if they had at least one day off a week. Mr. Bradshaw’s rate was \$2.70 per day if we assume he had two days off per week or \$1.80 per day if he worked thirty days in the month. It is difficult to make comparisons because we do not know the amount of days worked by the Mexican janitors compared to Mr. Bradshaw, or the number of classrooms that needed to be cleaned, or any other details of their work load. However, the fact that a distinction is made between Mr. Bradshaw and the “Mexican janitors” calls to mind several questions regarding equity of pay. In later school board meetings, the term “Mexican” is dropped regarding the janitors, although a listing of the janitors in the school system show the Chief Janitor, Mr. Bradshaw, to be Anglo, and the other janitors to be Mexican American.⁶³⁰

Regardless of the financial difficulties, the district’s coach earned as much or more pay as the district school principals. In 1929, the board minutes revealed that Coach Carr P. Kitchens was approved to earn \$238.33 per month, while the next highest salary, that of the North Side School principal, was \$165 per month.⁶³¹ During the Depression years when salaries dropped, the coach’s salary dropped also, but still remained the highest paid position second only to the superintendent. In 1933, Coach H.L. Schmalzried earned \$186 per month while some teachers’ pay dropped down to \$84 per month. The district also continued to purchase athletic equipment even though cuts were made to professional staff and instructional materials.⁶³² This brings to mind recent events during the current recession where school community members in the Rio

⁶²⁹ Ibid., September 10, 1941.

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ Ibid., May 9, 1929.

⁶³² Ibid., April 10, 1933.

Grande Valley are protesting the fact that while teachers are being laid off due to diminishing education funds, the athletic program often does not suffer financial consequences.⁶³³ This might suggest that some attitudes and values regarding athletic programs do not change over time.

The decade of the 1940s saw a slowly increasing pay scale for district employees, but salaries did not return to pre-Depression amounts until the latter years of the decade. With the exception of one or two Mexican Americans, the administrators and teachers in the school district were Anglo American from the start of the school district until the early 1950s.⁶³⁴ The school district continued to experience financial difficulties, often having to take a short term loan from the Hidalgo County Bank or the First National Bank in order to meet the monthly payroll.⁶³⁵ The school board members running for office rarely had serious competition, and never from the Mexican American community. The number of votes cast was small, with some apparent voter apathy possibly caused by the lack of opposition to incumbents. For example, during a school board election in April of 1941, a newspaper article in the *News Tribune* reported, “Three men, L.H. Henry, W. E. Hoekstra, and Frank Hendricks, were elected without opposition, each polling 57 votes.”⁶³⁶

The voter apathy changed during the latter part of the 1940s and the early 1950s as more heated races took place. In the mid-1940s, there was more of a Mexican American presence in the school board minutes. In a petition presented to the board for an increase in tax revenue necessary to hire more teachers, increase teacher salaries and address overcrowding at several campuses; the signatures included Mexican American businessmen Abel García, Luis R. Salinas,

⁶³³ Neal Morton, “E-E School Board Hesitates to Cut Athletics,” *The Monitor*, April 20, 2011, <http://www.themonitor.com/articles/hesitates-49378-school-athletics.html> (accessed May 30, 2011).

⁶³⁴ Minutes, June 13, 2008 to June 11, 1954.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*, September 28, 1937. Also April 14, 1943 and April 16, 1945.

⁶³⁶ “57 Votes Cast in School Poll,” *Mercedes News Tribune*, April 11, 1941.

B. García and Rafael Verdusco.⁶³⁷ By then several Mexican American teachers had been hired, including Mrs. Clotilde Canales and Mrs. Rey de la Cruz. This was new because until then, the teacher population at the Mercedes Independent School District had been one hundred percent Anglo. It could perhaps be attributed to the fact that Mexican Americans were now graduating from high school and college in increasing numbers, and therefore there were more available for teaching jobs. Some interviewees, however, reported having the credentials to teach or to be administrators and yet were unable to secure employment in “Anglo-entrenched school districts.”⁶³⁸

A look at the demographics of the graduating classes at Mercedes High School show the gradual growth of the Mexican American school population. The following chart, Table 4.3, of selected graduation years shows how the Mexican American graduates who were a minority for a time eventually became the majority group.

⁶³⁷ Minutes, January 30, 1946.

⁶³⁸ González, interview.

Table 4.3 Mercedes High School Graduates, by Surname, Selected Years, 1914 – 1953

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Graduates</u>	<u>Anglo</u>	<u>Mexican-American</u>
1914	1	1	0
1916	7	7	0
1920	12	12	0
1921	16	15	1
1925	25	24	1
1932	33	26	7
1937	52	43	9
1941	47	39	8
1945	54	29	25
1950	53	27	26
1953	53	18	35

Source: School Board Minutes 1909 – 1953. Also news articles in the *Mercedes Tribune* and the *Mercedes Enterprise*, 1921 – 1953.

The first Mexican American to graduate from Mercedes High School in 1921 was Mary Villarreal.⁶³⁹ The Mexican American graduates steadily increased in number and percentage and in 1953, Mexican Americans became more than fifty percent of the total number of graduates. The Mexican American majority has never been relinquished in the years since.⁶⁴⁰

Changes were occurring as evidenced in the Mercedes local newspapers also. Dr. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith recalls that the newspapers in town were published once a week. In writing about *The Mercedes Enterprise*, he stated:

⁶³⁹ Class of 1922, "Wall of Fame."

⁶⁴⁰ Minutes, 1909 – 2008. Also "Wall of Fame," 1914 – 2008.

[It was read] predominantly by the Anglo residents. It was a typical small-town newspaper with notes about book clubs, garden societies, visits from out-of-town relatives, and such typical fare ... few to no Texas Mexican names appeared in the paper. Those that did, did so usually at semester's end when some of us made the scholastic Honor Roll or when some of us graduated from high school ... in the main, however, it was their newspaper, not ours.⁶⁴¹

In October of 1941, the only Mexican American that was mentioned in the newspaper was one accused of attacking an Anglo woman. The article reads:

A young Mexican is being held for questioning in the Hidalgo County jail, following the accosting of Miss Ettie Ivey, Mercedes woman, last Friday evening about 9 o'clock, on Virginia Avenue, two blocks from the business district. Miss Ivey, who was walking to a store for purchases, stated that the man, who had followed her for two or more blocks, suddenly accosted her, asking where she was going. Upon a rebuff, she was seized and in a struggle, fell and suffered a right broken wrist. Screams frightened the man away, and her purse was not taken.⁶⁴²

There were three newspapers in Mercedes beginning with the earliest editions in 1907. Over time, different names were used which included the *Mercedes News*, the *Mercedes News-Tribune* and *The Mercedes Enterprise*. All of the news articles in these newspapers up until the late 1940s had no Mexican Americans in them except for alleged criminals and the names of schoolchildren who appeared on the honor roll or on graduation lists in Mercedes school news. There was no society news for Mexican Americans, or news of any kind except as mentioned above. This changed when in February of 1950, a wedding announcement appeared for a young woman named Sofía Martínez who was marrying Crisanto Villarreal.⁶⁴³ This was unusual because until now, social events involving Mexican Americans had been largely ignored by the Mercedes newspapers.

⁶⁴¹ Hinojosa-Smith, "Living On The River," 220.

⁶⁴² "Mercedes Mexican Held for Questioning," *The Mercedes Enterprise*, October 17, 1941.

⁶⁴³ "Sofía Martínez Becomes Bride of Crisanto Villarreal on Sunday," *The Mercedes Enterprise*, February 2, 1950.

On February 9th, 1950, an article appeared wherein Jesús García and Rodolfo Garza ran for office in the Mercedes City Council.⁶⁴⁴ A week later, Dr. Xico P. García, the brother of well-known Dr. Hector P. García, announced his candidacy for the Mercedes City Council.⁶⁴⁵ The García family had many members who were well-educated and some of whom had become middle-class business owners. The A.G. García Food Store was considered one of the largest grocery stores in the mid-Valley, and people came from many miles away to shop there. Other García family members also owned dry goods stores, a lumber company, and several other small neighborhood grocery stores that did well.⁶⁴⁶ According to several accounts, they were very active politically and belonged to several organizations, such as the Woodmen of the World, which met regularly and often discussed city and school affairs.⁶⁴⁷ An article in 1941 in *The Mercedes Enterprise* shows the new board of directors of the Mercedes Chamber of Commerce. Although there were many Mexican American businesses in Mercedes at that time, not one member of the Chamber of Commerce as shown was Mexican American. They may not have been welcome, because several Hispanic businessmen apparently established a Mexican Chamber of Commerce in Mercedes.⁶⁴⁸

An item is listed in the February 1949 school board meeting which gives a good example of the type of response in those years that the all – Anglo school board and the all – Anglo school administration had for any Mexican American complaints about educational matters. The minutes state:

⁶⁴⁴ “García, Garza Announce for City Council,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, February 9, 1950.

⁶⁴⁵ “Xico García To Run for Council Post,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, February 16, 1950.

⁶⁴⁶ Delia Ruelas de León, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Mercedes, TX, April 18, 2011.

⁶⁴⁷ Vito Buenrostro, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Mercedes, TX, May 23, 2011.

⁶⁴⁸ Minutes, February 9, 1949.

A committee from the Mexican Chamber of Commerce, composed of Jesús García, Rodolfo Garza, H.P. Domínguez and Mr. Barrera appeared before the Board to discuss the matter of providing more or additional class rooms for the Elementary or Grade schools on the North side. A full discussion was had of this subject, but no definite plan was adopted, but a committee from this Board promised to meet with the Mexican Chamber of Commerce in the near future to see if something definite could be mapped out.⁶⁴⁹

Nothing regarding this matter was ever mentioned again in school board minutes. It is not known whether the school board's promise to meet was kept or not. But it appears that the Mexican American community was becoming more active. It was not asking at this time that segregation be eliminated, but it seemed to have become obvious to Mexican Americans in Mercedes by now, that not only were facilities separate, they were also unequal and inadequate.

According to school board minutes, two Mexican American businessmen entered the race for Mercedes School Board Trustees in April of 1948, Silverio S. Hinojosa and Francisco Garibay. Out of 1,299 votes cast, Dr. Edwards received 712, Mr. T.B. Ewing received 755, Mr. Hinojosa received 541 and Mr. Garibay received 496. The Mexican American community participated heavily in this board election, but the two Mexican American candidates did not win. In April of 1949, another Mexican American candidate for the Mercedes School Board was advanced. This race also elicited a lot of interest, because the number of votes cast suddenly increased in number compared to previous elections where 50 to 80 votes would be cast. In this election, 438 votes were cast. Mr. Lauderdale received 345; Mr. J.R. Barry received 229; Mr. Whitlock received 155 and Mr. Mondragón, the only Mexican American candidate, received 125 votes. Mr. Mondragón was not elected, but his inclusion in the election indicated an interest on the part of the Mexican American community in having someone to represent it in school district matters. A third attempt by a Mexican American to get on the school board occurred in April of 1952 when Juventino de León ran against Ernest Marchant, James P. McElyea, and Aaron

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

Johnston. Although 1,396 votes were cast, which was a record number of votes to this date, Mr. de León was 20 votes shy of getting elected.⁶⁵⁰ Mr. Juventino I. de León remembers when his father ran for the school board. “He really worked hard and he thought he had a very good chance, but when the votes were counted, he didn’t make it,” Mr. de León recalls. “In those days, Mexican Americans didn’t ask for recounts, either,” he added.⁶⁵¹ Mrs. de León recalls that Juventino de León, Sr. was a popular figure in the Mexican American community. “He was often asked to be Master of Ceremonies at Boy Scout and Girl Scout [functions], and he was also many times the principal speaker for the graduation ceremonies held at North Ward every year,” she stated.⁶⁵² When asked to explain further about graduation ceremonies at North Elementary, she said that they were “a big deal” for the students who had finished sixth grade, and that sometimes important men from the school district came to speak also. She stated that the school officials said that they wanted to make sure it was a nice ceremony, since many of them would not go on to junior high and high school.⁶⁵³

The first Mexican American school board trustee for the Mercedes Independent School District in forty years was not to be elected until April of 1954. Nine candidates, six of which were Anglo and three were Mexican American, ran for two trustee slots wherein only 429 votes were cast. The incumbent Dr. T.G. Edwards, who had served many years as trustee already, was re-elected with 292 votes. Receiving 397 votes was Joaquín J. Fernández. All other candidates received three votes or less each.⁶⁵⁴ Mr. Fernández several times made attempts to better conditions at North Elementary; for example, asking for toilet and water fountain repairs for that

⁶⁵⁰ Minutes. April 9, 1952.

⁶⁵¹ Juventino de León, interview.

⁶⁵² Delia de León, interview.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁴ Minutes, April 14, 1954.

campus⁶⁵⁵ which were eventually repaired several months later. Mr. Fernández did not complete his term of office, relocating to New Mexico in 1955.⁶⁵⁶ Possibly as a show of good faith in retaining a Mexican American trustee, or possibly under political pressure, Mr. Mike Hinojosa was appointed to fill the unexpired portion of Mr. Fernández's term.⁶⁵⁷ In 1956 a second Mexican American trustee was elected to the school board, Miss Elvira Hinojosa, so that now there were two Mexican American trustees and five Anglo trustees.⁶⁵⁸

The photographs that follow in Figure 4.2 show how South Grammar School and North Grammar School compared, at least in their front facade. The photo is taken from a 1947 edition of the Mercedes High School yearbook, *The Bengal*. The north side elementary school is obviously smaller and less ostentatious than the south side elementary school. South Grammar is a multistory building with architectural embellishments, and North Grammar is a much plainer one-story building with none of the corridors, arches, towers or balconies that South Grammar showcases. It should be noted that the townspeople and school officials in Mercedes used different names for these two schools at varying times in their existence. North Elementary was also called the north side school, North Side Elementary, North Grammar School, North Ward, the Latin American School, the Mexican School, and School # 2 in school board minutes, newspaper articles, and school yearbooks.⁶⁵⁹ In 1964, this school's name was finally changed to John F. Kennedy Elementary, a name which it retains today even though it has been remodeled numerous times.⁶⁶⁰

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., May 11, 1954.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., October 12, 1955.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., November 9, 1955.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., April 11, 1956.

⁶⁵⁹ Minutes, 1908 – 2008. Also *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1941 – 2008, and *The Bengal*, Mercedes Yearbook, Mercedes ISD, Mercedes, Texas, 1941 – 2008.

⁶⁶⁰ Minutes, February 9, 1964.

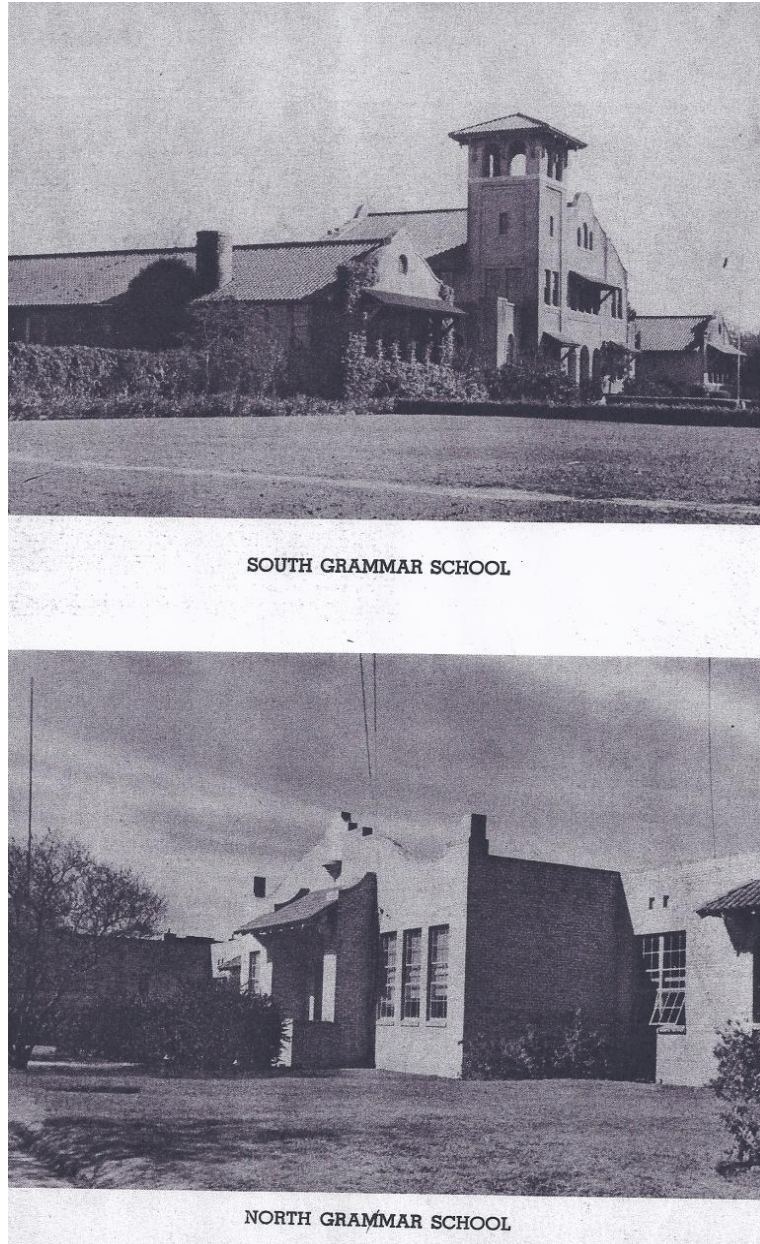


Figure 4.2: South Grammar School and North Grammar School, 1947, Mercedes, Texas. From *The Bengal*, 1947.

South Elementary was also called the south side school, South Side Elementary, South Grammar School, South Ward, the English speaking school, Leon R. Graham Elementary, and School # 1 in school board minutes, newspaper articles, and school yearbooks.⁶⁶¹ Although

⁶⁶¹ Minutes, 1908 – 2008; *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1941 – 2008; *The Bengal*, 1941 – 2008.

many photographs of the south side elementary school exist, the photograph above of the north side elementary school was the only one located by the researcher.

Early in 1950, an article appeared in *The Mercedes Enterprise* which addressed the issues of overcrowding in Mercedes schools. The article said 123 students had enrolled in Mercedes schools on a single day in January. According to the article, “these children are residents of Mercedes who have been out of the Valley working with their parents and are just now returning to the Valley.”⁶⁶² The school district’s answer to this problem was to go to half-day classes, since there were insufficient numbers of teachers and classrooms to accommodate all of the students. Superintendent Graham then stated that he would not be inclined to hire additional teachers just for the peak three months of January, February and March. He further stated,

The ideal solution would be to place all late entrants in rooms to themselves where they could begin together and go along together. However, under present conditions most of them have to be placed in rooms with children who have already been in school for three or four months and are far ahead of the late registrants.⁶⁶³

He was, of course, speaking about the migrant students, and the solution in later years in Mercedes would be to have a Migrant School where students were indeed separated from the rest and attended classes more hours per day than the regular students in order to “catch up” on instructional time lost to the family’s work patterns. An article in the newspaper the following week gave the enrollment in Mercedes schools as having peaked at a total of 2,230 students.⁶⁶⁴

Mexican Americans were not the only group that was marginalized in Mercedes schools. Several African American families lived in the town, but as happened with other nearby Valley towns, the children were sent to special “colored” schools in Weslaco, Edinburg or Harlingen. School board records show that the Mercedes children were bused through a commercial carrier,

⁶⁶² “New Students Enrolled This Week in School,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, January 9, 1950.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁴ “Enrollment Higher But Small Increase Daily Attendance.” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, January 16, 1950.

the Valley Transit Company. The item entered in the section “Bills allowed and ordered Paid,” reads “Transportation - 2 months - Negro pupils to Weslaco ... [\$] 25.40.”⁶⁶⁵ African American children were forced to attend schools in Harlingen, Edinburg or Weslaco where they had caring teachers but limited instructional resources and facilities.⁶⁶⁶

Mr. de León, who was a barber in Brownsville and later in Mercedes, spoke about how African Americans were treated in the town. He stated:

We had nothing against them ... we all needed to work and survive ... one day one of them came in the shop and I sat him down and put the cloth around him, getting ready to cut his hair ... but the other barber in there said, ‘No, we can’t cut his hair; he has to leave,’ and I asked him why and he said, ‘If we cut his hair here, we won’t get any Anglo business, and we can’t afford that.’⁶⁶⁷

Unfortunately, it was a matter of social levels, he explained. “The Anglos were on top, we [Mexican Americans] were next, and lowest were the African Americans.”⁶⁶⁸ He said he felt bad when he thought about it now, but back then it was a matter of survival, and he had to feed his family, so he did what the other barber told him.⁶⁶⁹

In 1956, a new brick campus was built in the north part of town to alleviate the overcrowded conditions at North Elementary. This new campus was named Zachary Taylor Elementary School. In 1957, a brand new school was built in the south part of town which was named William B. Travis Elementary School.⁶⁷⁰ The old South Elementary School on Ohio Street was used for junior high students, and at one time was also used for migrant students. Its name was changed to Graham Elementary then, and later was just called Graham School. Taylor

⁶⁶⁵ Minutes, June 10, 1948.

⁶⁶⁶ Ashley-Fridie, 45.

⁶⁶⁷ Juventino de León, interview.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁰ Minutes, October 10, 1956 and July 10, 1957. It is interesting to note that the two new schools built in the 1950s were named for men who were considered Texan and American heroes who had fought against Mexicans. Taylor fought in the Mexican-American War, and Travis was considered one of the heroes of the battle of the Alamo during the Texas Revolution. See David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

School had almost one hundred percent Mexican American schoolchildren. All the Anglo children now became zoned to attend Travis Elementary, although as before, some Mexican American children were allowed to attend.⁶⁷¹

Student enrollment records for each of the schools dating back to this time period are not available. However, in reviewing newspaper articles listing honor roll students at the various schools in the district, certain patterns can be seen. Table 4.4 shows a compilation of honor roll records as they appeared in an article in *The Mercedes Enterprise* in December of 1941. This was prior to the building of the West, Taylor and Travis elementary schools.

Table 4.4 Honor Roll Students in Mercedes Schools, By Surname, 1941

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Anglo</u>	<u>Mexican American</u>
Mercedes High School	21	17	4
Mercedes Junior High School	39	18	21
South Elementary	33	30	3
North Elementary	30	0	30

Source: “Girls Lead Boys on Mercedes Honor Roll,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, December 5, 1941.

Although it is possible that at North Elementary some Anglo students did not achieve the honor roll, it is more likely that none were even enrolled. Several interviewees who attended North Elementary at this time say that they never saw an Anglo student enrolled while they were there.⁶⁷² Almost ten years later, with the addition of another campus in Mercedes, that of West Elementary, many Mexican American students living on the south side of town were excluded from South Elementary school and sent to West Elementary. Arturo de la Cerda was one of the

⁶⁷¹ Minutes, May 29, 1957.

⁶⁷² Natividad Gonzales, telephone interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, March 3, 2011; Arturo de la Cerda, e-mail message to Beatrice D. Edwards, April 5, 2011; Olga Benítez, telephone interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, March 31, 2011; Howell, interview.

interviewees who attended West Elementary. He talked about attending the school and indicated that it was attended only by Mexican American schoolchildren.

I started first grade at North Side Elementary School in 1948. After about 2 months there, I was transferred to West Elementary School. Kids who lived south of the railroad tracks (or Highway 83 which ran parallel) attended West Elementary or South Elementary School.⁶⁷³

West Elementary was built in 1948 to help accommodate the Mexican American children who were overcrowding North Elementary as well as South Elementary. According to Andy Martinez, whose younger siblings attended West Elementary, this school was considered a neighborhood school for Mexican American children living in the southwest part of town.⁶⁷⁴

There is no mention made in school board minutes as to where the children resided who attended West Elementary. It is unknown whether they resided on the south side of town, the north side of town or the west side of town.

There was a newspaper article in the September 5, 1950 edition of *The Mercedes Enterprise* which indicated that West Elementary opened in 1949, but had only the first three grades of students. This school year, it stated, it would also have fourth, fifth and possibly sixth grade. The article also said:

All children who were in the third year at the West School last year will automatically comprise its fourth grade this year. Those students who were sent to the fourth grade at the South School last year, will return to the West School and make up its fifth grade.⁶⁷⁵

It did not say why those students, or at least some of them, could not just remain at South School, although we can speculate as to the reasons why. Juanita Elena Peña recalls having to go to West Elementary. "I remember starting not knowing any English whatsoever ... none ...

⁶⁷³ de la Cerda, e-mail message.

⁶⁷⁴ Andrés Martínez, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Edinburg, TX, May 4, 2011.

⁶⁷⁵ "Schools Open Next Tuesday, Teachers Named For Both Grade And High School," *The Mercedes Enterprise*, September 5, 1950.

when I went to school I thought I knew things but I didn't because everything was in English.”⁶⁷⁶

Juanita goes on to say that she picked up English rather quickly and became one of the better students, but she was not transferred to South Elementary after learning English, although she lived in that attendance zone at that time.⁶⁷⁷

Table 4.5 shows that West Elementary, also known as South Vermont School for a while due to its location on South Vermont Street, did not appear to have any Anglo students on the honor roll list and likely did not have any enrolled at all, even though it was located on the south side of town.

Table 4.5 Honor Roll Students in Mercedes Schools, By Surname, 1950

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Anglo</u>	<u>Mexican American</u>
Mercedes High School	17	11	6
Mercedes Junior High School	40	24	16
South Elementary	72	60	12
West Elementary	37	0	37
North Elementary	27	0	27

Source: “Honor Roll At Mercedes Schools Listed By Superintendent Graham,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, December 21, 1950.

Not only with the students were the schools still showing segregation patterns, but also with the teachers assigned to the various campuses. Table 4.6 was compiled using teacher lists submitted by the superintendent for school board approval of contracts for the 1953-1954 school year. The table follows below.

⁶⁷⁶ Juanita Elena Peña, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Weslaco, TX, April 22, 2011.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

Table 4.6 Teacher Recommendations for the 1953 – 1954 School Year, By Surname

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Anglo</u>	<u>Mexican American</u>
Mercedes High School	20	20	0
Mercedes Junior High School	10	10	0
South Elementary	15	15	0
West Elementary	9	5	4
North Elementary	26	19	7

Source: Mercedes School Board Minutes, April 9, 1953.

The teachers' assigned campus was listed for the first time in the superintendent's list given to the school board. Previous lists did not include the assigned campus. It is possible that there were insufficient numbers of qualified Mexican American teachers when selecting staff from applicants. It is also possible that from the few that were available, the superintendent and principals felt that they were more needed at West Elementary and at North Elementary where the Mexican American children were concentrated than they were at the other three Anglo-majority campuses; or may have felt that they were not good enough to teach Anglo children.

Many of the Mercedes alumni interviewed attended North Elementary or West Elementary, but one attended South School for seven years in the 1950s. He stated,

Fortunately for me, South School was the school I attended, not because of income, but simply because I lived next to the school ... this was the school where all the Anglos attended, as well as higher income Hispanics ... my South School experiences were stressful, intimidating and frightening ... I can never forget playing the game 'follow the leader' ... everyone followed the leader and kissed Mrs. Crawford ... when it was my turn, she seemed uncomfortable, and purposely moved ... I felt ... she did not want to be kissed by me ... the other kids ... made fun of me ... I realized that Mrs. Crawford did not like me ...⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁸ Richard Rivera, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Weslaco, Texas, November 2, 2005.

When asked why he used the term, “fortunately,” Dr. Rivera replied that everybody knew that the South School had the best teachers and nicest facilities. In that sense, he was fortunate to be allowed to attend there.⁶⁷⁹ He further recalls when he moved up into junior high school and high school, calling it a “cultural shock,”⁶⁸⁰ because suddenly all of the district’s children were together in one place. He stated, “It was my recollection that students from North Ward and West Ward were older and seemed educationally behind students from South School.”⁶⁸¹ He also remembers that many of those students from the North and West schools seemed to have speaking and reading problems. He remembered seeing some of them one day, then suddenly being gone the next day, never to return. He further added,

I also remember the teachers and principals treating these students badly, having low tolerance, and expressing low expectations. Many were ‘pushed’ out of school, never reaching high school.⁶⁸²

Another interviewee also told about his experiences when he went to junior high school and mingled with Anglo students for the first time. He had attended North Elementary and West Elementary, and had not seen any Anglo students there.

There was only one junior high school, (now called middle school), in Mercedes at that time. So Mexican American students and Anglo students attended the same junior high school together. For the first time, I experienced diversity in the classroom. There were middle class Mexican American students who lived in the more affluent neighborhoods in Mercedes. These kids had attended elementary school with Anglo kids, and some of them seemed to mingle with Anglo students more readily than us students who had never been in racially mixed classes. In retrospect, it occurs to me that the majority, if not all of these Mexican American students that assimilated more easily, could have passed for Anglos themselves. From my perspective, and it could differ from other Mexican American students who might see it otherwise, the Anglo students sat in the seats in the front of the classroom. The teachers seemed to be teaching primarily to them.⁶⁸³

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

⁶⁸³ de la Cerda, e-mail message.

There are several important points in this testimony. This interviewee corroborates other data regarding the maintenance of a separate elementary school for Anglo schoolchildren in Mercedes for the first historical period. The interviewee, who graduated from Mercedes High School in 1960, realized that “these Mexican American students that assimilated more easily could have passed for Anglos themselves.”⁶⁸⁴ When he was asked what he meant by that, he responded that they dressed alike, spoke alike, and physically resembled Anglos. In retrospect, as he explained, they were obviously from the same social class.⁶⁸⁵

His last statement, “The teachers seemed to be teaching primarily to them,”⁶⁸⁶ is also striking in its similarity to what another interviewee expressed regarding his college education. Dr. Daniel Treviño recalls that when he attended Texas A & I University in Kingsville, Texas, in 1981, he was told by some professors that he could not sit in the front rows of a classroom, because those seats were reserved. After some weeks went by, Dr. Treviño realized that only Anglo students were permitted to sit in the front seats.⁶⁸⁷ The professors seemed to prefer to teach to the Anglo students, or at least tried to ensure that the Anglo students got the best seats in the classroom. The similarity of the experiences in different time periods and venues indicated that certain discriminatory practices, such as preferential treatment for certain student groups, endured for many years in a variety of educational situations.

Part II. Historical Period 1959 -1978

During this time period the presence of Mexican Americans in city government as well as on the Mercedes School Board became more evident. For the first half century of the school district’s existence, it was almost a hundred percent dominated by Anglos although there was a

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁷ Daniel Treviño, Jr., interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Mercedes, TX, May 18, 2011. Texas A & I University later became Texas A & M at Kingsville University.

large Mexican American community in town. The Mexican Americans that lived in Mercedes in the first fifty years were not all agricultural laborers in the low socioeconomic class. There were quite a few that were middle class business owners. In newspaper articles and in the school board minutes, as well as in the testimony given through the interviews, several prominent families had taken their place in civic affairs. The García family to which Dr. Hector P. García belonged was large, and many of the uncles, cousins and other members were grocery store owners, pharmacy owners, and even owned a lumber company. The Salinas family members were also grocery store owners; the Hinojosa family members had begun a meat market business that would eventually have them shipping meat products to European and Asian countries; and the Fernandez family members of Toluca Ranch were large landowners who had also begun to participate in city and school affairs.⁶⁸⁸

As mentioned earlier, as soon as Mr. Joaquín Fernández was elected to the school board in 1954 he began addressing the overcrowding issues and the poor facilities at North Elementary. The school board minutes for one of the meetings that same year said, “It was brought to the attention of the Board by Mr. Fernández that immediate repairs were needed on the toilets, water fountains, and light fixtures at North Elementary School.”⁶⁸⁹ Neither the minutes for that meeting nor subsequent meetings indicated that anything was done regarding repairs to the North Elementary school. Unfortunately, in 1955 Mr. Fernández relocated to New Mexico, and he resigned from the school board.⁶⁹⁰ He was replaced by another Mexican American, and in 1961, a third Mexican American was elected to the school board, so that the school board members that year were Rudy Salinas, Elvira Hinojosa, J.A. Fernández, Dr. Lawrence Cox, Mrs. Jean Lauder,

⁶⁸⁸ Minutes, 1908 – 1958. Also *Mercedes News*, *Mercedes Tribune*, *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1921 – 1958.

⁶⁸⁹ Minutes, November 10, 1954.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, March 9, 1955 and October 12, 1955.

F. G. Knapp and Curtis Reagan.⁶⁹¹ The strength in numbers now helped to put pressure on the school district to address needs at not only North Elementary, but also at West Elementary which had been opened to alleviate some of the overcrowding at both North Elementary and South Elementary.⁶⁹²

In 1961, Mr. Liborio Hinojosa, representing the North Elementary P.T.A., attended a board meeting where he called attention to the poor conditions at North Elementary. “He requested that an investigation be made of the play grounds, and condition of the buildings. Some very old, and in need of repairs ... The chair appointed [a] ... committee to investigate the grounds and buildings.”⁶⁹³ In July of 1961, the board minutes said, “Report of committee appointed by School Board President, to investigate complaints and conditions at North Elementary School buildings and grounds. The committee was given more time to continue their work.”⁶⁹⁴ There was no more mention of this matter until the November, 1961, board meeting when Mr. Cernosek, the superintendent, presented a report on the improvements made at North Elementary school. The minutes said:

Considerable discussion followed, centering on the report [brought by superintendent Cernosek] of the hot water and shower facilities and the girl’s restroom facilities. Mr. Salinas [board member] stated that he had visited North Elementary the morning of the meeting and did not find the report to be completely accurate.⁶⁹⁵

In effect, board member Mr. Salinas called Mr. Cernosek’s veracity into question. It undoubtedly caused a stir at the meeting. Mr. Salinas then went on to bring up another matter at North Elementary of a needed fence. Other board members then suggested that the P.T.A. at North

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., April 18, 1961.

⁶⁹² Ibid., December 14, 1949.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., June 20, 1961.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., July 18, 1961.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., November 2, 1961.

might wish to furnish the fence.⁶⁹⁶ In reading the excerpt from the minutes above, another question that arises is: Why would shower facilities be needed at an elementary school? It brings to mind Arnolde de León's assertion in *They Called Them Greasers* that Anglos frequently viewed Mexican Americans as "dirty."⁶⁹⁷

Mr. Hinojosa became well-known in the community for asking the school board and the superintendent a lot of questions about the facilities and the instructional programs for Mexican Americans. Angel Noé González relates that his family lived in Edinburg until his mother passed away. Since they were related to the Hinojosa family, he and his siblings went to live in Mercedes, where he found out how influential the Hinojosa family was. Mr. González explained that had he remained in Edinburg he would have been retained in the seventh grade. Apparently the Hinojosa family insisted on the González children being placed with the best teachers. He stated that:

The Hinojosa family was very big and so they pushed and they... I think that they influenced where I ended up as far as 8-1s because I got there in June and by September, I was in that top class. There were only two Hispanics in that class, R. A. Champion and myself. We were the only two in that particular class and we had the best in teachers.⁶⁹⁸

Since Angel González graduated in 1948, his junior high years would have been from 1942 to 1944. He later stated that his eighth-grade teacher was Miss Alma Whatley, who by that time was considered the best English teacher in junior high.⁶⁹⁹

In March of 1962, a building committee was established which made further recommendations on North and Taylor Elementary improvements, requesting that frame portable

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁷ Arnolde de León, *They Called Them Greasers*, 56.

⁶⁹⁸ González, interview. The Champion family was another mixed ethnicity family in Mercedes whose members generally identified with Hispanics.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid. Also Rivera, interview, November 2, 2005.

buildings be moved out and replaced with brick classrooms.⁷⁰⁰ In May of 1962, the portable buildings had still not been moved. In October of 1962, board member Mr. Salinas who was a member of the building committee reported that not much had been accomplished as yet at North Elementary.⁷⁰¹ Finally in December of 1962, the superintendent reported that new rooms were almost ready at North and Taylor Elementary, but Mr. Hinojosa brought a report from the building committee that said that the pipes in the new restrooms had been left exposed, and that light fixtures had not been put into the specifications as requested.⁷⁰² In April of 1962, Mr. Liborio Hinojosa, active North Elementary parent and P.T.A. member, was elected to the school board.⁷⁰³ With three Mexican American board members, the Mexican American community was becoming more active in voicing its concerns over the schools their children attended.

There was also discontent on the part of the school board regarding the high number of failures at the high school during the first six weeks of school in the 1961-1962 school year, and the principal Mr. Fitzgerald was asked to give a report. After showing up to 52% failing rates in various classes, he cited the reasons for the failures as the following:

1. Indifference of students – family problems;
2. Migratory problem – have not been in attendance regularly leading up to failure;
3. Achievement level of student;
4. Instructional program.⁷⁰⁴

The highest failure rate at the junior high was in science at 69% failing. In 1938, when Leon R. Graham conducted his study of the Mercedes ISD, the failure rate for Mexican Americans in the elementary grades had been 42% compared to the failure rate for Anglos which was 4%. The failure rates that Mr. Fitzgerald was reporting for junior high and high school students in 1962

⁷⁰⁰ Minutes, March 1, 1962.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., October 2, 1962.

⁷⁰² Ibid., December 18, 1962.

⁷⁰³ Ibid., April 17, 1962. Liborio Hinojosa also served as Mayor of the City of Mercedes from 1972 to 1976. See "History of City Government Traced," *The Mercedes Enterprise*, September 15, 1982.

⁷⁰⁴ Minutes, January 16, 1962.

were actually worse than those in 1938.⁷⁰⁵ The reasons for failure at the junior high were given to be the same as those at the high school. The board minutes only stated then that there was additional discussion regarding the high failure rate, but no recommendations or solutions were stated in the minutes.⁷⁰⁶ Although the numbers are not broken down by ethnicity, the mention of the migratory problem indicates that many Mexican Americans were in the failing group, because Anglo students rarely migrated at that time.

When several interviewees were asked how they were performing academically in high school, and whether any administrators, teachers or counselors had ever encouraged them to attend college, some interviewees explained that they were not particularly goal-oriented and they had previously not even considered attending college. One interviewee explained what made a difference for him when he got in trouble with his typing teacher one day and was told to bring his parents to school to talk to the principal.

My parents did not speak English, so they were not able to meet with the principal. Luckily for me, my Aunt Eva was pretty proficient in English and went to talk to the principal, and I was allowed back in school the next day. That may have been the turning point for me. I didn't want to let my aunt down. She showed an interest in my graduating from high school. My mom also was pretty adamant that all four of her kids should stay in school and graduate... I seriously believe that if any one of the teachers or the career counselor would have taken an interest in me and encouraged me to enroll in college and shown me a way to apply for loans or grants, I would have probably gone that route. Instead, I went in the Army and left for basic training the month after graduation.⁷⁰⁷

Another interviewee, Andrés Martínez, told about finding out that he had not been signed up for English IV as a senior, and going to the counselor to ask her about it. He stated:

⁷⁰⁵ Graham, 86.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁷ de la Cerda, e-mail message.

I remember that a friend of mine who was the Valedictorian, Oscar Castillo...he got English IV, and I didn't, and Oscar and I had been in a lot of classes together, and I went and talked to the counselor, you know, ... how come I didn't have English IV? ... and I was told ... you're not going to go to college, so you don't need it, so ... you know, when you graduate you can join the service ... and I took it I guess as gospel, ... cause I didn't get it, so I didn't take it.⁷⁰⁸

Andrés never took English IV, but when his friend Oscar went to enroll at Pan American College after graduation, he tagged along since he had nothing better to do that day. He walked around the registration tables with his friend, collected class cards, then went home and told his parents he needed some money to register. He did indeed go to college, became a teacher and administrator, served as superintendent of two districts in the Rio Grande Valley, and completed his Doctor of Education in August of 2011 at the University of Texas - Pan American.⁷⁰⁹

The faculty and staff at the Mercedes schools in the 1963-1964 school year had a sprinkling of Mexican Americans, but at the junior high and high school the staff was almost a hundred percent Anglo. The two exceptions at the high school were Mr. Raymundo Hernández, an Algebra teacher, and Mr. Lauro Saldaña, an agriculture education teacher. The school principals were all Anglo, with Mr. N.K. Fitzgerald as high school principal, Mr. H.N. Browning as junior high principal, Mr. E.R. Broughton as principal at Taylor Elementary on the north side, Mr. R.W. Jones as principal of North Elementary, Mr. H.D. Wallace as principal of West Elementary, and Mr. Jim Collins as principal of Travis Elementary. The only Mexican American district staff member was Mr. A.P. Solis, who was Census Director for the district and also a teacher at Travis.⁷¹⁰

There was evidence that although the staff was Anglo, they recognized that Mexican American schoolchildren's needs had not always been met very well by the school district. In

⁷⁰⁸ Martínez, interview.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁷¹⁰ Minutes, February 9, 1962.

the 1963 annual report of the superintendent to the Board of Trustees, Mr. Cernosek “presented a resume of ‘Where We Stand.’”⁷¹¹ He enumerated various points, including a commitment to “education for all children, regardless of variance in abilities.”⁷¹² According to the report, uniform testing of all Mercedes schoolchildren had been undertaken, and the students’ abilities and achievements identified, “which assists in placement of students and planning of future program.”⁷¹³ Importantly, a program for “Bi-lingual students has been introduced and a complete curriculum guide developed.”⁷¹⁴ The enrollment was reported as having reached 3,689 that year.⁷¹⁵

In January of 1963, Superintendent Cernosek’s contract was not renewed even though he stated his willingness to take a \$2,400 pay cut.⁷¹⁶ Then in February of that year, the superintendent re-assigned the principal from North Elementary to West Elementary, an action which appeared to galvanize community members into opposing groups. Petitions were presented and letters were written to the newspaper for publication, but the principal’s re-assignment stood.⁷¹⁷ At the March meeting, Mr. Cernosek asked the board to clarify his status, since his contract had not been renewed in January. The board met in executive session and narrowly renewed his contract for three years.⁷¹⁸ Perhaps not surprisingly, in June of that year Mr. Cernosek resigned to take a superintendency in San Antonio.⁷¹⁹ The June 18, 1963 board minutes show that the board accepted his resignation and also included the following interesting statement, “Mr. Villanueva, Mr. Hinojosa and Mr. Salinas requested that the minutes reflect that

⁷¹¹ Ibid., January 21, 1963.

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Ibid.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., February 10, 1963.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid., March 19, 1963.

⁷¹⁹ “Superintendent Resigns, Takes San Antonio Area Job,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, June 20, 1963.

they deny the implications in an open letter appearing in *The Mercedes Enterprise*, and that none of their actions were on the basis of a racial question.”⁷²⁰

According to one interviewee, the transfer of the principal at North Elementary to West Elementary had been seen by some community members as a form of retaliation on the part of the school board for perceived wrongs that the principal had committed at North Elementary. Those “wrongs” were largely based on insensitivity or lack of caring for the North Elementary Mexican American students, failure to secure needed campus repairs, and a failure to adequately respond to parental or community concerns.⁷²¹ However, some persons apparently felt that the board had gone too far in transferring the principal who was well-liked by some teachers at North Elementary.⁷²² One teacher had written an “Open Letter” to the local newspaper indicating her perceptions of the problem. The letter in question had appeared in the June 13, 1963 edition of *The Mercedes Enterprise* and stated:

⁷²⁰ Minutes, June 18, 1963.

⁷²¹ Buenrostro, interview.

⁷²² Ibid.

A house divided cannot stand. These words spoken one hundred years ago are more applicable today than ever before in the history of our country.

We all deplore the race violence in Birmingham, Alabama; we have all raised our voices in protest of unfairness whenever and wherever it reared its ugly head. But what are we doing about it in our own City of Mercedes.

It has been brought to my attention that we have the start of a racial problem in our City. Our school board may have, in the past, discriminated against certain people, not because of the individual but because of ethnic origin. Now that we have elected a school board composed of three Anglo Americans and four Latin Americans, prejudice and unfairness is again raising its ugly head. You may have read the article printed last week in the Enterprise, about the action of the school board in moving a principal from one school to another.

Friends, that may be only the beginning of the fulfillment of pledges made by certain candidates for the school board prior to last April when they were elected. It was stated then, and by them, that they would run the "Anglos" from our schools. I sincerely beg the board to discontinue their campaign promises when they have no reason other than race to show partiality. It is and always has been my philosophy and that of my friends and neighbors that if we need 100 teachers and principals to teach our children and the most qualified 100 are of the same ethnic origin, that those should be employed.

Mr. President and other members of the school board, I beg of you to follow the American philosophy and do not fire or move any of our educators for hate or race alone. A house divided cannot stand.

(Signed) Teresa Torres⁷²³

The letter was notarized and submitted to the newspaper as a paid advertisement. The letter seems to indicate that some community members were beginning to worry about the development of reversed racial or ethnic issues now with the inclusion of Mexican American members on the Mercedes school board.

When the new superintendent was chosen, it was Mr. N.K. Fitzgerald, who was previously the high school principal.⁷²⁴ It is unknown whether the letter influenced the school board to choose an Anglo superintendent to disprove their alleged reverse-racism, or whether the board simply selected the best candidate for the job. School board minutes for that time period

⁷²³ "An Open Letter," *The Mercedes Enterprise*, June 13, 1963.

⁷²⁴ Minutes, June 18, 1963.

do not indicate who the other applicants for the position of superintendent were, so no comparison of qualifications can be made. The minutes did indicate that preference for hiring a superintendent would be given to candidates already employed with the school district.⁷²⁵ That summer, the board instructed the new superintendent to investigate accelerated programs for migrants as well as the establishment of a vocational training program.⁷²⁶

Mr. Fitzgerald recommended a Mexican American principal for North Elementary in 1964, Mr. Salvador Barrón. All the other principals were Anglo that year. In fact, up until that year, all school principals in the Mercedes ISD had been Anglo.⁷²⁷ That year, the North Elementary P.T.A. requested that the school's name be changed to John F. Kennedy Elementary. The request was taken to the board and approved in February of 1964.⁷²⁸ Mr. Fitzgerald, as promised, applied for and received approval for the summer school non-English speaking program. He also made other changes, such as using numerical figures on the junior high and high school report cards to replace the letter grades that had been used previously.⁷²⁹ During his tenure, he steadily began to employ more and more Mexican American teachers, although the high school continued to have predominantly Anglo teachers, with 32 Anglo and 3 Mexican American teachers in 1966.⁷³⁰ He also researched and proposed several programs to the board including the Mercedes Literacy Program wherein volunteer workers would teach English to Spanish speaking adults free of charge.⁷³¹ The Vocational Act of 1963 had been passed, and the board gave Mr. Fitzgerald approval to implement a vocational office practice program to train girls for secretarial work, and to obtain federal funds for a student work program that would help

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ Ibid., July 16, 1963.

⁷²⁷ Minutes, 1908 – 1964.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., February 9, 1964.

⁷²⁹ Ibid., April 10, 1964.

⁷³⁰ Ibid., March 8, 1966.

⁷³¹ Ibid., January 3, 1965.

students who might otherwise drop out because of economic hardship.⁷³² A Migrant School was established in 1965 and the principal became Mr. David González who had been a teacher at Kennedy Elementary.⁷³³ The Head Start Program which was federally funded was also undertaken in Mercedes during his superintendency, and he was able to take advantage of other federal and state funding opportunities in construction to build the newest high school which is still in use today.⁷³⁴

In April of 1965, the school board members were now four Mexican Americans and three Anglos, once again establishing a majority for Mexican Americans.⁷³⁵ However, the school board decisions made during this time period do not indicate that the groups voted unilaterally for every decision. There are numerous instances where one or two Mexican Americans agreed on the vote with the Anglo members of the board, and the opposite was also true many times.⁷³⁶ The decisions appear to have been made based on each member's perspective and interests, and not on racially or ethnically divided lines. Many modernizations were made during this time period, including going from a manual card-system of inventorying school property to a computerized method. At that time, the only way to do that was through the use of the IBM system at one of the banks in Brownsville, since computer time had to be shared.⁷³⁷ The passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 also impacted the Mercedes school district greatly, setting up many federally funded programs including bilingual education, migrant education, pre-school for economically disadvantaged students, and state compensatory funding for "at-risk" students. In February of 1966, twenty-three teacher aides were hired in the

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ Ibid., August 13, 1965.

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., April 9, 1965.

⁷³⁶ Ibid., April to December, 1965.

⁷³⁷ Ibid., July 13, 1965.

school district for the first time through the use of federal monies.⁷³⁸ By April of 1966, forty-three teacher aides had been employed to work in the 1966 – 1967 school year.⁷³⁹ An Adult Migrant Program was also begun with a budget of \$91,139 which helped adults learn English as well as complete high school certificates; and in 1968 a migrant program for pre-schoolers was also begun. In 1967, the high school computerized their student scheduling process for the first time by using the First National Bank of Brownsville's computers.⁷⁴⁰

In May of 1968, Mr. Fitzgerald and board member Mr. Gilberto Domínguez reported to the board on their attendance at the National Conference on Educational Opportunities for Mexican Americans. It was recommended that various board members as well as school principals visit the neighboring school districts of McAllen and Edinburg, and possibly even Laredo, with bilingual instructional programs in the elementary schools. It was also moved and approved to initiate a pilot program in bilingual instruction in the Mercedes school district.⁷⁴¹ That same year, Edcouch-Elsa high school students had a “Walk-Out” to protest school district segregation and discriminatory practices against Mexican American students.⁷⁴² Although *The Mercedes Enterprise* gave it no publicity, the Mercedes community and school officials undoubtedly discussed the implications. Many Mercedes high school students of the time said they had never heard of it, and others said they found out about it later in their college classes.⁷⁴³

Monte Churchill, who was a high school teacher at the time, said in his interview that school leaders of that time period had a clear understanding that changes needed to occur. He stated:

⁷³⁸ Ibid., February 8, 1966.

⁷³⁹ Ibid., April 12, 1966.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., February 14, 1967 and January 9, 1968.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., May 14, 1968.

⁷⁴² Guajardo and Guajardo, 501-526.

⁷⁴³ Howell, Martínez, and Buenrostro, interviews.

[They] ... understood that things had to be done, that the federal government was not going to allow it [segregation]; there was, in the midst of all this too, and you probably remember this, there were, like in Edcouch-Elsa, the famous walkouts of the students, ... a lot of civil rights activities, a lot of things going on, but we didn't have it in Mercedes, we really didn't, and I trace it back to the fact that we had some really capable leaders, I guess.⁷⁴⁴

In Mr. Churchill's estimation, the Mercedes school officials were well aware of the needs of Mexican Americans and that they had to address the needs of this group of students. The activities outlined in school board minutes of that time indicate that efforts were made to finally address the concerns of Mexican American community members regarding the facilities of the three elementary schools that were exclusively attended by Mexican American children.⁷⁴⁵ However, the Mexican American community still accepted the residential *apartheid* that existed. Doing something about the separation required a paradigm shift that Mercedes townspeople were apparently not quite ready to undertake.

One interviewee, Olga Benítez, who attended North Elementary as a child, was asked whether she thought that segregation existed in the school district. She replied:

No, I don't think there was segregation. I attended North because I lived near the school. When I went to junior high and high school we were all there, Anglos and Mexicans ... no, Mercedes did not segregate.⁷⁴⁶

Olga never questioned why there were no Anglo children at North Elementary, because after all, "They just didn't live around there, so why would they go to North?"⁷⁴⁷ The community's acceptance of the status quo persisted until the 1970s, when the awareness level was raised due to civil rights protests publicized in the newspapers and seen on television.⁷⁴⁸

⁷⁴⁴ Monte R. Churchill, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Weslaco, TX, May 16, 2011.

⁷⁴⁵ Minutes, 1963 - 1964.

⁷⁴⁶ Benitez, interview.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁸ Buenrostro, interview. Also San Miguel, "Let All of Them Take Heed," 56-57.

Mercedes school officials were apparently very cognizant of potential disruptions and problems arising from the influence of the civil rights unrest in Edcouch-Elsa, Texas, in November of 1968; in Crystal City, Texas, in November of 1969; and in East Los Angeles in 1968.⁷⁴⁹ In November of 1970, the school district adopted a “Disruptions Policy” that outlined the district’s view of student disruptions and the consequences of any occurring in the district.

The policy stated:

Duplicated, written, or printed materials, handbills, photographs, pictures, films, tapes or other visual or auditory materials shall not be sold, circulated, or distributed on or adjacent to the premises of any school in the Mercedes Independent School District ... deliberate attempts to create disorder and disruptions of the school processes will not be condoned and persons attempting such actions will be treated according to law.⁷⁵⁰

The disruptions at the Edcouch-Elsa High School in November of 1968, although that district was only five miles from Mercedes, had not been publicized in *The Mercedes Enterprise*. A review of the Mercedes weekly editions around the time of the incident did not reveal a single news story of the event.⁷⁵¹ However, the Harlingen newspaper, *The Valley Morning Star*, published several sensational photographs and headlines of the event in their November 15, 1968 edition.⁷⁵² With the civil rights protests continuing to occur nationwide, it appears that school officials feared that a similar incident might occur at the Mercedes schools and wanted to ensure that policy existed to support their response to such an incident.

In March of 1971, an incident occurred at the Mercedes High School in which a foreign language teacher was suspended by the principal, Mr. Emmett Albright, because she allegedly

⁷⁴⁹ San Miguel, “Let All of Them Take Heed,” 58-60.

⁷⁵⁰ Minutes, November 10, 1970.

⁷⁵¹ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1968 Volume.

⁷⁵² “Edcouch-Elsa Student Revolt Continues With Rally Today: Action May be Spreading Over Valley,” *The Valley Morning Star*, November 15, 1968. Also “Edcouch-Elsa Walkout” at <http://www.aaperales.com/school/files/walkout/articles.html> (accessed October 17, 2010).

was instigating student disruptions, specifically within the Mexican American student body.⁷⁵³ Mrs. Ursula Moore allegedly told her students that she would not be returning the next year because the principal thought she was “being too friendly with Latin American, or ‘Chicano’ students.”⁷⁵⁴ When she was suspended, she filed a grievance which was heard at a special meeting of the board on March 8, 1971. Various high school teachers testified that Mrs. Moore’s students had told them that they might have a “walk-out” in protest to her treatment by the principal. Mrs. Moore said that she had not been aware of the unrest described by the other teachers and that at most, some students had told her they would start a petition. Mrs. Moore also said that when she was first hired, the principal, Mr. Albright, had told her to “beware of the Mexicans; they are destructive; they come from a savage culture.”⁷⁵⁵ There were also allegations that the principal and the superintendent had tapped her telephone and had been monitoring her telephone conversations. The grievance hearing ended when the superintendent asked the board to uphold his recommendation to terminate Mrs. Moore’s contract based on insubordinate conduct, and they approved it.⁷⁵⁶ This incident is included here to illustrate that some of the high school students were aware of walkouts and other forms of student protest at this point in time, and that the school officials, especially the high school principal, must have been worried about similar incidents occurring in Mercedes. The truth of the allegations made at the grievance hearing is unknown, but it is evident that some tension was present in the district at this time regarding the relationship between Anglos and Mexican Americans in the district.

At the regular board meeting in March of 1971, the “No Spanish” rule in Mercedes was finally changed. Policy 5131 had stipulated that “all students be required to speak the English

⁷⁵³ Minutes, March 8, 1971.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

language while in attendance at school.” The verb in that phrase was changed from “required” to “requested.”⁷⁵⁷ At that same meeting, the school board president, Mr. Joe Bono, announced that he had received a letter from the superintendent, Mr. Fitzgerald, tendering his resignation. Mr. Fitzgerald was asked to reconsider, and he agreed to table his decision until April, possibly to await the results of the newest board election.⁷⁵⁸ In April, he once again asked the board to accept his resignation which the board did on a 5/2 vote. He did not explain his reasons for resigning.⁷⁵⁹

The board immediately began interviewing candidates and two months later, in June of 1971, a new superintendent was hired, the first Mexican American superintendent in Mercedes and one of the first in the Rio Grande Valley. Mr. Lauro R. Guerra took over his duties as superintendent of Mercedes schools on July 13, 1971.⁷⁶⁰ Almost immediately, Mr. Guerra named Mr. Martín Peña as the first Hispanic principal of Mercedes High School.⁷⁶¹

Mr. Lauro R. Guerra came to Mercedes just in time to implement a desegregation order. In November of 1970, Judge William Wayne Justice had ordered the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to assume responsibility for desegregating Texas public schools.⁷⁶² The desegregation order targeted African American schoolchildren in East Texas school districts, but the order was written instructing TEA to ensure that desegregation was carried out statewide. In addition, the federal funding under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 that had been accepted by school districts across Texas also included stipulations that equal educational opportunities be provided to all schoolchildren regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and physical

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., March 9, 1971. The Texas “No Spanish” law was in effect from 1905 to 1968. See San Miguel, 261.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., April 13, 1971.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid. June 14, 1971 and July 13, 1971.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., August 6, 1971.

⁷⁶² Frank R. Kemerer, “*United States v. Texas*,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jru02> (accessed May 19, 2011).

handicaps.⁷⁶³ According to his widow Imelda, Superintendent Guerra was well aware that Mercedes was segregated. Several interviewees also indicated that South School and later Travis Elementary was the “Anglo” school.⁷⁶⁴ Superintendent Guerra decided that the time had come to end the residential segregation.

His widow, Imelda Fernández Guerra recalls the events of that time very clearly. She states:

In 1971, my husband, Lauro Guerra, became the Superintendent of Schools. During his first year as superintendent (1971-72) the school district was notified by the U.S. Office of Civil Rights that the district had been placed under court order to desegregate the schools. The school administration’s answer was to create single-line campuses. This means that instead of neighborhood schools there were only one or two grades per campus at the elementary level. In response to this action, some families sent their children to schools in neighboring communities. The implementation of the single-line campus design continued until about 1999, when Jesús Gándara became the new superintendent of schools.⁷⁶⁵

In this quotation, Mrs. Guerra states that some children were sent to other schools. According to interviewee Juanita Elena Peña, “I didn’t see or didn’t meet any Anglo students until I got to junior high. I knew that a lot of the Anglo students were in private school, in the Lutheran school [up to eighth grade], so those I didn’t even get to meet until I was in high school.”⁷⁶⁶ There were several private schools of a religious nature in Mercedes, including the Lutheran school and the Catholic school.⁷⁶⁷ Pictures of a group of children attending the Lutheran elementary school from that time period show all Anglo children with one Mexican American child.⁷⁶⁸

⁷⁶³ Julie R. Jeffrey, *Education for the Children of the Poor: A Study of the Origins and Implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978), 23.

⁷⁶⁴ Buenrostro, de la Cerda, Howell, interviews.

⁷⁶⁵ Imelda Fernández Guerra, “Memories of Growing Up In Mercedes,” in *Mercedes’s Centennial Celebration of Good Living, 1907-2007*, ed. Armando Alonzo, (Mercedes, TX: Mercedes Centennial Book Project Committee, 2007), 149.

⁷⁶⁶ Peña, interview.

⁷⁶⁷ Guerra, 148-151.

⁷⁶⁸ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, March 7, 1974.

Mr. Monte Churchill, another interviewee who served as principal under Mr. Guerra, also recalls this time period. He says that he did not know it at the time, but all the Valley schools had been placed under a discrimination or desegregation order by the federal court in Baltimore, “because of the fact that in almost every school district in the Valley there was at least one Anglo elementary school and all the rest were Hispanic.”⁷⁶⁹ That type of school district situation was pretty common in the Valley at that time, according to Mr. Churchill, who goes on to say:

And Mr. Guerra being kind of...groundbreaking in many ways, said, ‘Okay, we’ve got a Migrant School over here, I’m going to do something, I’m going to try one school, single-line attendance, and it’ll all be sixth grade,’...and that’s the school that I inherited the first time; I became the principal, and I didn’t know it at the time, but it was a kind of guinea pig type of situation to see how it worked meshing all the elementary kids from all over Mercedes coming in from, I guess, four or five elementaries, into one campus, and I had that that first year.⁷⁷⁰

According to Mr. Churchill, Mr. Guerra orchestrated the change from residential elementary schools to single-line campuses with great finesse and caused the minimum amount of reaction from the community. He did not change all of the school campuses to single line attendance schools all at once. He started with the sixth grade campus at Graham Elementary, then by 1973-1974, he converted the rest of the elementary schools into single-line attendance campuses.⁷⁷¹ At that time there were four other elementary campuses, so that West Elementary housed the kindergarten students, Travis had the third and fourth graders, Kennedy became first and second, and Taylor became the fifth grade campus. Mr. Churchill goes on to say that the community “didn’t riot when we changed everything, because he did it in a very smooth way; he did it to show that if it works for sixth grade it certainly will work for the lower grades as well.”⁷⁷²

⁷⁶⁹ Churchill, interview.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁷¹ Minutes, April 10, 1973.

⁷⁷² Churchill, interview.

A look at honor roll lists as shown in Table 4.7 shows a more balanced picture of student populations of both ethnicities after the creation of the single-line campuses and complete integration. The small numbers of Anglo students in grades three through six may indicate that some parents had placed their children in other schools, such as the Lutheran elementary school, rather than allow their children to be bused across town to another school. However, this is uncertain due to a lack of sufficient data.

Table 4.7 Honor Roll Students in Mercedes Schools, By Surname, 1974

	<u>Total</u>	<u>Anglo</u>	<u>Mexican American</u>
Mercedes High School	54	23	31
Mercedes Junior High School	79	11	68
Graham Elementary (6 th grade)	29	4	25
Taylor Elementary (5 th grade)	24	2	22
Travis Elementary (3 rd & 4 th grade)	81	13	68

Kennedy (grades 1st and 2nd) and West (grades PK-K) did not report honor rolls.

Source: "Fifth Six Weeks Honor Roll List Is Released by Mercedes School District Officials," The Mercedes Enterprise, May 16, 1974.

Mr. Churchill always greatly admired Mr. Guerra, and said that he served as his role model when Mr. Churchill became an administrator, saying, "he was really a master at doing things and breaking down old barriers and doing it in a way that everybody liked it and thought it was their idea."⁷⁷³ A review of news stories in *The Mercedes Enterprise* for those years reveals that several meetings were held to explain the changes to the community, and there were no overt objections to the changes recorded.⁷⁷⁴ However, Mrs. Guerra did indicate that although some Anglo families may not have objected in a public forum, they did quietly take their

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁴ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1973 and 1974 bound volumes.

children out of Mercedes public schools and either enrolled them in private schools or sent them to neighboring school districts and willingly paid the extra tuition to do so.⁷⁷⁵ Efforts by Mr. Guerra to increase understanding are evidenced by the attendance of the superintendent, several of the district's administrators, and some board members at a Cultural Awareness Seminar for School Executives in Corpus Christi in July of 1971.⁷⁷⁶

As indicated by the minutes and Mr. Churchill's testimony, the reorganization of the elementary campuses proceeded fairly smoothly, and the most pressing problems then became the students' adherence to the dress code, and the increasing problem of drugs and alcohol in the school district. In many of the school board minutes of the 1970s, dress code violations became prominent features, especially as regarding the boys' hair length. Several student grievances were heard, but the school district's dress code was always upheld. Other concerns continued to be the high failure rates of students, especially in junior high and high school. At this time, students were regularly administered tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and based on these results, students were categorized as belonging to an A group, a B group, and a C group, which indicated their achievement and aptitude levels. Class scheduling took these groupings into account, and tracking of students was firmly established. Although technically students could change from a basic or vocational track to a college preparatory track, it did not happen often.⁷⁷⁷ Students had been categorized and tracked since the early 1900s, and this system was firmly entrenched and had become a paradigm that was difficult to change. With the availability of federal monies and under the requirements of the Bilingual Education Act, the bilingual program continued to expand in the school district. In 1972, as part of the reorganization of the district, Mr. Guerra also decided to dismantle the Migrant School at Graham School and turn that

⁷⁷⁵ Guerra, 149.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, July 13, 1971.

⁷⁷⁷ Treviño, interview.

campus into a sixth grade campus. All the migrant students would be placed on their respective elementary campuses to be served there.⁷⁷⁸ That year, two more elementary campuses were headed by Mexican American principals, Mr. Israel Garza at Kennedy Elementary (the old North Elementary campus), and Mr. Alex Estrada was made principal at West Elementary School.⁷⁷⁹ In February of 1973, the junior high school principal became Mr. Genaro Rodríguez, and an Elementary Curriculum Director position was created to help with all the new programs created through the new federal Title funds. This position was held by Mr. Jesús García, Jr.⁷⁸⁰

The reorganization of the elementary schools, or the complete integration of all schools in the Mercedes School District, was not completely in place until the 1973-1974 school year and subsequent years. It included the busing of students to any campus as needed. Dr. Daniel Treviño recalls that “that year we were bused to Taylor, and it was quite interesting because we met students that we had never seen before.”⁷⁸¹ Before the forced integration and single-line campuses, one elementary school in Mercedes was the “Anglo school.”⁷⁸² Dr. Treviño states that, “I couldn’t see it then, but now I could, that the students going to Travis Elementary perhaps were a little more affluent than the students going to West Elementary.”⁷⁸³ Various interviewees expressed the same idea, that the segregation that occurred in Mercedes was based both on place of residence and on socio-economic status. The students who attended South Elementary, and later Travis Elementary when it was built to replace South, were of the middle or upper class. The segregation was not as based on ethnicity as it was based on class.⁷⁸⁴

Because the reorganization required the purchase of additional school buses, the hiring of extra

⁷⁷⁸ Minutes, May 9, 1972.

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid.,

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid. February 14, 1973.

⁷⁸¹ Treviño, interview.

⁷⁸² Churchill, interview.

⁷⁸³ Treviño, interview.

⁷⁸⁴ Howell, Martínez, and Gonzales, interviews.

teachers, special teacher training, and the expansion of existing campus facilities; the district applied for and received over three million dollars in grant money through the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA) available funds.⁷⁸⁵

Mr. Monte Churchill describes the grant that was written to help in the desegregation process and in which he participated as writer and later as director of the programs. He says:

Yes, it would cost money and so I helped along with several people in the Mercedes school district at that time, and Mr. [Martin] Peña was one of the people writing that, Mr. Alex Solis, who was later a principal in the district, and myself; we wrote a grant and received, I want to say, about three and a half or four million dollars, in three different areas: one was in Reading and Math, K through 12; and one was bilingual; and one was what they called a pilot program, to study the pre-kindergarten language dominance of students coming into the pre-kindergarten program; to have appropriate testing because at that point in time, the testing was very weak in determining language dominance; so Mr. Guerra said, give up the principalship now and take that over; to run three different programs, three million dollars; and I said, ‘Okay,’ ... little did I know I was becoming the first Anglo Bilingual Director in the Valley.⁷⁸⁶

Mr. Churchill describes how they signed on Dr. Ralph Carlson from the University of Texas Pan American, as well as with the Psychological Testing Corporation out of New York City and with the assistance of some educational diagnosticians, they developed an assessment instrument to determine a child’s language dominance that was later adopted by the Texas Education Agency. The district used the assessment to determine which children needed Bilingual Education and what program specifics would address the child’s needs.⁷⁸⁷

In 1974, one of the Mercedes school board members, Mr. Rubén Hinojosa, was elected President of the Mexican American School Board Members Association (MASBMA). This organization had been founded in 1970 by José A. Cárdenas, superintendent of the Edgewood Independent School District in San Antonio partly as a result of the desegregation and discrimination issues that school district had experienced. In Texas in the early 1970s, only

⁷⁸⁵ Churchill, interview.

⁷⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁸⁷ *ibid.*

about 4 percent, or 400, of the state's 10,000 school board members in 1,400 school districts were Mexican American. In December of 1973, the organization incorporated with the financial support of the National Education Task Force de la Raza with the intent to promote educational opportunities for all public school children.⁷⁸⁸ Membership in the organization was open to any board members whose school districts had a large percentage of minority students. In 1975, MASBMA sponsored a conference on the educational needs of Hispanic students. The organization actively sought to implement the United States Civil Rights Commission's report *Toward Quality Education for Mexican Americans*. Together with the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) of San Antonio, it trained Mexican American board members across the state in developing effective leadership. Other notable members of the organization were Gus L. García, Alicia Chacón, Frank Madla and José Angel Gutiérrez, the founder of the *Raza Unida* Party. The organization existed until 1992 when lack of funding caused its demise.⁷⁸⁹

Mercedes board member Rubén Hinojosa actively promoted membership in the MASBMA for his fellow board members in the Mercedes ISD. In February of 1974, the school board minutes reflect that Mr. Hinojosa and Mr. Villanueva had attended a meeting of MASBMA and they were enthusiastic about the efforts the organization was making to promote equal educational opportunities for Mexican American schoolchildren. The board approved a motion to join the organization as a group, however, two board members, Mr. Jack Schwarz and Mrs. Lucile Schwarz, declined saying they wanted to read the organization's constitution first.⁷⁹⁰ In the April 9, 1974 school board meeting, Mr. Hinojosa reviewed the MASBMA constitution

⁷⁸⁸ Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Mexican American School Board Members Association," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kam01> (accessed on May 20, 2011).

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁰ Minutes, February 12, 1974.

and by-laws. Newly elected school board member W.C. Ross III, who had replaced Jack Schwarz, said that “in his experience with state organizations, each one founded tended to weaken those in existence, and he questioned whether this might happen in this instance.”⁷⁹¹ The Mercedes board voted to join the MASBMA on a trial basis for one year. As the only dissenting vote, Mrs. Schwarz voted not to join the association because she felt that the purpose of the organization had not been clarified to her and she requested that her \$50 membership fee not be submitted.⁷⁹² This board incident is included here to show that some Anglo school board members in Mercedes, such as Mr. Ross and Mr. Savarino, were willing to support efforts to provide equal educational opportunities to Mexican American students through Mexican American organizations, but some Anglo members such as Mrs. Schwarz were not convinced it was necessary.

Some community input regarding this board meeting was given in *The Mercedes Enterprise* in the April 9, 1974 edition.⁷⁹³ A local pastor, Rev. Sumerlin, wrote a letter to the editor wherein he declared that the MASBMA organization was “purposeless.”⁷⁹⁴ He protested the use of school district taxpayers’ money to pay for membership in an organization such as the Mexican American School Board Members Association. A month later⁷⁹⁵ an answering letter to the editor was posted, written by Gus L. García, an Austin Mexican American city leader who was known for civil rights activism.⁷⁹⁶ In his response, Mr. Garcia stated that the MASBMA organization’s purpose was clearly stated in its Articles of Incorporation, saying that “the

⁷⁹¹ Ibid., April 9, 1974.

⁷⁹² Ibid.

⁷⁹³ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, April 18, 1974.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid., May 16, 1974.

⁷⁹⁶ This was not Gustavo C. García of San Antonio, a well-known Mexican American civil rights lawyer who had died in 1964. This Gus García was a CPA who became the first Hispanic elected to the Austin school board in 1972. He later was elected to the Austin City Council and in 2001 became the mayor of Austin. See Daryl Slusher, “The Life and Times of Gus Garcia,” *Austin Chronicle*, June 2, 2000, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2000-06-02/77470/> (accessed on May 20, 2011).

purpose of the organization is to work toward assuring that all children in the state of Texas receive and are eligible for equal educational opportunity.”⁷⁹⁷ He further pointed out that school boards in Texas may belong to other organizations which support the local boards with fulfilling their responsibilities of public service. In fact, nearly all Texas school boards belonged to the Texas Association of School Boards and the larger school districts belonged to the Texas Council of Major School Districts. These memberships were all paid with local school district funds and no one had protested the local boards belonging to these organizations.⁷⁹⁸ For the remainder of that year, Rev. Sumerlin did not write any more letters to the local newspaper, nor did anyone else protest the matter again. In later years, however, Rev. Sumerlin did continue to write letters to the editor of *The Mercedes Enterprise* that many community members considered racist in connotation and to which they wrote responses. These letters continued for many years, and some Mercedes residents considered Rev. Sumerlin to have been voicing ideas and perspectives that other Anglos in town may have felt but did not voice in public.⁷⁹⁹

During Mr. Lauro Guerra’s superintendency which lasted until 1978, many changes were made. During this time, the high school graduation plans and student ranking methods were changed. Graduation course requirements were not changed, but many of the multiple tracks were eliminated. Although there were three plans, the general plan, college preparatory plan and the honors plan, high school students had been divided up into “A” and “B” groups within each graduation plan which effectively tracked students into multiple groups depending on perceived academic ability.⁸⁰⁰ Some staff felt that this system was tracking students into pre-determined life choices and making life decisions for them when they were still in junior high school. During

⁷⁹⁷ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, May 16, 1974.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁹ Howell, Buenrostro, and Martínez, interviews.

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

this second historical period, efforts were made to decrease the number of tracks used in the high school.⁸⁰¹

Several interviewees recalled that in Mercedes in earlier years, the students had been tracked through what we would today call ability grouping. Angel Noé González, who transferred from Edinburg to Mercedes when his mother died and they had to go live with relatives, said:

I got to Mercedes and they put me in the 8-1 section. The 8-1s were all of those students that were the... the best in the junior high there in the eighth grade. The 8-1s and the 8-2s,...the 8-2s were pretty good and then it tailed off to the 8-3s and 8-4s. I had a lot of friends in 8-3 and 8-4. They were the big strong athletes and the faster kids, you know...But, there was a lot of, a lot of difference in the instruction and in learning and the opportunities to learn in the 8-1s because you learned a lot from your peers. You learned a lot from those that are around you and if you have got the best around you, then you are,...you're teaming all the time.”⁸⁰²

The photograph below, Figure 4.3, was taken from a 1947 Mercedes High School yearbook. It clearly shows how the eighth-grade classes were divided into four tracks, exactly as the interviewee, Angel González, described it. What is remarkable about it is that the children are collected into these groups and photographed and put into *The Bengal* for everyone to see. Apparently the administration did not see anything wrong with divulging to the world which students were considered smart and in track 8-1 and which ones were academically lacking and put into lower tracks from 8-2 to 8-4. The photographs are used here to illustrate the veracity of what the interviewee was relating, and are used in small enough format for the students to be unidentifiable. Figure 4.3 follows below.

⁸⁰¹ Churchill, interview.

⁸⁰² González, interview.



Miss Alma P. Whatley and Miss Mildred Coffee—Eight One & Two



Mrs. Crystal Durham and Miss Virginia Lutten—Eight Three & Four

Figure 4.3 Eighth-Grade Groups in the Mercedes ISD, 1947. From *The Bengal*, 1947.

The earlier editions of *The Bengal*, even though it was a high school yearbook, often included pictures of the junior high students who were housed just across the street from the high school.⁸⁰³ The proximity of the junior high and high school continued until a new high school was opened in a different location in January of 1968.⁸⁰⁴

In 1976, Mr. Guerra informed the board that the migrant school day was no longer legal, and that late entering migrant students must enter the regular school programs in session.

⁸⁰³ *The Bengal*, 1941 – 1954.

⁸⁰⁴ Minutes, December 9, 1967.

Agreements were in the process of being completed between Texas and the receiving states of Michigan and Washington so that migrants would not lose credits.⁸⁰⁵ The high school also began to organize college trips for students, teach students the college admission process and how to prepare college financial aid applications. College trips were taken to various Texas colleges as well as to out-of-state colleges.⁸⁰⁶ State Compensatory monies as well as federal Title monies continued to be secured, and programs were put into place to benefit “at-risk,” “handicapped,” and “language-deficient” students in the district.⁸⁰⁷ The school district began to be heavily dependent on these monies in order to hire staff, build additional classrooms, purchase instructional materials and provide staff development opportunities. Central office administrator positions increased also because of a need to oversee the special programs and monies. New positions included Bilingual Director, ESAA Director, Director of Special Services, Federal Programs Director, Planner/Evaluator, Plan A Director, and Vocational Supervisor.⁸⁰⁸ On June 28, 1978, Mr. Lauro R. Guerra tendered his resignation as Mercedes Superintendent of Schools in order to become Executive Director of the Region One Education Service Center. When he resigned, the Mercedes school board consisted of six Mexican American members and one Anglo member.⁸⁰⁹

Part III. Historical Period 1978 – 2008

Monte Churchill recalls that period of time well, since he applied for the position of superintendent when Mr. Guerra resigned. He recalls that:

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid., May 7, 1976.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid., June 6, 1978.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid., June 28, 1978.

Mr. Rudy González and I both applied for the job. At that time I was the HR or Personnel Director, thirty-six years old, and Mr. Rudy González was Assistant Superintendent and former High School Principal in Robstown. He got the job on a 4/3 vote.⁸¹⁰

Mr. Churchill then worried that Mr. González would be uncomfortable knowing that Mr. Churchill had been his rival, but everything worked out well. Mr. Churchill said that Mr. Gonzalez was “an outstanding person ... he had all the qualifications...and we meshed again as far as personalities ... he promoted me to Assistant Superintendent.”⁸¹¹ Unfortunately, Mr. González had a stroke in the middle of his second year and decided for health reasons to move to a smaller school district. He applied for and got the superintendency of the Odom-Edroy ISD near Corpus Christi. In 1980, Mr. Churchill applied again for the superintendency of Mercedes ISD and this time he was approved. “I applied and got it, and I stayed for seventeen years.”⁸¹²

Monte R. Churchill came to the Mercedes ISD in 1964 and became a high school World History and Government teacher before moving on to become the principal of the newly integrated sixth grade Graham School campus. He served under Mercedes superintendents Lauro Guerra and Rodolfo González as a principal, ESAA Director and Assistant Superintendent when that position was first created at the Mercedes ISD. He served as Superintendent of Schools from 1980 to 1997, then in 2004 he ran for the Mercedes School Board and has been a school board trustee ever since.⁸¹³ He currently works with South Texas College and is the STC Mid-Valley Campus Coordinator in Weslaco, Texas.⁸¹⁴

Mr. Churchill was born in Quanah, Texas and lived in Crowell, a town of about 1700 residents, until he graduated. He attended Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas and the

⁸¹⁰ Churchill, interview.

⁸¹¹ Ibid.

⁸¹² Ibid.

⁸¹³ Ibid.

⁸¹⁴ South Texas College Directory, <http://rav4.southtexascollege.edu/hr/admindirectory.aspx#> (accessed on May 18, 2011).

University of Texas at Austin where he obtained a Bachelor of Arts in History with a minor in Spanish, and a Master of Arts in Educational Administration, respectively.⁸¹⁵ Mr. Churchill says that he always felt that coming from very humble beginnings in Crowell, and having Mexican American roommates at Sul Ross State made him very understanding of and comfortable with the Rio Grande Valley cultural climate. When asked what changes he had witnessed at Mercedes, he responded that having been a history teacher made him reflect often on this very topic, and that he feels that Mexican Americans in the sixties and seventies faced two main obstacles to their learning. The first of these was the extreme poverty that certain residents of the Rio Grande Valley have always experienced. The second challenge was the migratory lifestyle of many of the parents of Mexican American students.⁸¹⁶ School officials had to deal with a population that was only in school half of the school year, “not because of not liking school but because of economic conditions... that made it extremely hard for young people to matriculate in a regular amount of time.”⁸¹⁷

In an effort to address this problem, a Migrant School was started, but Mr. Churchill admits that the school “[was] in itself somewhat discriminatory because it was only migrants there, but in an effort to catch them up in a more concentrated period...they went to school the five days but they went to five or six [o’clock].”⁸¹⁸ He reflects that “it was a different era because of the fact that we were still a very rural agrarian [region]...and most of their parents were working in agriculturally related activities.”⁸¹⁹ In comparison with today, Mr. Churchill says that:

⁸¹⁵ Churchill, interview.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid.

⁸¹⁷ Ibid.

⁸¹⁸ Ibid.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid.

The migrant population now is almost non-existent; Mercedes had back then maybe a thousand migrants. It probably has fifty now ... the agricultural industry has become mechanized and ... [it's] just not as labor intensive as it once was.⁸²⁰

When Juanita Elena Peña was interviewed, the Migrant School came up when Janie recalled that:

Across the street was Graham, which was the school for migrant students, at that time, and there were migrant students there, and we would see them, and we would say, 'oh...*pobrecitos* (poor things)...over there, they're migrants.'⁸²¹

She added that they felt sorry for them because they were isolated, and they had to go to school early and leave late. Even though they didn't arrive for school until late fall, and then they left in early spring, it was still no picnic for them, because they had to go work. "And the work was horrible, back-breaking, just to be paid a few bucks," she added.⁸²²

Another change that Mr. Churchill has noted is that the family structure has changed greatly over the years. He commented:

When I first came to Mercedes there was a strong family tie, partly because they worked as a team, literally. The family unit was the most precious thing, and over the years I saw the family unit breaking down somewhat. And I think...one of the strengths of the Mexican American culture... has always been the family, and the closeness of the family. We [have] adopted many of the urban problems of one-parent families...when I came to the Valley, you didn't see so much of that; by the time I left [the district] in '96 – '97, a large number of our students were in one-parent families ... we saw a difference in society I guess ...⁸²³

Mr. Churchill feels that although the school district instituted many programs to help high poverty children, and in particular migrants, the gains that may have been achieved have not been sustained over the years because of the changes in family structure. He recalls that when he retired as superintendent of Mercedes, the graduation classes numbered almost three hundred.

Today he attends graduation ceremonies as a school board member, and the number of graduates

⁸²⁰ Ibid.

⁸²¹ Peña, interview.

⁸²² Ibid.

⁸²³ Ibid.

has dropped to about two hundred and forty on average, regardless of an increase in overall enrollment in the school district. “The dropout problem has always been there ... and we have not done enough to address that.”⁸²⁴

Monte Churchill became Mercedes superintendent in 1980, just in time to get into the:

Ross Perot Era of wanting to make everything like in business or industry ... accountability ... but you know I think every child is a unique individual and they don't come off the assembly line like computers ... you can't teach a child like you can fix a computer ... they need teaching like I remember teaching was, rather than teaching to a test.⁸²⁵

In the 1980s, Texas education was noted for the establishment of a state curriculum and the advent of testing programs which ensured that the curriculum was being taught. In 1981, Governor Clements signed House Bill 246 which established twelve subject areas with “Essential Elements” that must be taught in every Texas classroom. The 1983 National Commission of Excellence in Education issued the report entitled, “A Nation at Risk” that said that U.S. students were not as proficient as students in many other nations. Then Governor White appointed a committee on public education headed by Dallas billionaire businessman H. Ross Perot. His recommendations after a year of study essentially became House Bill 72, which outlined several reforms, including:

- the “no-pass, no play” rule in athletics and extracurricular activities,
- required annual state assessments in English language arts and mathematics,
- every student had to pass an exit-level test in order to receive a high school diploma,
- provided pay raises for teachers, a career ladder system of pay, lower pupil-teacher ratios in the early grades and a mandatory planning period for teachers,

⁸²⁴ Ibid.

⁸²⁵ Churchill, interview.

- required teachers and administrators to pass a basic competency test, the Texas Examination of Current Administrators and Teachers (TECAT) to be recertified,
- changed the system of public school finance so that property-poor school districts received more school funding,
- instituted school district accountability measures through required performance reports,
- required dropout reduction programs,
- required school board members to receive annual training,
- reduced the size of the State Board of Education from 27 elected members to 15 appointed members.⁸²⁶

According to the TEA Handbook, these were possibly the most sweeping changes that Texas public education had ever experienced.⁸²⁷ The state continued and expanded the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) exam. In 1984, a new state assessment was implemented, the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) that tested students in reading, writing, and math. The Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) collected public school data in a computerized format.⁸²⁸

Students who belonged to school clubs and organizations were impacted by House Bill 72 in 1984, because student participation in extra-curricular activities would be curtailed if students were not passing their subjects. Student clubs and organizations had always been an important part of student life at Mercedes High School. Indeed, Leon R. Graham in his 1938 master's thesis had included a table wherein he compared club membership of 92 selected

⁸²⁶ *Texas Public Schools Sesquicentennial Handbook*, 66.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*

students at the Mercedes High School of which 46 were “Latin American” and 46 were “English speaking.”⁸²⁹ After the compilation and analysis of his data, Graham concluded that the English speaking students belonged to at least twice as many clubs as the Latin American students, and that the English speaking students were three to four times more likely to hold club office than the Latin American students. He stated that the reason why English speaking students held more club offices than Latin American students was because “in the senior high school division, the Latin American enrollment is very small and it is only natural that the English speaking children elect the officers from their own group.”⁸³⁰ He concluded that:

The English speaking children exhibited a marked superiority in extra-curricular activities. With few exceptions, they dominated the school clubs, the homerooms, the athletic teams, assembly programs, and Interscholastic League participation.⁸³¹

Graham went on to make recommendations, stating that:

Club sponsors must endeavor to break down the social barrier that does exist between the Latin American and English speaking children, they must encourage Latin American participation, and they must find activities in their organizations which the Latin Americans can perform creditably.⁸³²

Graham did not specify how these three recommendations were to be accomplished, nor does he explain what he means by “creditably.”⁸³³

The following Table 4.8 shows the holding of Mercedes High School club or organization offices by A = Anglos, and by MA = Mexican American students in selected years for which the data was available through the Mercedes High School yearbook, *The Bengal*. In some organizations in certain years, there were no specified officers, and the total membership enrollment was included in order to provide comparative numbers of Anglo and Mexican

⁸²⁹ Graham, 65-74.

⁸³⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁸³¹ Ibid., 87.

⁸³² Ibid., 90.

⁸³³ Ibid.

American membership. In the case where dashes are included the club was not featured in the yearbook; which most likely indicated that the club was not yet in existence, had ceased to exist, or was not active in that particular school year. This table shows the trends and patterns revealed by a review of club and organization membership and officers through the Mercedes High School yearbook, *The Bengal*, over several decades. Table 4.8 follows below.

Table 4.8 Mercedes High School Club Officers, By Surname, Selected Years, 1948 - 1986

Club	1948		1958		1960		1968		1986	
	A	MA	A	MA	A	MA	A	MA	A	MA
Future Homemakers of America	5	1	11	3	15	7	1	9	0	25
Future Farmers of America	6	0	7	2	5	0	13	26	0	62
The Bengal (Yearbook)	18	2	26	3	11	1	1	11	0	6
Band Twirlers	4	1	6	1	5	1	4	1	0	0
Cheerleaders	6	0	5	1	6	1	1	5	1	7
Band	5	0	6	1	7	2	7	0	0	14
Thespians	7	0	8	0	8	0	6	0	2	10
Zeta Eta Sigma	3	1	6	4	6	0	2	3	3	4
Student Council	8	1	6	3	23	15	18	22	0	2
Y-Teens	13	2	12	0	10	0	11	1	---	---
Quill & Scroll	22	2	16	3	4	2	---	---	---	---
Little Theater	7	0	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
National Honor Society	---	---	7	3	6	0	3	4	4	23
Better Speech Club	---	---	---	---	0	8	---	---	---	---
Key Club	---	---	---	---	6	2	4	2	0	11
Future Business Leaders of America Club	---	---	---	---	0	7	0	7	---	---
Future Teachers of America	---	---	---	---	3	5	3	20	0	19
Vocational Office Education	---	---	---	---	---	---	3	22	1	34
Distributive Education Clubs of America	---	---	---	---	---	---	0	29	0	68
Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	0	139
Fellowship of Christian Athletes	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2	17
Math Club	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2	9
Band Debonaires (Dance Drill Team)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	1	19
One-Act Play	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	5	11
Beta Gamma Phi Environmental Club	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2	21

Source: *The Bengal*, Mercedes High School Yearbooks, 1948 – 1986.

From the table above, Table 4.8, it is evident that some organizations at Mercedes High School were popular and endured year after year, while others ceased to exist for a variety of reasons. By 1986, the Anglo population of Mercedes High School had dwindled to the point

where very few Anglo students were members of clubs and organizations, but they still made a showing as officers or members in several organizations. The short-lived Better Speech Club is interesting to note because not only were there no Anglo officers in 1960 in this club, none of the 30 members were Anglo this year. This possibly indicated that the Anglo student population did not feel that they needed help to better their speech.⁸³⁴ Another notable club was the Y-Teens, a club that maintained not only a majority of Anglo officers, but also an almost exclusive Anglo membership for many decades, as evidenced by a review of *The Bengal* for this time period. The 1980s also marked the beginning of many vocational clubs which are not all included in Table 4.8, such as drafting, construction, mechanics, and cosmetology.⁸³⁵ Many Mercedes High School students developed social skills as well as leadership skills through membership in school clubs and organizations.⁸³⁶ Many of the interviewees fondly remember belonging to school organizations and stated that the club activities opened new horizons for them through their participation in club activities, club-related school trips and competitions.⁸³⁷

The Mercedes school board was well pleased with Mr. Monte Churchill who remained superintendent until 1997. During his tenure, federal and state monies increased or decreased according to who was in elected office at the time. The wave of monies that sponsored many bilingual and bicultural enrichment programs ended when Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1981 and began to cut federal aid to schools.⁸³⁸ Title I Migrant, Title I Regular, State Compensatory and Title VII programs saw cuts of twenty to twenty-five percent. The district managed to absorb staff through other monies available, but they learned that hiring staff based

⁸³⁴ *The Bengal*, 1960.

⁸³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1986.

⁸³⁶ Gonzales, Buenrostro, Peña, interviews.

⁸³⁷ Peña, Treviño, Buenrostro, Benítez, Howell, interviews.

⁸³⁸ Minutes, March 20, 1981.

on these types of monies was risky, and contingency plans had to be developed in the event that federal and state compensatory monies were drastically reduced.⁸³⁹

The issue of educating undocumented immigrant children also developed during this time. In 1981, a letter was written to the superintendent from board trustee David Day and Superintendent Dan Ives of the Harlingen ISD requesting Mercedes to support the filing of an *amicus curiae* brief in opposing free admission of illegal alien children in schools. The board minutes do not show that Mercedes agreed to support this request.⁸⁴⁰ The Mercedes school district also periodically received letters from Congressman Kika de la Garza advising the district of the progress being made in passing legislation which would provide federal dollars to alleviate the burden of educating undocumented children. The Rio Grande Valley with its high influx of immigrant children would be heavily burdened with educating these children compared to other northern school districts less affected.⁸⁴¹

The Bilingual Education Program continued to evolve as the state collected data on its effectiveness. A Language Proficiency Assessment Committee and a Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee were now required to be appointed every year for each campus and be approved by the school board.⁸⁴² The school district also maintained communication with the parents of bilingual children and the community through the regular printing of a newsletter entitled “El Informe.”⁸⁴³ The state’s required data collection revealed that in 1983 Mercedes had 782 students labeled Limited English Proficient in grades kindergarten through fifth grade enrolled in the Bilingual Education program, and 68 students in grades 6 through 12 enrolled in the English

⁸³⁹ Churchill, interview.

⁸⁴⁰ Minutes, February 20, 1981.

⁸⁴¹ Ibid., Also Letter from Kika de la Garza to Mr. Monte Churchill, Minutes, April 13, 1981.

⁸⁴² Minutes, August 18, 1981. Also Leibowitz, “The Bilingual Education Act,” 29.

⁸⁴³ Ibid., September 9, 1981.

as a Second Language (ESL) program.⁸⁴⁴ With a total enrollment of 4,433 students in 1983, the LEP and ESL population in Mercedes totaled 19 percent.⁸⁴⁵

Elisa de León Gutiérrez, who graduated from Mercedes High School as Valedictorian of her class in 1948, spoke about the Bilingual Program which she directed for some time while working for the Texas Education Agency. Elisa tells how she was recruited by Severo Gómez to work at TEA because the agency had been told by “the Civil Rights people from Washington”⁸⁴⁶ that the Texas Education Agency needed to have more Mexican Americans on staff to address the needs of the large Mexican American student population in Texas. Severo Gómez, she says, was Mexican American, but he hardly spoke Spanish, so he convinced Elisa to come to work for him because she was very fluent in that language. At that time there was no bilingual program, and she and Severo had to do the research and develop a program from scratch. They developed the early program guidelines, told the school districts that they had to implement them, and then went around the state to monitor that implementation.⁸⁴⁷ At that time, Leon R. Graham, who had been a teacher, principal and superintendent at the Mercedes ISD, had become Deputy Commissioner of Education at the Texas Education Agency. Asked about their working relationship, Elisa said, “He was very nice to me when I was there, but the others...”⁸⁴⁸ When asked about how the others treated her, she replied:

They didn’t treat me like one of them ... but you know what, it didn’t bother me...if they didn’t want to talk to me then I didn’t want to talk to them...why should I waste my time ... I just did my work the best I could ... and it must have been good, because our staff was asked to go all over and present ... I went to Arkansas and helped them write their state [Bilingual] plan, then we went and trained their teachers ... they were starting to get Mexican American students, too, and didn’t know what to do about it.⁸⁴⁹

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid., October 11, 1983.

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁶ Elisa de León Gutiérrez, interview by Beatrice D. Edwards, Austin, TX, August 13, 2010.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid.

She still vividly remembers some of the things that she found when she monitored the state's Bilingual Program in the early years of its implementation. She tells the story of one visit that has always stayed in her mind. She stated:

Well, I went to the school and I opened the door to hang up my coat and there was a little boy in there ... and I told the teacher 'What's that little boy doing in the closet?' ... and she said, 'Well I've locked him up until he learns English'... and I told her 'you can't do that ... that's against the law!' ... 'Well, he's not coming out of there until he learns English!'... then I went to the Principal's office and I told him, 'Do you know that you have this terrible person over there that has a kid locked up in the closet until he learns English ... how is he going to learn English that way? ... I want you to fire her, because I don't want her in the school doing anything more to any of these students ... she's bad news'... and he said, 'Well, she's my wife.' And I said, 'You poor man,' but then he said 'we're retiring next week and I'm going to Wisconsin.' And I told him that I was going to another school and that when I came back if she was still in the classroom I would close the school down ... when I came back they were both gone."⁸⁵⁰

The implementation of the state's Bilingual Program was met with resistance by school districts who did not believe that it would work better than the previously employed method of English immersion. The merits of the program continue to be argued today.⁸⁵¹

Starting a bilingual program from scratch was a daunting task, but Dr. Gutiérrez said that she remembered her years growing up as a young child and being taken to Mexico by her mother when her grandmother died. As her mother took care of many details of her grandmother's estate, it was decided that little Elisa would go to a neighborhood school run by a retired teacher. "I was only three or four years old, but I learned my alphabet, my numbers, all in Spanish, of course," she recalls.⁸⁵² When she returned to the United States, she was put in school and although she did not speak much English, she learned quickly and stayed at the head of her class all through elementary school. She remembered her experiences, and also that many of the

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁵¹ Stephen Krashen, "Why Bilingual Education?" *ERIC Digest*. <http://www.ericdigests.org/1997-3/bilingual.html>. (accessed September 26, 2010).

⁸⁵² Gutiérrez, interview.

successful Mexican American children in Mercedes had attended neighborhood “*escuelitas*,” or little schools, where they learned basic language arts and mathematics in Spanish. Her recollections and observations were supported by the studies she researched in writing the first bilingual guidelines and curriculum. These studies showed that children who had learned basics in their native language were better able to grasp English basics in school.⁸⁵³ Several of the other interviewees also remembered attending an “*escuelita*” when they were very young.⁸⁵⁴ There were several established in Mercedes even before the district became incorporated and they operated for many years thereafter. Many Mercedes residents remember teachers such as doña Angelita Castellanos,⁸⁵⁵ doña Albinita de León,⁸⁵⁶ and don Marco Cuéllar.⁸⁵⁷

The state’s testing program continued to evolve, with the TABS test being replaced by the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) in 1985 and remaining the state test until 1990. The state had established twenty regional service centers to assist school districts with programmatic changes required by state legislation every two years, and these remain in operation today although they have several times been threatened with being abolished.⁸⁵⁸ Testing was expanded to cover more grade levels and more subject areas in 1990 with the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) which remained in effect for twelve years until 2002. Using test results and other school data such as the dropout and attendance rates, in 1993 the state began assigning accountability ratings and rating schools and school districts.⁸⁵⁹ In 1997, the state revised its curriculum and testing system with the adoption of the Texas Essential

⁸⁵³ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁴ Peña, Rivera, Buenrostro, interviews.

⁸⁵⁵ “‘La Maestra’ Gave Good Start to Hundreds, Maybe Thousands,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, September 1, 1982. Also Peña, interview.

⁸⁵⁶ Delia de León, interview.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid., Hinojosa-Smith, Gutiérrez, interviews.

⁸⁵⁸ *Texas Public Schools Sesquicentennial Handbook*, 68-69.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid. There were four ratings based on assessment results and other data: Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable, and Academically Unacceptable. These ratings are still in use today although the criteria used to arrive at the ratings have changed.

Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and students were tested for learning through the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) beginning in 2003.⁸⁶⁰ Reports on the results of each campus, school district and region in Texas became available under the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS). These became available to the public through posting on the Texas Education Agency's website in 1997.⁸⁶¹ These changes are reflected in Mercedes school board minutes as they evolved over time, and the Mercedes ISD now posts all test results, accountability ratings and other reports on its website at <http://misdtx.schoolwires.com>.⁸⁶²

When Mr. Monte Churchill finally retired in 1997, the school board decided to look “out-of-town,” for the next superintendent and hired Mr. Jesús Gándara, who had been an assistant superintendent at the Ysleta Independent School District in West Texas.⁸⁶³ During the tenure of Mr. Gándara, the school district managed major construction projects at all the schools, but most notably at Kennedy Elementary. A planetarium was built at that campus, which became the only elementary school in south Texas to have one. Unfortunately, post-construction problems plagued the Kennedy Campus, and the district had to go into litigation with the construction company over various problems of which the most devastating was mold. The mold problem effectively shut down the campus, and no students have attended there since 2006.⁸⁶⁴ Mr. Churchill remarks sadly, “We’ve had seven lawsuits. We’ve settled four of them already, and every one of them has turned out to be not our problems but somebody else’s problems.”⁸⁶⁵ The school district has won its lawsuits and recovered some monies from the construction companies, but Mr. Churchill says that Kennedy Elementary will have to be torn down completely because

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid.

⁸⁶² Mercedes ISD Website.

⁸⁶³ Churchill, interview.

⁸⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid.

of the mold problem and a new campus built there.⁸⁶⁶ Mr. Gándara remained until 2004, and when he left, Mr. Churchill decided to run for the school board so that he could have a say in school district affairs once more, particularly in hiring a new superintendent.

The next superintendent hired was Dr. Janice Wiley who had been an assistant superintendent in the neighboring school district of Weslaco. She remained only a year and a half, taking a top level job at the Region One Education Service Center in 2005. The school district then went through a succession of short-lived superintendents, until the board selected the present superintendent, Dr. Daniel Treviño, in 2010. During this time period when many superintendents seemed to come and go so quickly, many community members were upset about the quick succession of superintendents and wondered “what Mercedes is doing wrong.”⁸⁶⁷ At one board meeting in 2007, Ms. Lillie Pérez, a local teacher, asked to speak on the Open Forum section of the board meeting. “We are like a revolving door here with superintendents,” she stated.⁸⁶⁸ Addressing the then superintendent Luis Ramos, who had announced he was resigning, Ms. Pérez said, “You are kind of a record at a year; the last one didn’t last but a couple of months.”⁸⁶⁹ At that same meeting, another community person, Mrs. Elvia Sandoval who had previously served as a school board trustee, came forward to speak at the Open Forum. She indicated that she knew why Mr. Ramos was leaving and stated: “Like I said, the biggest issue was the superintendent not being from our community.”⁸⁷⁰ Three more superintendents served after Mr. Ramos, between 2007 and 2010. Finally, Dr. Daniel Treviño, Jr., a former Mercedes graduate in 1981, was hired as the new superintendent. Mr. Churchill, as school board member,

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ Minutes, June 12, 2007.

⁸⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid.

was very happy for the district to have hired the first superintendent of Mercedes to have graduated from Mercedes High School. He stated:

My philosophy has always been that you should choose [the superintendent] from local people, because you will get a long-term commitment. They love the town, they love the community, and they will do what's right for the community and the children.⁸⁷¹

The table that follows, Table 4.9, lists the superintendents who have served in Mercedes since its inception and which years they served. The superintendent with the shortest tenure was I.V. Horner, who never actually served. After he was hired, he contracted smallpox and was unable to assume his duties as superintendent. The first few were not really superintendents, but were more akin to lead teachers and principals who agreed to take on district-wide duties. Miss Nannie Mer Buck can be said to have been the first superintendent who had strictly district-wide duties, as well as being the first woman superintendent of Mercedes. There was not another woman superintendent until Dr. Janice Wiley in 2004. Some of these persons listed may have served as interim superintendents as well as serving as a fully contracted superintendent. Of the twenty-four superintendents, twenty-two have been men and two have been women; nine have been Mexican American and fifteen have been Anglo.⁸⁷²

⁸⁷¹ Churchill, interview.

⁸⁷² Minutes, 1908 – 2011.

Table 4.9 List of Mercedes ISD Superintendents, 1909 - 2011

J.M. Hamlett	1909 – 1911
J.P. Massey	1912 – 1913
W.T. Dietel	1913 – 1914
J.E. Briggs	1914 – 1915
I.V. Horner	1915 – 1915
Nannie Mer Buck	1915 – 1923
C.W. Taylor	1923 – 1925
H. E. Millsap	1925 – 1926
Ernest H. Poteet	1926 – 1941
Leon R. Graham	1941 – 1951
L.W. St. Clair	1951 – 1958
A. G. Greer	1958 – 1959
Stanley Cernosek	1959 – 1963
N. K. Fitzgerald	1963 – 1971
Lauro R. Guerra	1971 – 1978
Rodolfo González	1978 – 1980
Monte R. Churchill	1980 – 1997
Jesús Gándara	1997 – 2004
Dr. Janice Wiley	2004 – 2005
Eugenio Gutiérrez	2005 – 2006
Luis Ramos	2006 – 2007
Walter Watson	2007 – 2008
Beto González	2008 – 2009
Mauro Vásquez	2009 – 2010
Dr. Daniel Treviño, Jr.	2010 – present

Source: Mercedes School Board Minutes, 1908 – 2011

The next table that follows, Table 4.10, shows a hundred years of school board trustees with a snapshot taken at ten-year intervals beginning with June of 1908.

Table 4.10 One Hundred Years of Mercedes School Board Trustees in Ten-Year Snapshots

Year	President	Vice – president	Secretary	Member	Member	Member	Member
1908	S.P. Silver	J.M. Johnson	L. Harrison	G.S. Freeman	R.J. Smith	G.K. Wattson	F. J. Cutting
1918	F.E. Bennett	H.E. Barrett	F.A. Blackwell	H.T. Tidmore	Dr. A.H. Kalbfleisch	R. Swancy	S. Fikes
1928	C.H. Hupp	H.T. Stotler	R.H. Smith	B.F. Byers	J.R. Barry	R.H. Kern	L.H. Henry
1938	R.H. Kern	L.H. Henry	F. Johnston	W.F. Hoekstra	J.B. Taylor	N. Harrington	J.R. Barry
1948	H.D. Lauderdale	T.B. Ewing	C. Hollon	L.H. Henry	G. Schwarz	J.R. Barry	Dr. T.G. Edwards
1958	J.B. Winston	H.B. Watson	J.R. Wade	M. Schwarz	G. Knapp	J.A. Fernández	E. Hinojosa
1968	R. Villanueva	W.C. Ross, III	J. Bono	R. Marroquín	D. Morrison	G. Domínguez	J. Schwarz
1978	R. Rentería	J. Salinas	T. Hernández	J. Lauderdale	H. Garza	A. Moreno	R. Noriega
1988	D. Morrison	O.R. Gonzales	R. Noriega	H. Garza	A.L. Gonzales	J. Salinas	S.O. Calvillo
1998	R. Sandoval	R. Ramírez	A. García	H. Garza	J.E. González	A. Hinojosa	E. Howell
2008	D.R. Salinas	M.R. Churchill	B.F. Castillo	D.H. Vogel	G. Cárdenas	O.A. Hernández	R. McVey

Source: Mercedes School Board Minutes, 1908 – 2008.

The holding of political power represented by being elected to the school board can be derived by looking at the surnames of the trustees. Anglo surnames are in regular font and Spanish or Mexican American surnames are highlighted in bold font. Two Anglo last names, Howell and McVey, are included as Mexican American since those families self-identify as Hispanic.⁸⁷³ The transition period begins in the 1950s, and by the 1960s, Mexican Americans hold a 4/3 majority on the school board. The Mexican American majority has not been

⁸⁷³ Howell, interview.

relinquished over the years. It should be noted, however, that the two groups rarely voted as a bloc; in other words, on some issues, both Mexican Americans and Anglos voted “yes” or voted “no.” With some exceptions, each board member appears to have voted based on personal values and perspectives of district needs rather than as a member of an ethnic group.⁸⁷⁴

One of the most pressing concerns for the Mercedes Independent School District in the last two decades has been the growing state and federal accountability requirements that have resulted from the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001 that became known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Both federal and state requirements mandate a massive assessment program that is intended to assist school districts target problem areas, but which in reality has turned into a punitive system, according to Mr. Churchill.

Although the district has received Academically Acceptable and Recognized ratings in the last two decades, Mr. Churchill feels that there is still much work to be done concerning the high dropout rate. When asked about the problems confronting Mexican American schoolchildren today, Mr. Churchill stated:

We have politicized the state, and let me say this: I’m not a big fan of graduation by test. I think you teach kids, and you let instructors and teachers teach them and they don’t need a statewide test to tell you they know what they ought to. [I think the testing system has] been a failure. I think it has been detrimental, and I think so many of the things we’re doing have been detrimental and what troubles me is that you look at the Valley schools now and see how many are in 7th or 8th grade, and then how many graduate and we’re at 30 or 40 percent dropouts.⁸⁷⁵

Since the state began issuing accountability ratings for school districts in 1996, the Mercedes Independent School District has been rated “Recognized,” the state’s second highest rating, in 2010 and in 2002. The district has been rated “Academically Acceptable,” the state’s third highest rating, from 1996 to 2002 and from 2004 to 2009. Texas school districts were not rated

⁸⁷⁴ Minutes, 1958 – 2008.

⁸⁷⁵ Churchill, interview.

in 2003 when the state changed over from the previous system to the present one. The district has never attained the highest rating of “Exemplary,” however; several campuses in the district have attained that rating, including the Mercedes High School in 2002 and 2001.⁸⁷⁶

When the current superintendent, Dr. Daniel Treviño, Jr. was asked what kind of educational opportunities students in the Mercedes school district had now, he answered:

Just Saturday, we had about 24 students graduating with an Associate’s Degree from high school, and that opportunity had not been in place in the last five years here in Mercedes. Now more than ever a high school student can finish up, maybe not have an Associate’s degree, but can finish up with college credit; that’s already in place, honored by just about every university in the state, . . . that will save parental dollars, if you may, because they’re already having their [college] basics out of the way. . . maybe eighteen or twenty college credit hours as they’re entering freshmen or sophomores at a university.⁸⁷⁷

He explained that the Mercedes High School has expanded the opportunities that all students have by adding college level concurrent classes to the curriculum as well as Advanced Placement courses which allow the student to graduate from high school with college credit hours. To help expand this opportunity to attain college credit hours before graduating from high school, the district has opened an Early College Academy where high school students can enroll in dual enrollment or concurrent college classes. Through this Academy, Mercedes students earn both high school graduation credits and college credit hours while enrolled in the same course.⁸⁷⁸

The following two tables, Table 4.11 and Table 4.12, have been included to show the graduation and general enrollment trends in the last years for which information is available

⁸⁷⁶ Mercedes ISD AEIS Reports, 1990 - 2009, Texas Education Agency, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us> (accessed May 17, 2011).

⁸⁷⁷ Treviño, interview.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid. Also Churchill, interview.

through the Texas Education Agency’s Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS)

website.⁸⁷⁹

Table 4.11 Enrollment for Mercedes ISD by Ethnicity/Race: 1990 – 2008

Year	Total Enrollment	White	Hispanic	African American	Other
1990	4708	111	4586	6	5
1991	4846	120	4714	8	4
1992	4823	127	4684	8	4
1993	5035	131	4893	8	3
1994	5033	111	4914	6	2
1995	5083	83	4993	5	2
1996	5103	82	5013	7	1
1997	4968	72	4889	7	0
1998	5024	79	4935	8	2
1999	4986	73	4904	6	3
2000	4938	57	4871	9	1
2001	4918	49	4858	10	1
2002	5086	49	5023	13	1
2003	5250	38	5194	16	2
2004	5329	40	5272	16	1
2005	5336	36	5280	16	4
2006	5256	36	5203	13	4
2007	5272	47	5209	12	4
2008	5483	33	5435	11	4

Source: Texas Education Agency AEIS Reports at <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/index.html>.

⁸⁷⁹ Mercedes ISD AEIS Reports, 1990 - 2009. The Texas Education Agency uses “Hispanic” rather than “Mexican American” and “White” rather than “Anglo” in the classification of these students.

Table 4.12 Mercedes ISD Graduates by Ethnicity: 1990 – 2008

Year	Total Graduates	White	Hispanic	African American	Other
1990	268	6	262	0	0
1991	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
1992	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
1993	183	6	177	0	0
1994	246	0	246	0	0
1995	238	5	233	0	0
1996	273	4	268	0	1
1997	260	1	259	0	0
1998	248	6	241	1	0
1999	263	6	256	0	1
2000	260	5	255	0	0
2001	279	3	275	1	0
2002	256	6	249	1	0
2003	252	3	248	0	1
2004	249	4	245	0	0
2005	239	5	231	2	1
2006	226	3	223	0	0
2007	228	5	222	1	0
2008	221	0	221	0	0

Source: Texas Education Agency AEIS Reports at <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/index.html>.

Tables 4.11 and 4.12 clearly show that while the total population of Mercedes has fluctuated over the years, it has increased somewhat over the last two decades. The Anglo population in 2008, however, has clearly diminished and is now less than a third of what it was in 1990. The Anglo graduates from Mercedes High School have dwindled down to zero. When several interviewees were asked how Mercedes had changed over the years, some answered that

there weren't as many Anglo kids as before. When Juanita Elena Peña was asked where she thought they had gone, she answered:

Harlingen ... (laughs) ... I'm just saying that because everybody knows that Harlingen has more Anglo students percentage-wise than most other neighboring school districts, but actually I think the kids have grown up and moved away. They went to college, didn't come back, or else they got married and moved away.⁸⁸⁰

When asked about the diminishing number of Anglo graduates at Mercedes High School, she answered that the establishment of two magnet high school campuses within the city limits have probably provided some competition for high school students.⁸⁸¹ The South Texas Independent School District which consists solely of magnet schools, established two high school campuses in east Mercedes; the South Texas High School for Health Professions and the South Texas Science Academy.⁸⁸² The enrollment at the two high school campuses totaled 1,504 in the 2009-2010 school year, and it is very possible that some Mercedes high school students have enrolled at these schools.⁸⁸³

In any case, the numbers of Anglo students at the Mercedes ISD have dropped dramatically, while the number of Mexican American students has continued to rise slowly but steadily. Whatever the reasons may be for the changing demographics, the Mercedes Independent School District no longer resembles the district at its beginnings more than a hundred years ago. The changes that the district has undergone have been remarkable, and ones that the early founders of the school district likely never anticipated or even imagined.

⁸⁸⁰ Peña, interview.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸⁸² South Texas Independent School District, National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch> (accessed May 31, 2011).

⁸⁸³ Ibid.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the educational history of the Mercedes ISD during the twentieth century with a focus on the opportunities and challenges encountered by Mexican American schoolchildren who were served by the district. This was accomplished through a review of documents and records such as previous historical studies and data on the area, newspaper articles, school board minutes, state education agency records, census data, high school yearbooks, school attendance and academic achievement records, curricular materials, maps, pamphlets, photographs, artifacts, museum archives, library archives, and literary works; and through questionnaires and interviews with students, parents, teachers and administrators who attended or served in the Mercedes ISD.

Use of Conceptual Model to Collect and Organize Findings

As explained in Chapter Three – Methodology, the researcher developed a conceptual model to help guide both the collection of the data and to organize the analysis of findings. The conceptual model is based on Guadalupe San Miguel's interpretation of Robert Murray Thomas's Political Ecology Model of Education.⁸⁸⁴ Thomas's area of expertise is Comparative Education, where he analyzes the educational systems of different nations and compares them based on a multitude of criteria or categories. Of Thomas's many categories of comparison, this researcher has chosen, as does San Miguel in several articles and studies, six categories to use in

⁸⁸⁴ San Miguel, "Status of Historical Research," 468.

the analysis of findings. These six areas are 1) access to public education, 2) character of the schools, 3) school achievement, both academic and social, 4) curriculum and instruction, 5) administrative practices, and 6) minority responses to discrimination.⁸⁸⁵

The conceptual model also represents the chronological sequence of events, since this is a historical study of the Mercedes Independent School District. It views events through both a macro and a micro perspective in the realization that events that happen on a national or state level always impact in some manner events on the local level. An example of a macro event impacting on the local level is the passage of the *Bilingual Act of 1968*, which caused local school districts to restructure their entire instructional programs to serve the needs of language minority children.⁸⁸⁶ The converse can certainly be true also, since some local events, such as the refusal of Sumner Elementary school officials to admit African-American third-grader Linda Brown to their all-white school, can eventually impact an entire nation. This occurred when the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, with the court's ruling that segregation was unconstitutional. The ruling of this court case struck down *Plessy v. Ferguson* and required the desegregation of the entire nation.⁸⁸⁷

All chronological events and the data in the six categories are looked at through the lens of Critical Race Theory and its offspring, Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit). LatCrit Theory is grounded in five themes including the examination of oppression based on race, class, gender, language and immigration status; the resistance of the oppressed group to dominant ideology in educational institutions, the commitment to social justice and transformation, the importance of

⁸⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁶ Bilingual Education Act (1968), <http://education.uslegal.com/bilingualism/landmark-legislation/bilingual-education-act-1968/> (accessed May 30, 2011). Also Arnold H. Leibowitz, "The Bilingual Education Act: A Legislative Analysis," ERIC Document 192614, (Arlington, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1980): 15-41, at <http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED192614.pdf> (accessed June 2, 2011).

⁸⁸⁷ Liza Cozzens, "The Civil Rights Movement, 1955 – 1965," African American History Web Project, May 25, 1998, <http://www.watson.org/~lisa/blackhistory/early-civilrights/brown.html> (accessed May 25, 2011).

experiential knowledge, and the use of an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge construction of Latino issues. This theory is a good match for the topic of study and provides the needed lens and perspective to analyze the findings.

Summary of Major Findings

Access to Public Education

The first category, access to public education, refers to the extent to which Mexican American children were allowed to enroll in the public schools of their choice. In Texas, Mexican American students were never legally banned from attending schools with Anglo children, as African Americans were banned through case law.⁸⁸⁸ Rather than *de jure* segregation as in the case with African Americans, segregation occurring with Mexican Americans was *de facto* and based on gentlemen's agreements or unstated and unwritten school board policy. The findings in the Mercedes ISD regarding access to public education are the following:

- Initially and in later years, Mexican American children were assigned to north side schools or south side schools based on place of residence; however, exceptions were made in some instances.⁸⁸⁹
- To some extent, the socioeconomic status of the family in Mercedes determined where schoolchildren lived, and therefore where they would attend school.⁸⁹⁰
- Generally speaking, south side residents were more affluent than north side residents, at least for the first seventy years or so of the town's existence.⁸⁹¹

⁸⁸⁸ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), http://www.oyez.org/cases/1851-1900/1895/1895_210/ (accessed May 27, 2011).

⁸⁸⁹ Howell, de la Cerda, Peña, Buenrostro, Hinojosa-Smith, interviews.

⁸⁹⁰ Graham, 14-16. Also Sanborn Mercedes Map 1, 1917. Also de la Cerda, Hinojosa-Smith, Rivera, interviews.

⁸⁹¹ *Ibid.*

- Mexican American children were almost one hundred percent of the school population at North Ward, later called North Elementary and Kennedy Elementary, from 1908 to 1973 when single-line elementary campuses were established.⁸⁹²
- Mexican American children were not banned from South Elementary, considered the Anglo school, if their parents resided in the south side of town.⁸⁹³
- In a few instances, if the parents were insistent enough, some children from different residential areas of town were allowed to attend South Elementary and later Travis Elementary on the south side of town.⁸⁹⁴
- When West Elementary school was built, its school population consisted of almost one hundred percent of Mexican American schoolchildren, and it appeared to have been built to relieve overcrowding at North and South Elementary.⁸⁹⁵
- When single-line elementary campuses were established in the school district, children from all parts of town were bused to the appropriate school according to their grade level.⁸⁹⁶
- Mercedes Junior High and Mercedes High School served both Anglo and Mexican American schoolchildren at least since 1921 when the first Mexican American high school graduate is recorded.⁸⁹⁷

⁸⁹² Minutes 1908 – 1973. Also *Mercedes Tribune*, *Mercedes Enterprise*, 1921 – 1974. Also Hinojosa-Smith, Churchill, Treviño, de la Cerda, Buenrostro, interviews.

⁸⁹³ Graham, 13 – 16. Also Hinojosa-Smith, Howell, Rivera, interviews.

⁸⁹⁴ Howell, Rivera, Peña, interviews.

⁸⁹⁵ Minutes, January – December, 1948. Also *Enterprise*, September 5, 1950.

⁸⁹⁶ Minutes, April 10, 1973. Also Churchill, Treviño, interviews.

⁸⁹⁷ Class of 1922, “Wall of Fame.”

- There were 144 “Mexican” pupils reported attending South School and High School (first through eleventh grades) in 1924;⁸⁹⁸

Since enrollment records are unavailable to the researcher for the early 1900s, some mathematical estimation must be made regarding the earliest presence of Mexican American schoolchildren at the Mercedes Junior High. It is likely that Mexican American schoolchildren attended junior high school since its establishment, although they may have dropped out and not graduated. Since the first Mexican American graduated in 1921, four to six years earlier she would have been attending junior high, which would mean the years 1915 to 1917. Unless the students transferred in from elsewhere, then Mexican Americans must have attended junior high as early as 1915.⁸⁹⁹

Character of the Schools

The second category, character of the schools, refers to a description of both the physical facilities and the school culture or climate that existed in the various schools of the Mercedes Independent School District. The researcher examined maps and reviewed testimony to determine whether there existed disparities or inequities in the south side schools and north side schools. The data was also examined to see if there were differences in the school furniture that was used, in the provision of drinking fountains and restrooms, in the play areas and in the building materials used. However, the differences between school campuses extend beyond the physical attributes of the facilities to a description of school culture and school climate. The actions of the school officials and teachers on the different campuses were examined to see if they demonstrated differences in the attitudes and expectations toward Mexican American

⁸⁹⁸ Minutes, December 11, 1924.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid.

children as opposed to Anglo American children. The findings in the Mercedes ISD regarding the character of the schools are as follows:

- North Elementary was a facility of wooden structures for many years; the first mention of brick or stucco being used at that campus was in 1930.⁹⁰⁰
- South Elementary was built of stucco or brick since the 1920s.⁹⁰¹
- North Elementary was chronically overcrowded, with pupil/teacher ratios of up to 94:1; the same applied to West Elementary when it was built in 1949.⁹⁰²
- South Elementary in 1917 and later in 1931 maps had electricity and running water; North Elementary had no electricity or running water indicated in those maps.⁹⁰³
- North Elementary in the 1950s was reportedly dark and ominous; often needed roof, window and plumbing repairs, and at one time had a bat infestation.⁹⁰⁴
- South Elementary had a cafeteria since the 1930s. Later Travis Elementary on the south side had a cafeteria in the 1970s while other campuses did not.⁹⁰⁵
- North Elementary, West Elementary and later Taylor (a later north side school) did not have cafeterias at first. These students had to be bused to South (later Travis) or else food was brought in. This situation continued until the 1970s and 1980s when all elementary schools finally had cafeterias (or cafeteriums as they later came to be called).⁹⁰⁶
- While South Elementary had student desks, North Elementary had long tables and benches for their students for many years.⁹⁰⁷

⁹⁰⁰ *Mercedes News Tribune*, April 28, 1930.

⁹⁰¹ *Ibid.* Also Graham, 18.

⁹⁰² Minutes, 1909 – 1954. Also *Tribune*, June 14, 1922; November 30, 1923; *Enterprise* 1941 – 1954.

⁹⁰³ Sanborn Mercedes Maps, 1917 and 1931.

⁹⁰⁴ Minutes, 1950 – 1959. Also Gonzales, Delia de León, interviews.

⁹⁰⁵ Minutes, April 25, 1930. Also Howell, Hinojosa-Smith, Treviño, interviews.

⁹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁷ Minutes, May 9, 1922. Also *Tribune*, June 14, 1922.

- After North Elementary finally got restrooms, showers and water fountains, the plumbing was often in need of repair and not servicing the students.⁹⁰⁸
- North Elementary students were generally not expected by their teachers and administrators to advance past sixth grade, and a sixth grade graduation ceremony held at that campus reinforced that expectation.⁹⁰⁹
- Mexican Americans who attended North Elementary reported that most of their teachers were “nice,” but the consensus of the community was that the “best” teachers were those at South Elementary and later Travis Elementary on the south side of town.⁹¹⁰
- Mexican American students were assigned to multiple levels in elementary school, such as low first and high first, and many students were retained multiple times in elementary school and often dropped out by the sixth grade.⁹¹¹
- The teachers, principals, central office staff and school board members at all Mercedes were almost one hundred percent Anglo until the 1950s when Mexican Americans slowly began to get hired.⁹¹²
- The first Mexican American school principal, Salvador Barrón, was not named until 1964 for North Elementary.⁹¹³
- The first Mexican American high school principal, Martín Peña, was not named until 1971.⁹¹⁴

⁹⁰⁸ Minutes, 1913 – 1961.

⁹⁰⁹ Juventino de León, Delia de León, Gutiérrez, Hinojosa-Smith, Gonzales, Howell, de la Cerda, interviews.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid. Also Buenrostro, interview.

⁹¹¹ *Mercedes Tribune*, June 14, 1922. Also Rivera, J. Peña, J. de León, R. de León, Howell, de la Cerda, Buenrostro, interviews.

⁹¹² Minutes, 1909 – 1958. Also *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1941 – 1960.

⁹¹³ Minutes, 1909 – 1964; and February 9, 1964.

⁹¹⁴ Minutes, 1909 – 1971; and August 6, 1971.

- The first Mexican American superintendent of schools, Lauro R. Guerra, was not named until 1971.⁹¹⁵

School Achievement: Academic and Social

The third category, school achievement, is subdivided into academic achievement and social achievement. Academic achievement is most commonly considered in studies comparing Mexican American education to other groups; and the data used is usually the number of students graduating, the number of students passing or failing their courses, and the number of children being retained in the same grade level for failure to achieve the required norms. However, students don't just learn academic subject matter in public education. They also learn socialization skills and leadership skills. Both areas are considered in this study to determine the level of engagement and social achievement that Mexican American schoolchildren were able to secure while in school. The findings in this category are as follows:

- In the 1920s, the North School was only an elementary while the South School was expanded to include elementary, junior high and high school grade levels with many clubs, organizations, and activities that were not available at the North School.⁹¹⁶
- The first student to graduate from Mercedes high school did so in 1914.⁹¹⁷
- The first Mexican American high school student to graduate did so in 1921 and she represented a 6% minority of the graduating class that year with one Mexican American and 15 Anglos graduating.⁹¹⁸
- Mexican American graduates did not become the majority of the Mercedes graduating class until 1953 when 18 Anglos and 35 Mexican Americans graduated.⁹¹⁹

⁹¹⁵ Minutes, 1909 – 1971; and June 14, 1971.

⁹¹⁶ *Mercedes Tribune*, June 14, 1922.

⁹¹⁷ Class of 1914, "Wall of Fame."

⁹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Class of 1921. The graduate was Mary Villarreal.

- In the Mercedes graduating class of 2008, there were 221 graduates of whom 221 were Mexican American and none were Anglo.⁹²⁰
- Valedictorians and salutatorians were sometimes Mexican American beginning in 1928.⁹²¹
- In 1938, the failure rate for Mexican Americans in elementary grades was 42%; the failure rate for Anglos was 4%.⁹²²
- In the 1960s, Mexican American school board members questioned the high failure rates at junior high and high school. In many classes up to 69% of the students were failing.⁹²³
- Prior to the 1950s, large numbers of Mexican Americans dropped out of school because they had to work to help support the family, not because they were failing in school.⁹²⁴
- Mexican American and Anglo students who attended junior high and high school in Mercedes did not belong in equal numbers to clubs and organizations until around 1968.⁹²⁵
- Prior to the 1960s, most clubs and organizations only had a few Mexican Americans as members and one or two officers.⁹²⁶
- A few clubs and organizations, such as Y-Teens, Zeta Eta Sigma, and Thespians, retained an Anglo majority until the 1980s.⁹²⁷
- Mexican Americans were the majority of members and club officers in school clubs and organizations by the 1980s.⁹²⁸

⁹¹⁹ Minutes, 1909 – 1953.

⁹²⁰ Mercedes ISD AEIS Report, 2009.

⁹²¹ Class of 1928, "Wall of Fame."

⁹²² Graham, 86.

⁹²³ Minutes, January 16, 1962.

⁹²⁴ Graham, 5, 85, 88. Also Rivera, Howell, Juventino de León, Buenrostro, interviews.

⁹²⁵ *The Bengal*, Mercedes ISD Yearbooks for 1948, 1958, 1968.

⁹²⁶ Mercedes ISD Yearbooks for 1948, 1958, 1960, 1968, 1986.

⁹²⁷ *Ibid.*

- School clubs and organizations in the 1980s and 1990s that were traditionally female such as Future Homemakers of America (FTA), Cosmetology or Cheerleading now included a male membership.⁹²⁹
- School clubs and organizations in the 1980s and 1990s showed an increase of vocationally-oriented clubs such as Cosmetology, Office Education, Mechanics, Drafting, Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA), and a new environmental club named Beta Gamma Phi.⁹³⁰
- Previous high dropout rates for Mexican Americans continued to 2008; of 471 freshmen enrolled in 2004, only 228 graduated on time in 2008, or 48.4%.⁹³¹

Curriculum and Instruction

The fourth category is curriculum and instruction. This category focuses on the curriculum, or instructional materials, that were used with Mexican American children as well as on the method of delivery. There are indications in some studies that Mexican American children were believed incapable of college and were therefore being guided into vocational training rather than college preparatory courses.⁹³² The researcher looked at the data to see if there was evidence of this occurring at the Mercedes Independent School District. The researcher also looked at the available curriculum to determine the degree of Americanization curriculum that was being used with Mexican American children, especially in the early days. Some Chicano historians raise the question of the version of history that was taught to Mexican American

⁹²⁸ Mercedes Yearbooks for 1968, 1978, 1988, 1998.

⁹²⁹ Ibid.

⁹³⁰ Ibid.

⁹³¹ Mercedes ISD AEIS Reports, 2004 and 2009. The graduation data for 2008 is given in the 2009 report.

⁹³² Juan Javier Inda, "La Comunidad en Lucha: The Development of the East Los Angeles High School Blowouts," *Working Papers Series, No. 29*, (CA: Stanford University, 1990), 3. Also San Miguel, "Mexican Americans and Education," 120-121.

schoolchildren at varying points of time.⁹³³ Only recently have revisionist historians succeeded in publishing more balanced views of historical events which do not either completely omit the contributions of Mexican Americans or else denigrate the actions of Mexican Americans, in particular in the study of Texas history.⁹³⁴ The method of delivery of these curricular materials, or the instructional domain, also looks at the language needs of Mexican American children and the use of bicultural, bilingual instructional methods. The justification for segregated schools that was used in the early years was the lack of English language skills that Mexican American children had upon entering school.⁹³⁵ Was this reasoning used to separate children in Mercedes in the early years and in succeeding time periods? The findings in this category are as follows:

- Elementary school Mexican American children were put in a separate school in the north side of town designated as “Mexican” in 1908 at the beginning of the school district.⁹³⁶
- In 1910, the school for Mexican American children was called “Preparatory” which implied that they were not English-ready and therefore could not attend the school on the south side of town.⁹³⁷
- Although the physical facilities at the north school were inferior to those of the south side, there is insufficient data to say that the instructional materials at the north schools were inferior to those of the south schools.⁹³⁸
- Initially the teachers on the north side were paid lower salaries than those on the south side, which may have indicated non-certified or non-degreed teachers there.⁹³⁹

⁹³³ San Miguel, *“Let All of Them Take Heed,”* 39-47.

⁹³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹³⁶ Graham, 4, 12, Also Minutes, April 5, 1910; June 3, 1910.

⁹³⁷ Minutes, June 11, 1910.

⁹³⁸ Minutes, 1908 – 2008. None of the interviewees attended both South School and North Elementary.

No indications were found that materials were distinct. Some interviewees attending North and West reported old worn books, but it is unknown if the same existed at the South School at the same time.

- In some integrated rooms at South and later at the junior high and high school, Anglo students sat at the front of the class and teachers seemed to be teaching to them only.⁹⁴⁰
- All schoolchildren were tracked based on the results of testing; many Mexican American schoolchildren were tracked into non-college preparatory classes.⁹⁴¹
- The Mercedes ISD used Texas state-adopted textbooks as the foundation of their instructional resources for all one hundred years in this study.⁹⁴²
- In 1963 the beginnings of a bilingual program were implemented in the elementary schools in Mercedes.⁹⁴³
- Beginning in 1914, Mercedes teachers were required to have First Grade State Certificates (highest level) or have a degree of similar rank in order to teach in Mercedes schools.⁹⁴⁴
- Teachers were sometimes hired without degrees or proper certification, particularly at North Elementary and later West Elementary.⁹⁴⁵
- Mexican American students' and parents' perceptions of teacher quality were that the best teachers taught at the South School and later Travis Elementary on the south side of town.⁹⁴⁶

⁹³⁹ Minutes, September 21, 1908.

⁹⁴⁰ Rivera, Hinojosa-Smith, de la Cerda, Gonzales, interviews.

⁹⁴¹ Minutes, January 21, 1963. Also Hector P. Garcia, Rivera, Hinojosa-Smith, Treviño, Martínez, Buenrostro, interviews.

⁹⁴² Minutes, 1908 – 2008. The MISD minutes show textbook committees were appointed to review and choose textbooks for the district. The committee chose state-adopted textbooks in all selections. Other studies have shown Texas textbooks, especially Texas history textbooks, to have been Anglo-centric until the revisionist era in the 1970s. See San Miguel, *“Let All of Them Take Heed,”* 39-47.

⁹⁴³ Minutes, January 21, 1963.

⁹⁴⁴ Minutes, March 9, 1914.

⁹⁴⁵ Minutes, 1908 – 2008. See examples April 10, 1941 and April 14, 1954.

⁹⁴⁶ Hinojosa-Smith, Peña, Howell, Gonzales, de la Cerda, Rivera, interviews.

Administrative Practices

The fifth category is administrative practices. These are broad and can include many areas such as the following: the use of intelligence test results to practice tracking of students; the assignment of teachers by administrators and the factors that these decisions were based on; the development of vocational and other less academic courses of study based on the belief that Mexican American schoolchildren were incapable of achieving more; and the enforcement or lack of enforcement of federal and state laws and policies such as compulsory attendance, the speaking of Spanish in school, and academic requirements for graduation. In some studies, administrators were revealed to arbitrarily place Mexican American students in vocational courses rather than college preparatory courses based on personal belief systems rather than data.⁹⁴⁷ There were also reported instances of the lack of enforcement of the compulsory attendance law in Texas, because school officials did not wish to deal with the “Mexican Problem” in their school districts.⁹⁴⁸ Mercedes data will be examined to determine whether administrative practices manifested any of the above tendencies. The findings in this category are as follows:

- As mandated by school board policy, Mexican American schoolchildren were not permitted to speak Spanish at school until 1971.⁹⁴⁹
- Some Mercedes ISD students were caught speaking Spanish at school. Some received corporal punishment for this infraction.⁹⁵⁰
- All schools in Mercedes had Anglo principals until 1964.⁹⁵¹

⁹⁴⁷ San Miguel, *“Let All of Them Take Heed,”* 46-47.

⁹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁹⁴⁹ Minutes, March 9, 1971. The policy’s phrase “required to speak English” was changed to “requested to speak English.”

⁹⁵⁰ Rivera, Peña, Hinojosa-Smith, de la Cerda, Buenrostro, interviews.

⁹⁵¹ Minutes, June 13, 1908 to February 9, 1964.

- Campus administrators, teachers and counselors sometimes decided to place Mexican American schoolchildren on vocational or basic academic tracks as opposed to college-bound tracks based on personal perceptions rather than on proven ability.⁹⁵²
- Until the 1960s, south side campuses including South Elementary, Travis Elementary, junior high and high school had almost one hundred percent Anglo teachers placed there.⁹⁵³
- Until the 1960s, most Mexican American teachers hired were placed at North Elementary, West Elementary and Taylor Elementary (north side schools).⁹⁵⁴
- Superintendents generally tried to enforce the compulsory attendance law even though it frequently resulted in overcrowding.⁹⁵⁵
- In an attempt to fully integrate Mercedes schools in the early 1970s, Superintendent Lauro R. Guerra created single-line campuses or campuses with a single grade level where all the town's schoolchildren had to attend.⁹⁵⁶
- Most Mercedes schoolchildren were bused in the early 1970s in order to integrate all the district schools.⁹⁵⁷

Minority Responses to Discrimination

The sixth category is minority responses to discrimination. Frequently, Mexican American parents were categorized by school officials as being uncaring and unsupportive of

⁹⁵² Martínez, de la Cerda, Hinojosa-Smith, Buenrostro, Rivera, interviews.

⁹⁵³ Minutes, 1909 to 1962; see samples April 12, 1928; May 14, 1931; May 7, 1947; May 14, 1958; February 9, 1962. Also *Mercedes Tribune*, *Mercedes News*, *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1921 – 1962.

⁹⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁵ Minutes, 1908 – 2008. Also Graham, 4. Also *Mercedes Tribune*, June 14, 1922. Also González, Churchill, interviews.

⁹⁵⁶ Minutes, April 10, 1973. Also Churchill, Treviño, interviews.

⁹⁵⁷ Churchill, Treviño, interviews.

their children's education.⁹⁵⁸ They cited lack of parent involvement in school activities, frequently ignoring the parents' long working hours, lack of language proficiency and socioeconomic status as possible deterrents to parent-school communication.⁹⁵⁹ Some studies indicate that Mexican American parents were passive and never resisted segregation and discriminatory practices.⁹⁶⁰ Other studies indicate that Mexican American parents and community members actively attempted individually or through organized efforts to fight for equal educational opportunities for their children.⁹⁶¹ The data collected on the Mercedes Independent School District will be analyzed for evidence of passive or active responses to discriminatory practices. The findings in this category are as follows:

- Before 1933, school board minutes and newspaper articles do not show any Mexican American community members complaining about discrimination or segregation; in 1933, an incident is recorded in the school board minutes regarding alleged and unspecified discriminatory practices.⁹⁶²
- Mexican American parents participated in Parent – Teacher Associations (P.T.A.) at North Elementary since the 1920s in order to purchase needed educational resources.⁹⁶³
- Some Mexican American parents insisted on having their children enrolled at South Elementary or Travis Elementary, even if they were not officially in that residential area.⁹⁶⁴

⁹⁵⁸ Graham, 88.

⁹⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁰ Nancy Feyl Chavkin and Dora Lara González, "Forging Partnerships Between Mexican American Parents and the Schools," *ERIC Digest*, <http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-2/mexican.html> (accessed May 16, 2011).

⁹⁶¹ Ibid.

⁹⁶² Minutes, March 30, 1933.

⁹⁶³ *Mercedes Tribune*, June 14, 1922.

⁹⁶⁴ Howell, Hinojosa-Smith, interviews.

- Some Mexican American parents who lived on the north side had their children live with relatives on the south side so that they could attend South Elementary or Travis Elementary.⁹⁶⁵
- Some Mexican American P.T.A. members went to school board meetings to complain about facilities and other instructional needs for their children beginning in the 1950s.⁹⁶⁶
- Mexican American community members formed organizations such as the Mexican American Chamber of Commerce and the Mexican American School Board Members Association when existing organizations ignored their concerns.⁹⁶⁷
- The first Mexican American school board member served from 1915 to 1917 but another would not serve until 1954.⁹⁶⁸
- Mexican American community members ran for school board elections since 1915 but did not form a 4/3 majority until 1965.⁹⁶⁹
- Mexican American board members did not vote as a bloc, but divided their votes according to personal choices sometimes voting with and sometimes voting against Anglo votes.⁹⁷⁰
- Mexican American board members did not attempt to “get revenge” but instead attempted to achieve equity in the school system.⁹⁷¹
- Beginning in the 1960s, the local newspaper sometimes printed letters written to the newspaper regarding racial discrimination or segregation issues in Mercedes schools.⁹⁷²

⁹⁶⁵ Gonzales, González, de la Cerda, Peña, interviews.

⁹⁶⁶ Minutes, June 20, 1961.

⁹⁶⁷ Ibid., February 9, 1949, February 12, 1974. Also Hinojosa-Smith, Buenrostro, Juventino de León, interviews.

⁹⁶⁸ Minutes, May 5, 1915 to April 14, 1954.

⁹⁶⁹ Ibid., April 9, 1965.

⁹⁷⁰ Ibid., April 9, 1965 – December 14, 2008.

⁹⁷¹ Ibid., 1965 – 2008. Also June 18, 1963.

- Many Mexican Americans and Anglos accepted the status quo in Mercedes and never viewed discrimination and school segregation as serious issues.⁹⁷³
- When the Mercedes schools became fully integrated in the 1970s through the creation of single-line campuses and district-wide busing, many Anglo parents placed their children in private schools or left the community to avoid the integration.⁹⁷⁴

Research Questions

In this qualitative historical study of the Mercedes Independent School District with a focus on Mexican American education and the opportunities and obstacles experienced by these schoolchildren as they were served by the district, the researcher sought answers to the following four research questions: 1) What educational opportunities and obstacles were experienced by Mexican Americans in Mercedes, Texas during the twentieth century? 2) What were the schools like that were attended by the Mexican American schoolchildren in Mercedes, Texas? 3) What perceptions, attitudes and reactions did the Mexican American parents and schoolchildren have regarding the schools they attended and the educational opportunities and obstacles they experienced? 4) Which individuals played important roles in the educational history of the Mercedes, Texas schools? The questions are answered in the following manner based on the findings of the research study.

Research Question # 1

What educational opportunities and obstacles were experienced by Mexican Americans in Mercedes, Texas during the twentieth century?

In the early days of the Mercedes Independent School District, most Mexican American children were expected to attend North Elementary.⁹⁷⁵ They were placed in low or high grade

⁹⁷² *The Mercedes Enterprise*, June 13, 1963. Also April 18, 1974 and May 16, 1974.

⁹⁷³ Benítez, Goza, Kennedy, González, Rivera, interviews.

⁹⁷⁴ Guerra, 148. Also Peña, Treviño, Buenrostro, González, interviews.

levels so that many were retained in elementary school for several years. In 1938, North Elementary sixth graders were reported to be between the ages of 11 and 17.⁹⁷⁶ Needless to say, very few Mexican Americans graduated from the high school in the early days.⁹⁷⁷

The data collected indicates that the elementary schools attended by Mexican American students were inadequate.⁹⁷⁸ There was severe overcrowding and the teachers were often inexperienced or poorly qualified.⁹⁷⁹ The main obstacles to the education of Mexican Americans in this early period was the extreme poverty of the majority of these children and the poor attendance that was forced upon them because of the necessity of working to help support the family.⁹⁸⁰ A few more prosperous Mexican American families who lived on the south side of town were able to enroll their children at South Elementary.⁹⁸¹ They had the same educational opportunities as the rest of the Anglo children enrolled there. They had newer facilities, a cafeteria, gymnasium and auditorium by the 1930s, qualified teachers and sufficient instructional resources.⁹⁸² Mexican Americans finally became a majority of the graduating class in 1953 when 35 of the 53 graduates were Mexican American.⁹⁸³

During the transitional years of the 1950s to the 1970s, additional elementary schools were built both on the south side of town and on the north side of town which served to expand the educational opportunities of Mexican American schoolchildren.⁹⁸⁴ The Mexican American community became more and more involved in city and school politics and became more

⁹⁷⁵ Graham, 12. Also Hinojosa-Smith, Juventino de León, Delia de León, Rivera, Buenrostro, de la Cerda, interviews.

⁹⁷⁶ Graham, 38.

⁹⁷⁷ "Wall of Fame."

⁹⁷⁸ Minutes, 1908 – 2008. Also Rivera, Hinojosa-Smith, González, Gonzales, Juventino de León, interviews.

⁹⁷⁹ Minutes, 1908 – 1970. Also *News, Tribune, Enterprise*, 1922 – 1959.

⁹⁸⁰ Graham, 85-86, Also de la Cerda, Gutiérrez, González, Gonzales, Peña, Buenrostro, interviews.

⁹⁸¹ Graham, 13-14. Also Howell, Hinojosa-Smith, Peña, interviews.

⁹⁸² Minutes, 1908 – 2008. Also *Mercedes News, Mercedes Tribune, The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1922 – 1970.

⁹⁸³ Minutes, 1914 – 1953. Also May 13, 1953.

⁹⁸⁴ Minutes, 1949 – 1979.

insistent on equal facilities, although complete integration did not occur until the 1973-1974 school year when the district went to single-line campuses and district-wide busing.⁹⁸⁵ The number of Mexican American teachers, counselors, administrators and school board members steadily increased so that the Mexican American community had a better voice in improving the facilities, the teacher quality and the instructional resources. The chief obstacle during this time of increased Mexican American enrollment was the lingering practice of separating students into the advanced, college-preparatory track or the basic or vocational track.⁹⁸⁶ In other words, even though Anglo and Mexican American children attended the same school, they were not necessarily placed in the same classrooms or had access to the best teachers and instructional materials. High expectations for Mexican American students were still not the norm during this transitional period.⁹⁸⁷

Since the 1990s, Mercedes has expanded the opportunities that all students have by adding college level concurrent classes to the curriculum as well as Advanced Placement courses which allow the student to graduate from high school with college credit hours.⁹⁸⁸ There are new campuses built with state-of-the-art technology available to the teachers and the students for instructional purposes.⁹⁸⁹ Although the district is still in litigation with construction companies over poorly built facilities, they have managed to expand and modernize existing physical plants to address the needs of all students.⁹⁹⁰ In addition to the traditional Mercedes High School, the district has added an alternative high school campus as well as an Early College Academy in order to provide as many credit accruing options as possible in the effort to increase graduation

⁹⁸⁵ Minutes, April 10, 1973. Also Churchill, interview.

⁹⁸⁶ Peña, Rivera, Gonzales, de la Cerda, Treviño, Hector P. García, Howell, interviews.

⁹⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁸ Minutes, 1998 – 2008. Also Treviño, Churchill, interviews.

⁹⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid.

rates.⁹⁹¹ The district currently has four elementary campuses in operation: Kennedy, Travis, Taylor and Hinojosa, the newest campus.⁹⁹² There are very few Anglo students left in Mercedes, however, with the 2007-2008 school year showing only 33 Anglo children enrolled compared to 5,435 Mexican American children district-wide. The district continues to experience a high dropout rate consistent with the state and national trends.⁹⁹³ The district's students have also coped well with new state testing requirements, and the district has attained the state's second highest "Recognized" rating twice in the last two decades.⁹⁹⁴

Research Question # 2

What were the schools like that were attended by the Mexican American schoolchildren in Mercedes, Texas?

In every description over the years of the schools on the south side of town where the Anglos resided, the schools were constructed of brick or stucco, had a cafeteria and an auditorium, as well as athletic facilities.⁹⁹⁵ This was not so on the north side of town for a long time.⁹⁹⁶ North Elementary was frequently described in school board minutes and newspaper articles as being constructed of wood frame, with no electricity and running water for many years, with tables and benches instead of desks, and generally of far inferior condition to the schools on the south side of town. Natividad Gonzales, interviewee who attended North Ward in the 1940s, said, "it was a dark, ominous building...and there were bats..."⁹⁹⁷ The school board minutes as late as 1940 show how North Elementary was frequently shortchanged when it came to physical facilities. The July 29, 1940 board minutes indicated that although a brick addition

⁹⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹⁹² Mercedes ISD AEIS Report, 2008.

⁹⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁴ Mercedes ISD AEIS Reports, 1990 - 2008.

⁹⁹⁵ Minutes, 1911 - 1970.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid. Also Gonzales, Hinojosa-Smith, Delia de León, Juventino de León, interviews.

⁹⁹⁷ Gonzales, interview.

had been approved for North at an earlier board meeting, the board then decided to construct a frame building instead.⁹⁹⁸

There is a newspaper article in December of 1950 which describes a Christmas Program that will be given at the North Ward School “on the playground if the weather is favorable.”⁹⁹⁹ The article further states that “the stage for the presentation is being furnished by Jesus Garcia while Abel Garcia and the Mexican Chamber of Commerce are furnishing seats for the evening.”¹⁰⁰⁰ This implies that the school had no adequate facility for any children’s programs, and must, perforce, have a Christmas program conducted outdoors in the middle of winter. If the Mexican Chamber of Commerce had not gotten involved, it appears that there would not have been a stage or seats available.¹⁰⁰¹ In contrast, the school board in February of that same year had authorized Mr. Graham, the superintendent, “to have lights installed on the tennis courts on the South grammar school grounds.”¹⁰⁰² The contrast between the two conditions portrayed above give a stark picture of what little importance Mercedes school officials gave to the North School compared to the South School in the first fifty years of the district’s existence.

It was not until the Mexican American community was able to hold political positions in the city and on the school board beginning in the 1960s that things gradually began to change. With Mexican Americans on the school board, particularly after they attained a majority, the schools serving Mexican Americans improved considerably in facility quality.¹⁰⁰³ Other things were slower to change. Although Mexican American teachers and administrators had begun to be hired at the elementary and junior high levels, the Mercedes High School had an Anglo

⁹⁹⁸ Minutes, July 29, 1940.

⁹⁹⁹ “North Ward School To Give Christmas Program Tuesday,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, December 14, 1950.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰² Minutes, February 8, 1950.

¹⁰⁰³ Ibid., 1959 – 1970. Also *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1941 – 1970.

majority teaching staff well into the 1980s.¹⁰⁰⁴ The Anglo staff was well qualified, and was generally well-liked by the Mexican American students attending the high school, but very few Mexican American role models were provided to the high school students until the last two decades of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁰⁵ Generally speaking, the first Mexican American teachers in Mercedes were Mercedes graduates returning from college to teach in their home school. Many Mercedes graduates currently work in the school district as paraprofessional staff, teachers and administrators.¹⁰⁰⁶ The current superintendent Dr. Daniel Treviño, Jr. graduated from Mercedes High school in 1981.¹⁰⁰⁷

Research Question # 3

What perceptions, attitudes and reactions did the Mexican American parents and schoolchildren have regarding the schools they attended and the educational opportunities and obstacles they experienced?

In the early years, Mexican Americans appeared to be complacent and to accept the status quo of having separate school facilities. There was an apparent acceptance that this was the way things were, and that change was not likely or possible. Several interviewees felt that complaining about the way things were was not considered to be in good taste.¹⁰⁰⁸ A few Mexican Americans decided that getting elected to the city council or to the school board was a way to have their concerns heard, and one, Jesús M. García, managed to get elected in 1915.¹⁰⁰⁹ Although the presence of one or two Mexican American school trustees on the board helped to put items on the agenda, they soon found out that concerns were heard but they were not acted

¹⁰⁰⁴ Ibid., 1959 – 1990.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Peña, Delia de León, Gutiérrez, González, Hinojosa-Smith, Buenrostro, interviews.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Treviño, Churchill, interviews.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Buenrostro, Benítez, Gutiérrez, interviews.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Minutes, May 5, 1915.

upon, or at least not in a timely manner.¹⁰¹⁰ In later years, as more Mexican American trustees were elected to the Mercedes school board, the minutes reflect lively exchanges between board members and the superintendent as attempts were made to address concerns at North Elementary, in particular the poor physical condition of the school and the serious overcrowding.¹⁰¹¹

Many Mexican American parents did not speak English very well, and were therefore reluctant to approach Anglo school administrators or board members to discuss their child's needs. Several interviewees indicated that when their parents did not speak English well, another relative who did would be sent in their place to speak to school officials.¹⁰¹² The inability to speak English well and therefore the reluctance to approach school officials very likely made Mercedes school administrators and trustees think that Mexican American parents were complacent and did not care about their child's education.¹⁰¹³ Yet even in the very early years, Mexican American parents proved that they were very interested in their children's education by becoming involved in the P.T.A. and participating in fund-raising activities to benefit the schools. Newspaper articles as far back as 1922 showed a very active group of Mexican American parents at North Elementary.¹⁰¹⁴

Even though some Mexican American students were allowed to attend South School, it was dependant on their having residency in the south side of town. In some cases, Mexican American parents were insistent on having their children attend South School, or later Travis Elementary, because it was common knowledge that the facilities and the teacher quality was

¹⁰¹⁰ Ibid., 1908 – 1970.

¹⁰¹¹ Minutes, 1960 – 1970.

¹⁰¹² Peña, Gonzales, de la Cerda, Martínez, interviews.

¹⁰¹³ Graham, 87-88.

¹⁰¹⁴ "Large Proportion of Scholastic Eligibles are Attending Mercedes Public Schools," *Mercedes Tribune*, June 14, 1922.

superior at that campus. One of the interviewees remembers his aunt going to Travis to enroll her children there because the “teachers were better” there.¹⁰¹⁵ Another interviewee said he was sent to live with his aunt on the south side so that he would be eligible to attend South School.¹⁰¹⁶ These actions indicate that many Mexican American parents would do whatever it took to get what they perceived to be the best education for their children.

Several of the persons interviewed had not thought about their school days in the Mercedes Independent School District in a long time. As they responded to questions and reflected on their school days in Mercedes, there were various “aha” moments as they realized in hindsight how things had been. One interviewee who attended West Elementary school was bused almost every day to Travis Elementary to have lunch at that campus.¹⁰¹⁷ As a child, he never thought to question why his campus did not have a cafeteria, nor did he realize that the south side schools where the Anglo children attended had had cafeterias since the 1930s. As an adult, he now realizes that there were some disparities and that not all schools gave equal educational services to the Mercedes students at various times in the school district’s history. Another interviewee reacted with surprise when she realized that every one of the high school teachers teaching college preparatory courses had been Anglo. When she attended high school, she never thought to question why there were hardly any Mexican American teachers teaching those courses.¹⁰¹⁸ Some interviewees reflected that as in most situations, hindsight is 20/20, and that they see things now that they did not realize as they lived those moments.¹⁰¹⁹

In some cases, Mexican American students and parents did not question the decisions made by school officials because they felt that “teachers know best; the school knows what it’s

¹⁰¹⁵ Howell, interview.

¹⁰¹⁶ Gonzales, interview.

¹⁰¹⁷ Treviño, interview.

¹⁰¹⁸ Peña, interview.

¹⁰¹⁹ Peña, Gonzales, Buenrostro, interviews.

doing.”¹⁰²⁰ One interviewee recalled going to the school counselor to ask why he had not been put into the English IV class, which was a college preparatory course. He was told that he wasn’t college material and that he should consider entering military service after high school. At that time, he did not question the counselor’s response, thinking that undoubtedly she knew what was in his best interests.¹⁰²¹ In these cases, it was not a matter of being passive or complacent on the part of Mexican American parents and students, it was a matter of having full trust in the school district administrators and teachers, and in believing that they were knowledgeable experts and professionals who knew what was best for all students and who would advocate for them in their best interests.

If there was a time when Mexican American students and the community might have reacted aggressively to perceived discrimination, it was during the 1960s and 1970s when civil rights activism was sensationally featured on national and local televisions and in newspapers and magazines. School board minutes do reveal that there was some tension among Mercedes high school students during the late sixties and early seventies. The incident regarding Mrs. Moore is described in school board minutes and reveals that high school students were well aware of civil rights protests and walk-outs by Mexican American students at other school districts.¹⁰²² Mercedes high school students might have considered a walk-out in protest of Mrs. Moore getting fired, but they did not actually carry it out.¹⁰²³ The time period of this incident in March of 1971 appears to have been the only time that Mercedes Mexican American students considered active protests against the actions of school officials. It seems to have been effectively tamped down by school administrators, however, by effectively firing Mrs. Moore

¹⁰²⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰²¹ Martínez, interview.

¹⁰²² Minutes, March 8, 1971.

¹⁰²³ Ibid.

who was considered an instigator, and this type of student protest never again surfaced during the history of the school district.¹⁰²⁴

Research Question # 4

Which individuals played important roles in the educational history of the Mercedes, Texas schools?

There are several notable individuals that should be included in this study as having played important roles in the educational history of the Mercedes school district. Many, but not all, of these individuals came from the middle income level Mexican American families who because they did not constantly struggle with poverty were able to become well-educated and therefore more empowered to be “movers and shakers” in the community. Some of these notable Mexican American families were the García, Hinojosa, and Fernández families who produced individuals who actively pushed for increased educational opportunities for Mexican American schoolchildren. Leon R. Graham acknowledged these families when he mentioned in his 1938 master’s thesis, “many of the Latin Americans had considerable political influence.”¹⁰²⁵

One of the García family members, Jesús M. García, was elected to the Mercedes school board in 1915.¹⁰²⁶ Another Mexican American would not again be elected to the school board until 1954.¹⁰²⁷ Many García family members were well-to-do businessmen and professionals with dry goods stores, grocery stores, pharmacies and lumber companies in town.¹⁰²⁸ Dr. Hector P. García, the founder of the American G.I. Forum who was instrumental in facilitating the right to vote for Mexican Americans through poll-tax drives and who fought for veteran’s benefits for

¹⁰²⁴ Ibid., 1971 – 2008. Also *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1971 – 2008.

¹⁰²⁵ Graham, 14.

¹⁰²⁶ Minutes, May 5, 1915.

¹⁰²⁷ Minutes, April 14, 1954.

¹⁰²⁸ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, September 15, 2007.

returning WWII Mexican American servicemen belonged to this family.¹⁰²⁹ Most of his brothers and sisters became medical doctors as he had by surmounting many obstacles such as discrimination, prejudice and limited access to medical schools. The García family often appeared in local news stories supporting and promoting increased educational opportunities for Mexican Americans not only locally but also nationally.¹⁰³⁰

The Hinojosa family also produced notable individuals who actively fought to address Mexican American issues and needs. Liborio Hinojosa served as P.T.A. President of North Elementary, was elected Mercedes school board trustee, and was also elected Mayor of Mercedes among other offices. His active political involvement put considerable pressure on city and school officials to provide equitable educational opportunities to Mexican American schoolchildren.¹⁰³¹ Miss Elvira Hinojosa also served on the Mercedes School Board for many years and did her share to make sure Mexican Americans and their educational needs were not forgotten.¹⁰³² Another family member, the Honorable Rubén Hinojosa, graduated from Mercedes schools and returned to help build the H & H Meat Products family business. He also served on the Mercedes school board, was President of the state Mexican American School Board Members Association, was elected to the Texas State Board of Education in 1974 and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1996 and has served there since. In all of his elected positions, he has made Hispanic education a priority concern, and in his current office as a U.S. Congressman, he leads the Congressional Hispanic Caucus' task force on education and serves as chairman of the Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Competitiveness. He has fought to improve accessibility and affordability in higher education

¹⁰²⁹ Hinojosa-Smith, "Foreword," xiii.

¹⁰³⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁰³¹ Minutes, 1962 – 1972. Also *The Mercedes Enterprise*, September 15, 1982.

¹⁰³² *Ibid.*, 1961 – 1970.

for all but especially for Hispanics. He has continued to stay in touch with the Mercedes school district regarding its needs, and the family company has donated land and other resources to the school district on many occasions.¹⁰³³

Many of the members of the Fernández family were original Spanish land grant recipients whose proprietorship of lands in the Rio Grande Valley dated back to the mid-1700s.¹⁰³⁴ They are representative of the original ranching enterprises that characterized the Rio Grande Valley for many years before the coming of Anglo Americans and commercial farming enterprises to the region. Several Fernández family members served as school board trustees in the Mercedes ISD including Joaquín J. Fernández and Santiago “Jimmy” Fernández.¹⁰³⁵ Many Fernández family members worked for the school district as teacher aides, teachers, and administrators, including Imelda Fernández Guerra who served as Elementary Curriculum Director in the late 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰³⁶ Fernández family members intermarried with other prominent families with last names such as Champion, Chapa, Vela, Cano, Sáenz, Hinojosa, and Guerra who also traced their heritage to the original Spanish land grantees of the Rio Grande Valley.¹⁰³⁷

One important individual who belonged to prominent Rio Grande Valley families was Lauro R. Guerra, who as Mercedes Superintendent of Schools in the 1970s led the Mercedes school district through one of its most difficult periods. Although he was not born in Mercedes, he had married into the Fernández family as the husband of Imelda Fernández.¹⁰³⁸ He became the Mercedes superintendent in 1971 and integrated the entire school district through a series of

¹⁰³³ Congressman Rubén Hinojosa, Representing the 15th District of Texas, <http://hinojosa.house.gov/>, (accessed June 1, 2011).

¹⁰³⁴ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, July 4, 1974.

¹⁰³⁵ Minutes, 1954 – 1974.

¹⁰³⁶ Guerra, 150.

¹⁰³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰³⁸ *Ibid.*

incremental steps which ensured a smooth transition.¹⁰³⁹ According to one interviewee, he was able to accomplish the desegregation of the school district with a firm but understanding hand and with minimal disruptions.¹⁰⁴⁰ With excellent interpersonal skills and expert planning, he ensured that education in the school district was greatly expanded to address the needs of Mexican American students. He served as an outstanding role model in educational leadership for developing district administrators, and he developed, promoted and implemented groundbreaking new programs that addressed the needs of all students in the district.¹⁰⁴¹

Although she left the school district upon graduation and never returned to live in the district, Dr. Elisa de León Gutiérrez impacted the Mexican American schoolchildren in Mercedes in a different way. As the first Director of Bilingual Programs in the Texas Education Agency, she developed the curricular language program that would finally acknowledge the Mexican American's native language of Spanish as a viable and important tool in acquiring knowledge while the child learned English. She not only impacted Mexican American children in Mercedes, but in the entire state of Texas and beyond when other states used the Texas model to develop their own state bilingual plans.¹⁰⁴² The academic success of thousands of Mexican American schoolchildren in Texas and the nation is attributable in large part to the tireless work she did researching, developing, writing, defending, and implementing bilingual education programs. She said in her interview that she would never forget the monitoring trips she took to hundreds of school districts in Texas, and the horror she felt at how Mexican American children

¹⁰³⁹ Minutes, June 14, 1971. Also Churchill, interview.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴² Elisa Gutiérrez, Policies Affecting Bilingual Education and ESL Programs, Intercultural Development Research Association, http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Newsletter/August_1997_Policy/Policies_Affecting_Bilingual_Education_and_ESL_Programs/ (accessed December 17, 2010).

were being treated. “I realized that I had a job to do. I had to protect those children.”¹⁰⁴³ She never sought accolades or extra compensation, working quietly but relentlessly to ensure that Mexican American schoolchildren were able to experience success in Texas school districts.

Giving stability to the school district was Monte R. Churchill who served as Mercedes superintendent from 1980 to 1997 and who after retiring from school administration then served the district as a school board trustee from 2004 to the present.¹⁰⁴⁴ He indicated in his interview that Lauro R. Guerra was his role model, and that he learned much from Mr. Guerra in diplomacy, in the successful implementation of new programs, and in navigating the waters of change. He has until now been the Mercedes superintendent with the longest tenure at seventeen years. The length of his tenure is a testament to his mastery of administrative skills in an era when the usual tenure of a school district superintendent is from two to five years.¹⁰⁴⁵ He was able to handle the paradigm shift of the integration of schools begun by his predecessor Lauro Guerra, and was able to implement a succession of new programs to address the needs of the growing population of Mexican Americans in the Mercedes school district. He was also the superintendent in charge when the state began its accountability requirements and was able to provide the leadership necessary to achieve “Academically Acceptable” ratings for the school district during his tenure.¹⁰⁴⁶

Finally, it is indisputable that the current superintendent of schools, Dr. Daniel Treviño, Jr., will serve as an excellent role model for all the schoolchildren in Mercedes.¹⁰⁴⁷ Coming from humble beginnings in his native Mercedes, he was able to overcome financial hardships and discouraging circumstances to attain the highest degree in his profession, a doctorate in

¹⁰⁴³ Gutiérrez, interview.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Churchill, interview.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Ibid.

educational leadership.¹⁰⁴⁸ He expresses the determination to provide all the educational opportunities in his power to all of the schoolchildren in Mercedes not only by his words but by his actions. Under his leadership, the district is undertaking the complete modernization of the facilities, upgrading the use of state-of-the-art technology for administrative as well as instructional practices, and is producing graduates who have attained college credit hours and Associate's Degrees before they even embark on their post-secondary education. He is committed to the success of the district and to providing a quality education to all of the children in his charge. He understands the challenges that the district now faces, but he is prepared to use his district team to its fullest capabilities in order to maximize educational opportunities for all the students and minimize any obstacles they face.¹⁰⁴⁹ Those who work with him agree that the district is in very capable hands.¹⁰⁵⁰

Conclusions: Emerging Themes

The Mercedes Independent School District came into being on June 13, 1908. It began with two schools, School # 1 located on the south side of town, and School # 2 located on the north side of town.¹⁰⁵¹ The intent was clearly to separate Anglo schoolchildren from Mexican American schoolchildren, with many reasons given such as “for the convenience of the children living in that area,”¹⁰⁵² and “to prepare non-English speaking children for the English-speakers school.”¹⁰⁵³ Few openly spoke about the segregation although the words “Mexican School” clearly appeared on early Mercedes maps,¹⁰⁵⁴ and occasionally the words “Mexican School”

¹⁰⁴⁸ Treviño, interview.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Churchill, interview.

¹⁰⁵¹ Minutes, September 21, 1908.

¹⁰⁵² *The Bengal*, 1952.

¹⁰⁵³ Graham, 13.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Sanborn Mercedes Map 1, 1917.

appeared in the official school board minutes.¹⁰⁵⁵ If anyone objected to this arrangement, it was not officially recorded in the school board minutes or local newspapers, but in Leon R. Graham's 1938 master's thesis, we have the first indications that Mexican American community members were not altogether enthusiastic about the arrangement. He states that "many Latin Americans had considerable political influence,"¹⁰⁵⁶ and that fact effectively prevented school officials from denying entrance to the South School to south side Mexican American families.

This is one of the first indications of an emerging theme in this educational history of Mercedes ISD; that prominent Mexican American families in Mercedes were at the forefront of obtaining the best educational opportunities for not only their own, but all Mexican American children in the school district. The Mexican American middle class businessmen and professionals, many of whom had been educated and had graduated from Mercedes schools, formed the nucleus of this group.¹⁰⁵⁷ They often returned to the town after securing post-secondary degrees, and the slowly growing educated middle class of Mexican American families eventually had sufficient numbers to impact in city and school elections.¹⁰⁵⁸ Once Mexican Americans had secured city and school district political positions, the school district became more balanced in terms of equal educational opportunities for all children, although full integration did not occur until the 1973 – 1974 school year.¹⁰⁵⁹

The second emerging theme in this study was the phenomenon of early acceptance of the status quo both on the part of the Anglos and the Mexican Americans. Both groups expressed time and again, that while they lived the moments, they were unaware of differences and

¹⁰⁵⁵ Minutes, July 26, 1909 and July 14, 1928.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Graham, 14.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Many of the town's Mexican American businessmen and members of prominent families such as the García, Fernández, Hinojosa, Salinas, Adame, and other families ran for city and school office and headed school organizations. See Minutes, March 30, 1933 and June 20, 1961.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Minutes, April 9, 1965.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Ibid., February 12, 1974. Also Treviño, interview.

disparities until they looked back many years later and discovered that educational opportunities were not always fully available to Mexican American students.¹⁰⁶⁰ Many of the Mexican American alumni interviewed had “aha” moments in which they were surprised to realize that all of their high school teachers had been Anglo, or that no school officials had encouraged them or advised them to attend college, or that they had been tracked since junior high or before into low-expectation groups. Some denied that segregation had existed in the town.¹⁰⁶¹ They were convinced that it was simply a matter of residence and natural attendance at a neighborhood school. They were unaware that only certain schools in a certain part of town had cafeterias or auditoriums available for their use while others did not. They were unaware that while they sat at tables and benches, other schools had new desks. They did not realize that some campuses did not have to worry about bat infestations or leaky roofs, and that they had working restrooms and water fountains while theirs were always in disrepair. They simply accepted what was, and did the best they could with what was available to them.

A third theme that emerged was the general willingness of Mexican American parents to do whatever they could to provide the best possible education for their children. In many instances, if the parents did not speak English and were uncomfortable going to the schools to speak with school officials, they found someone else to go to represent them. Sometimes it was an older child, sometimes a brother or sister who had been better educated, sometimes it was a friend or a community member who was willing to represent them and help them get solutions to their problems.¹⁰⁶² There were several interviewees who spoke about organizations such as the Woodmen of the World, known as “*Los Hacheros*” in Mexican American circles, who met socially and discussed Mexican American issues and concerns including educational

¹⁰⁶⁰ Gonzales, de la Cerda, Churchill, Peña, interviews.

¹⁰⁶¹ Martínez, Peña, Rivera, Benítez, Goza, interviews.

¹⁰⁶² Martínez, Peña, de la Cerda, Gonzales, González, interviews.

disparities.¹⁰⁶³ These organizations tried to offer scholarships to Mexican American graduates who might not otherwise have gotten one, and they often helped students, parents or employees who had school or work related issues.¹⁰⁶⁴ The interviewees several times mentioned that they were sent to live with relatives on the south side of town in order to be able to attend the better equipped schools there.¹⁰⁶⁵ Some parents simply approached school officials and insisted on admittance to the schools, but because of attendance zone maps, not many of these transfers would have been approved.¹⁰⁶⁶ Many parents made financial sacrifices in order to maximize educational opportunities for their children.¹⁰⁶⁷ Migrant families frequently left children with relatives so that they could attend school all year long, and interviewees told of parents who somehow came up with the money needed for them to attend college after graduation.¹⁰⁶⁸

When Leon R. Graham listed his findings and made recommendations in his 1938 master's thesis, he stated that the school district was not reaching as many Latin Americans as it should, based on the high failure, retention and dropout rate that this group exhibited. He recommended that:

The ideal situation would be based on a well organized plan of compulsory attendance that would permit only those who actually had to work to remain out of school. Since such a plan is not feasible at the present, due to the cost and the difficulty of administration, the next best plan must be one based on parent and pupil education. Parent education to convince the Latin American parents that their children should be in school, and pupil education to make the Latin American children desire to attend school.¹⁰⁶⁹

¹⁰⁶³ Buenrostro, Juventino de León, Delia de León, interviews.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Buenrostro, interview.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Gonzales, Peña, interviews.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Howell, interview.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Juventino de León, Delia de León, de la Cerda, Treviño, interviews.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Hector P. García, Rivera, Martínez, Peña, Howell, Gutiérrez, Treviño, interviews.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Graham, 88.

Mr. Graham was suggesting that Mexican American parents did not care enough about their children going to school, and was recommending parent education to convince them. However, it became evident from the primary data collected, that the majority of Mexican American parents did want a good education for their children.¹⁰⁷⁰ They needed no convincing that education was the way out of the loop of poverty that many of them were caught in. Graham mentions that “... such a plan is not feasible at the present, due to the cost ...”¹⁰⁷¹ One of the most prevalent items mentioned in school board minutes from the earliest times to the mid-century was that the north side schools needed repairs, and these repairs were not taken care of for many months and sometimes years. Meetings were held and the Anglo community represented made it clear that it did not feel the need to spend its hard-earned taxpayer money on the north side schools.¹⁰⁷² The severe and chronic overcrowding at North Elementary and later West Elementary, which were attended almost exclusively by Mexican Americans, contradicts what Graham states in the last sentence of the quote wherein he states in his recommendations, “parent education to convince the Latin American parents that their children should be in school.”¹⁰⁷³ If Latin American parents had to be convinced to send their children to school, then why were the north side schools so overcrowded?

The final theme that emerged in this study was that when the Mexican American community was finally able to mobilize sufficient political strength to begin to occupy city council and school district trustee positions, they did not embark on a plan of vengeance. When the Mexican Americans on the school board finally reached a 4/3 majority in 1963, they did not

¹⁰⁷⁰ Juventino de León, Delia de León, Rivera, Martínez, Peña, Howell, Gutiérrez, Treviño, González, Gonzales, Buenrostro, interviews.

¹⁰⁷¹ Graham, 88.

¹⁰⁷² “Meet Does Not Favor Bond Issue,” *Mercedes News*, November 30, 1923.

¹⁰⁷³ Graham, 88.

instantly begin removing all Anglo teachers and administrators.¹⁰⁷⁴ They practiced restraint and showed common sense as they attempted to hire the best person for the job regardless of race or ethnicity.¹⁰⁷⁵ In the school board minutes, as items were discussed and voted on, it became clear that the Mexican American school board members did not vote as a bloc. On some items, both Anglo and Mexican Americans voted “aye” and on some other items, both voted “nay.”¹⁰⁷⁶ The community’s wishes were respected, and letters to the local newspapers indicated that the community did not want racial or ethnic tensions to escalate to full incidents, as had occurred in other Rio Grande Valley school districts.¹⁰⁷⁷ The community did make it clear, however, that change and reform was expected, as evidenced by the continuing election of Mexican American school board trustees.¹⁰⁷⁸ When the district finally underwent full integration during the 1973 – 1974 school year under Lauro R. Guerra’s leadership, there were no riots, protests or walk-outs in Mercedes. The integration proceeded smoothly, and no one reported retaliatory acts or treatment.¹⁰⁷⁹ While it is true that many Anglo parents preferred to withdraw their children from public education rather than have them bused to schools on the north side of town, as far as any available records or testimony indicates, those Anglo children that remained did not experience reverse-racism.¹⁰⁸⁰

Reflections

The study of the history of an educational institution such as a school district may at first glance appear to be less than appropriate in obtaining a doctorate in educational leadership. A

¹⁰⁷⁴ Minutes, June 18, 1963, and April 9, 1965.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Minutes 1965 – 2008.

¹⁰⁷⁷ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, June 13, 1963.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Minutes, 1965 – 2008.

¹⁰⁷⁹ *The Mercedes Enterprise*, 1973 – 1975.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Neither school board minutes nor newspaper articles and letters indicate that the Anglo population was displeased with integration or had any complaints. The only “racist” comments were those of Rev. Sumerlin, who more frequently complained about misuse of taxpayer money than he did anti-Anglo feelings. See “Letter to the Editor,” *The Mercedes Enterprise*, April 9, 1974.

review of the titles of dissertations obtained in this field usually reveals quantitative studies in areas such as factors that impact student achievement, the identification of leadership qualities in superintendents or of leadership behaviors in principals, the effectiveness of unique curricular measures used in schools, or the impact of professional staff development or levels of parent involvement in predicting student success.¹⁰⁸¹ The qualitative study of the history of a particular school district in the Rio Grande Valley may evoke responses such as, “Well, that’s fine, but I’ve never had anything to do with that school district; how can knowing the history of a school district tie in with educational leadership?” The response to that question is multi-layered, and can best be answered by first reflecting on the question, “Why study history?”

Historical inquiry in education involves an investigative gathering of facts which is accomplished by reviewing archival documents such as school board minutes, high school yearbooks, attendance records, enrollment lists and newspaper articles. To add personal viewpoints and experiences to the accumulation of facts, particularly when a traditionally marginalized group is part of the study, persons involved with the historical subject of study are interviewed so that a variety of perspectives on events and incidents is gathered.¹⁰⁸² But the accumulation of the facts is insufficient, and only the first level of inquiry. The most important dimension is the interpretative process of historical inquiry in which the researcher practices and hones the ability to gather and assess evidence, the ability to assess conflicting interpretations of events, and the ability to assess change over time.¹⁰⁸³ The study of the history of an educational entity expands the context and answers questions which define a space, such as: how did this

¹⁰⁸¹ Graduates, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program Website, University of Texas – Pan American , <http://www.utpa.edu/programs/eldp/graduates2.html> (accessed May 31, 2011).

¹⁰⁸² L.R. Gay and Peter Airasian, *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Applications*, 7th ed., (Upper Saddle River: NJ, Merrill Prentice Hall, 2003), 221 – 222.

¹⁰⁸³ Peter N. Stearns, “Why Study History,” American Historical Association, <http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/WhyStudyHistory.htm> (accessed May 31, 2011).

place get to be, who are the people that live here, and how did events shape this space? The study of history provides identity to both the researcher and the researched and attempts to answer the questions which every individual eventually asks, such as: who am I, where did I come from, how did I get here, and where am I going? The study of history helps to understand change; how it happens, why it happens, whether it can be directed and how best to direct it. The study of history helps to give an understanding of society, its constituent parts, the dominant and subordinate forces within it, what forces impact society, and what forces society impacts. The study of history helps us to decide what is trivial and what is important in both the short-term and the long-term. It helps in problem solving and decision making.¹⁰⁸⁴ Peter N. Stearns of the American Historical Association sums it up by saying:

Why study history? The answer is because we virtually must, to gain access to the laboratory of human experience. When we study it reasonably well, and so acquire some usable habits of mind, as well as some basic data about the forces that affect our own lives, we emerge with relevant skills and an enhanced capacity for informed citizenship, critical thinking, and simple awareness.¹⁰⁸⁵

Everyone has heard the mantra, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹⁰⁸⁶ Of course, this is important also as a reason to study history; to learn what works and what doesn’t so that mistakes are not repeated. This is a valid argument for the necessity of studying history, but after all if mankind had learned from its mistakes, we would not still have wars, poverty, prejudice and all the other ills that beset humanity.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸⁶ This quote, and its many variations, has been attributed to Socrates, Winston Churchill and many others, but the actual author is George Santayana, a Spanish philosopher who taught for many years at Harvard University in the early part of the twentieth century. George Santayana is the Anglicized version of his true name: Jorge Agustin Nicolas Ruiz de Santayana y Borrás. He is also the author of many other aphorisms of which one of the most famous is “Only the dead have seen the end of war.” See “George Santayana,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/santayana/>, (accessed May 31, 2011).

The study of the history of a school district, therefore, incorporates all of the tenets mentioned above, but it requires clarification in the application of how the study of the history of a school system benefits the field of educational leadership. Consider the study of a hundred years of the history of the Mercedes Independent School District. This study is perforce a study of those who have led it, the challenges they confronted, how they handled change from without, how they effected change from within, how they solved problems, and how they came to make the decisions that they did. It is a study of the operational dynamics of a school system, and as such it identifies:

- the purpose of the organization;
- who the movers and shakers are;
- how the organization was and is structured;
- how the organization has accomplished its goals;
- how the community exerts pressure on the leaders and how the leaders exert pressure on the community;
- how a leader decides whether change is important;
- how a district leader plans for the future;
- how the leader sets goals and conducts long term planning;
- how new federal and state requirements are implemented;
- how the money is managed and how school funding affects student learning;
- how a financially efficient school system is effected;
- how taxpayers can be convinced that raising taxes is needed;
- how bond elections get passed and how they do not;
- how curricular choices are made;

- how instruction is improved;
- how parental and community concerns are handled;
- how the media is handled; and
- how the educational needs of all of the students are met.

In studying a hundred years of the Mercedes Independent School System, all of the above were observed at one time or another. Because this study was conducted using the lens of LatCrit Theory, these factors were seen in the context of the education of Mexican American students in the school system.

Studying a hundred years of school district history can only be a survey and not an in-depth study of any of the above factors. However, it is sufficient enough to give the researcher and the reader a very good idea of what all of the above looked like in one particular school district. The development of educational leadership is based on these very factors that were revealed in this historical study. A hundred years of educational leadership were studied in the viewing of the actions of twenty-four superintendents and hundreds of school board members and others. Whether you study the history of education because as a practitioner you wish to apply the lessons learned to a new context, or whether you study the history of education because you wish to prepare educational leaders as an academician, the study of the history of an educational entity such as a school district provides myriad examples in the exercise of educational leadership.

Recommendations

A study such as this where a hundred years of history are reviewed can only bring up more questions that should be answered. Most obviously, a biographical study of some of the different outstanding personages who became superintendents of the Mercedes School District would be recommended. For example, the first true superintendent, Nannie Mer Buck, can be

studied simply as having been the first administrator who truly had only district-wide duties.¹⁰⁸⁷ She can also be studied as a woman superintendent in a traditionally male dominated profession. Consider her accomplishments. As evidenced by the multiple newspaper stories during her administration, she was a master of public relations.¹⁰⁸⁸ She put out story after story on the accomplishments of the school district, on its needs, its future plans and the celebration of student achievements.¹⁰⁸⁹ Even when the state reports contained negative items or recommendations for improvement, she managed to find the positives and promote those to the local newspapers.¹⁰⁹⁰ She organized curriculum and instruction and ensured that state standards for accreditation were met, and she recruited and hired only the most qualified teachers. She developed the first teacher contracts that specified pay, teacher responsibilities and even sick leave days and she set up procedures for teacher complaints or grievances.¹⁰⁹¹ When she married, she was forced to step down from her position because newly married women were not permitted to teach or otherwise hold educational positions in the school district at that time.¹⁰⁹²

There were certainly other individuals that could serve as role models for educational leadership studies; individuals such as Leon R. Graham who served as teacher, principal and superintendent of the Mercedes ISD before going on to work at the Texas Education Agency; Elisa de León Gutiérrez who was the Texas Education Agency's first Bilingual Director; Lauro R. Guerra who was the first Hispanic superintendent of schools at Mercedes; Monte R. Churchill who served the longest term as superintendent of Mercedes schools; and Dr. Daniel Treviño, Jr. who is the current superintendent and an excellent role model for Mexican American students in

¹⁰⁸⁷ Minutes, July 6, 1915.

¹⁰⁸⁸ *Mercedes Tribune*, June 14, 1922; also *Mercedes News*, February 22, 1924.

¹⁰⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹¹ Minutes, April 9, 1924.

¹⁰⁹² *Ibid.*, 1915 – 1924. Also November 12, 1931.

his district. Their biographies would be important in taking a closer look at the educational leadership qualities necessary to effect change and increase the educational opportunities of all students.

As presented at the very start of this study, the educational history of the Rio Grande Valley is insufficiently known. There have been educational historical doctoral dissertations completed at the University of Texas – Pan American on only two school districts in the lower Rio Grande Valley: the Weslaco Independent School District and the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District, and the latter focused only on a specific time period.¹⁰⁹³ This researcher's study completes only three educational leadership doctoral dissertations that have been conducted on any of the thirty-two public school districts in the lower Rio Grande Valley.¹⁰⁹⁴ A comprehensive historical educational study of the entire lower Rio Grande Valley would be invaluable to add to the knowledge of borderlands school districts, their unique challenges and issues and how they have solved the problems that they all confront. A comparative study of two or three school districts in this region that vary greatly in demographics would also provide insight into how different districts handled similar issues in unique ways. It can only be hoped that other doctoral students will take up the challenge to further complete the historical study of school districts in the lower Rio Grande Valley.

¹⁰⁹³ "Graduates," Educational Leadership Doctoral Program Website.

¹⁰⁹⁴ There are thirty-two independent school districts in the four counties that comprise the lower Rio Grande Valley; Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron and Willacy counties. See the website for the Region One Education Service Center at <http://www.esc1.net/12931081413533950/site/default.asp>, (accessed May 31, 2011).

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVED INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

Single Person Interview

Focus Group Interview

Telephone Interview Script

E-mail Interview Script

Approved by: UTPA IRB

Expires: NA

IRB#2011-037-04

The University of Texas – Pan American

Informed Consent Form – Interview

A Study of Mexican American Education in the Mercedes Independent School District, 1908 – 2008: Opportunities or Obstacles?

This research survey is being conducted by Beatrice de León Edwards from the University of Texas – Pan American/UTPA, under the supervision of Dr. Martha Tevis. We are conducting a research study about the history of the Mercedes Independent School District with a focus on the educational opportunities or challenges faced by Mexican American schoolchildren in this school district in the twentieth century. As part of this study, we are interested in the views of persons who attended and/or graduated from Mercedes ISD schools and/or who have a relationship with the Mercedes ISD as current or former parents, teachers, administrators or school board members.

We have invited you here today so that we can conduct an interview about issues related to this topic. The interview is expected to last approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Your individual responses will be treated confidentially. Your participation is completely voluntary; although you have shown interest in participating in this study, you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time and can choose not to answer specific questions.

In order to ensure the accuracy of recorded statements, we will be recording the session on audio tape and later transcribing the tapes. The tapes will not be marked with your names and will be securely stored at UTPA. The recordings themselves will only be used for research purposes and will not be given to anyone not directly involved in the research. After 5 years, the tapes will be destroyed or erased.

Your responses may be quoted in whole or in part in publications or presentations based on this research. If quotes are used, your real name will be replaced by a made up name (pseudonym) and any additional information that might directly identify you will be excluded, unless you give the researcher permission to use your real name and identifying information.

You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this research. If you are under 18, please let the researcher know before the session begins.

Researcher contact information: Name: Beatrice de León Edwards
Dept: Educational Leadership
The University of Texas-Pan American
Phone: 956-665-7173, Email: beatricedeleon@yahoo.com

Faculty Advisor
contact information:

Name: Dr. Martha Tevis
Dept: Educational Leadership/Curriculum & Instruction
The University of Texas-Pan American
Phone: 956-665-3434, Email: mtevis@utpa.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protection (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel that your rights as a participant were not adequately met by the researcher, please contact the IRB at 956-665-3002 or irb@utpa.edu. You are also invited to provide anonymous feedback to the IRB by visiting www.utpa.edu/IRBfeedback

Please keep this sheet for your reference.

Approved by: UTPA IRB

Expires: NA

IRB#2011-037-04

**The University of Texas – Pan American
Informed Consent Form – Focus Group**

**A Study of Mexican American Education in the Mercedes Independent School District, 1908 – 2008:
Opportunities or Obstacles?**

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We have invited you here today so that we can conduct a focus group about issues related to this topic. The focus group is expected to last approximately 30 – 45 minutes. Your individual responses will be treated confidentially. Statements made by other group members should also be treated confidentially and should not be shared outside of this group. Your participation is completely voluntary; although you have all shown interest in participating in this group, you are free to withdraw from the focus group at any time and can choose not to answer specific questions.

In order to ensure the accuracy of recorded statements, we will be recording the session on audio tape and later transcribing the tapes. The tapes will not be marked with your names and will be securely stored at UTPA. The recordings themselves will only be used for research purposes and will not be given to anyone not directly involved in the research. After 5 years, the tapes will be destroyed or erased.

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Researcher contact information: Name: Beatrice de León Edwards
Dept: Educational Leadership
The University of Texas-Pan American
Phone: 956-665-7173, Email: beatricedeleon@yahoo.com

Faculty Advisor
contact information: Name: Dr. Martha Tevis
Dept: Educational Leadership/Curriculum & Instruction
The University of Texas-Pan American
Phone: 956-665-3434, Email: mtevis@utpa.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protection (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel that your rights as a participant were not adequately met by the researcher, please contact the IRB at 956-665-3002 or irb@utpa.edu. You are also invited to provide anonymous feedback to the IRB by visiting www.utpa.edu/IRBfeedback

Please keep this sheet for your reference.

Approved by: UTPA IRB

Expires: NA

IRB#2011-037-04

The University of Texas – Pan American

Informed Consent Form – Telephone Interview Consent Script

A Study of Mexican American Education in the Mercedes Independent School District, 1908 – 2008: Opportunities or Obstacles?

Researcher: Thank you for agreeing to this telephone interview today.

The title of the study being conducted is "A Study of Mexican American Education in the Mercedes Independent School District, 1908 – 2008: Opportunities or Obstacles?"

I will be asking you questions relating to your experiences with the Mercedes Independent School District as a former student, parent or school official. Although I have specific questions to ask you, I may also ask you to clarify your response, or to extend it for more information.

Before we start the interview, there is some important information that I must give you. Please listen closely and feel free to stop me at any time to ask me to repeat the information or clarify it for you.

This research survey is being conducted by Beatrice de León Edwards from the University of Texas – Pan American/UTPA, under the supervision of Dr. Martha Tevis. We are conducting a research study about the history of the Mercedes Independent School District with a focus on the educational opportunities or challenges faced by Mexican American schoolchildren in this school district in the twentieth century. As part of this study, we are interested in the views of persons who attended and/or graduated from Mercedes ISD schools and/or who have a relationship with the Mercedes ISD as current or former parents, teachers, administrators or school board members.

This telephone interview is expected to last approximately 30 minutes. Your individual responses will be treated confidentially. Your participation is completely voluntary; although you have shown interest in participating in this study, you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time and can choose not to answer specific questions.

In order to ensure the accuracy of recorded statements, we may be recording the session on audio tape and later transcribing the tapes. The tapes will not be marked with your names and will be securely stored at UTPA. The recordings themselves will only be used for research purposes and will not be given to anyone not directly involved in the research. After 5 years, the tapes will be destroyed or erased.

Your responses may be quoted in whole or in part in publications or presentations based on this research. If quotes are used, your real name will be replaced by a made up name (pseudonym) and any additional information that might directly identify you will be excluded, unless you give the researcher permission to use your real name and identifying information.

You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this research. Are you at least 18 years old?

Researcher: I would also like to provide you with important contact information. If you have any questions about the research, you can contact the researcher Beatrice de León Edwards at the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program office at the University of Texas-Pan American. The telephone number there is 956-665-7173; if you prefer, you may also email the researcher at beatricedeleon@yahoo.com.

You may also contact the faculty advisor for this study, Dr. Martha Tevis, for any questions on this research at the Curriculum & Instruction Department at the University of Texas-Pan American. Her number there is 956-665-3434; or if you prefer, you may also email her at mtevis@utpa.edu.

I also want you to let you know that this study has been reviewed by our university's human subjects ethics committee, called the IRB. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or want to voice any concerns about the way this research was conducted, you can contact the IRB directly at 956-665-3002. You may also email the IRB at irb@utpa.edu.

Please let me know if you have any questions regarding the information I have given you so far. Is there anything you would like me to repeat?

Researcher will proceed to ask the following questions. Interviewee may expand upon the answer as he/she wishes, but will be guided back to the questions if he/she digresses too much.

Some questions may be skipped if the interviewee sufficiently answered them in a previous response. Additional questions may be asked by the researcher to gain clarification or to expand responses.

Researcher (allowing interviewee time to answer each one):

1. State your name and give some basic biographical information about yourself (place of birth, parents' and siblings' names, where you lived in Mercedes, current and past career information)
2. Tell about your educational experiences in the Mercedes Independent School District (which elementary schools were attended, when you graduated or left school, who were your teachers, what subjects did you study, who were the other students in your school/class)
3. Describe the schools that you attended in Mercedes (both physical facility description and school culture/climate).
4. Were you encouraged by your teachers, counselors, administrators, parents to go on to college?
5. Was there communication between you and your parents and school officials such as counselors or administrators?
6. Did you belong to any school organizations or clubs and were you ever an officer in these clubs?
7. What changes have you seen in your home town schools (Mercedes ISD) over the years?
8. Did you feel that you were given extra opportunities in school to further your education?
9. Did you feel that you were forced to overcome challenges in school to further your education?
10. Did you feel that you were treated differently from other students by the teachers, counselors or administrators in your school? How did you or your parents respond to being treated differently (if it happened)?

Researcher: Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated and will serve to expand the body of knowledge on this topic. Do you have any questions for me about this research or the contact information?

If you later recall additional information that may be helpful to the purpose of this study, please feel free to contact the researcher Beatrice de León Edwards at 956-665-7173 or email her at beatricedeleon@yahoo.com. Thank you.

Approved by: UTPA IRB

Expires: NA

IRB#2011-037-04

The University of Texas – Pan American

Informed Consent Form – E-Mail Correspondence Interview

A Study of Mexican American Education in the Mercedes Independent School District, 1908 – 2008: Opportunities or Obstacles?

Email used for recruitment (letter of introduction):

Greetings:

My name is Beatrice de León Edwards and I am currently conducting a research study (doctoral dissertation) entitled: *A Study of Mexican American Education in the Mercedes Independent School District, 1908 – 2008: Opportunities or Obstacles?*

The purpose of the study is to investigate the educational history of the Mercedes ISD during the twentieth century with a focus on the opportunities and challenges encountered by Mexican American schoolchildren who were served by the school district. As a former student and/or graduate of the Mercedes ISD schools, I believe that your educational experiences with the Mercedes ISD would greatly assist me in completing this study [alternate sentence: As a previous parent, teacher, administrator or school board member in the Mercedes ISD, I believe that your experiences with the Mercedes ISD would greatly assist me in completing this study].

I would like to invite you to participate in this study through an email “interview” correspondence where I email you some questions and you respond to the best of your recollection.

If you are interested in participating, please reply to this email. If you wish, you may also call me at 505-288-8299 (cell phone) or 956-665-7173 (work) for additional information on the study.

Sincerely,

Beatrice de León Edwards

Email used for interview after participant accepts invitation:

Greetings:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study (doctoral dissertation) entitled: *A Study of Mexican American Education in the Mercedes Independent School District, 1908 – 2008:*

Opportunities or Obstacles? As previously explained, the purpose of the study is to investigate the educational history of the Mercedes ISD during the twentieth century with a focus on the opportunities and challenges encountered by Mexican American schoolchildren who were served by the school district.

Through email correspondence, I will be asking you questions relating to your experiences with the Mercedes Independent School District as a former student, parent or school official. Although I have specific questions to ask you, I may also ask you later to clarify your response, or to extend it for more information.

Before we begin, there is some important information that I must give you.

Your email responses will be treated confidentially; however, you should know that we cannot guarantee the security of e-mail transmissions. Your participation is completely voluntary; although you have shown interest in participating in this study, you are free to withdraw from the e-mail correspondence interview at any time and can choose not to answer specific questions.

Your e-mail response printouts will not be marked with your name and will be securely stored at UTPA. The e-mail response printouts will only be used for research purposes and will not be given to anyone not directly involved in the research. After 5 years, the e-mail response printouts will be destroyed.

Your e-mail responses may be quoted in whole or in part in publications or presentations based on this research. If quotes are used, your real name will be replaced by a made up name (pseudonym) and any additional information that might directly identify you will be excluded, unless you give the researcher permission to use your real name and identifying information.

You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this research. If you are under 18, please let me know before we begin this e-mail correspondence interview.

I would also like to provide you with the following important contact information. If you have any questions about the research, you may contact the following persons:

Researcher contact information: Name: Beatrice de León Edwards
Dept: Educational Leadership
The University of Texas-Pan American
Phone: 956-665-7173, Email: beatricedeleon@yahoo.com

Faculty Advisor
contact information: Name: Dr. Martha Tevis
Dept: Educational Leadership/Curriculum & Instruction
The University of Texas-Pan American
Phone: 956-665-3434, Email: mtevis@utpa.edu

You should also know that this research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protection (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel that your rights as a participant were not adequately met by the researcher, please contact the IRB at 956-665-3002 or irb@utpa.edu. You are also invited to provide anonymous feedback to the IRB by visiting www.utpa.edu/IRBfeedback

Please keep this email for your reference.

Please answer as many of the following questions as you can. Feel free to give extensive details on each, but remember that you may also choose not to answer specific questions.

1. State your name and give some basic biographical information about yourself (place of birth, parents' and siblings' names, where you lived in Mercedes, current and past career information)
2. Tell about your educational experiences in the Mercedes Independent School District (which elementary schools were attended, when you graduated or left school, who were your teachers, what subjects did you study, who were the other students in your school/class)
3. Describe the schools that you attended in Mercedes (both physical facility description and school culture/climate).
4. Were you encouraged by your teachers, counselors, administrators, parents to go on to college?
5. Was there communication between you and your parents and school officials such as counselors or administrators?
6. Did you belong to any school organizations or clubs and were you ever an officer in these clubs?
7. What changes have you seen in your home town schools (Mercedes ISD) over the years?
8. Did you feel that you were given extra opportunities in school to further your education?
9. Did you feel that you were forced to overcome challenges in school to further your education?
10. Did you feel that you were treated differently from other students by the teachers, counselors or administrators in your school? How did you or your parents respond to being treated differently (if it happened)?

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study. Your responses will assist me greatly in completing the research study and expanding the body of knowledge on this topic.

Sincerely,

Beatrice de León Edwards

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions for Mercedes Alumni

Interview Questions for School Officials

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MERCEDES ALUMNI

1. State your name and give some basic biographical information about yourself (place of birth, parents' and siblings' names, where you lived in Mercedes, current and past career information)
2. Tell about your educational experiences in the Mercedes Independent School District (which elementary schools were attended, when you graduated or left school, who were your teachers, what subjects did you study, who were the other students in your school/class)
3. Describe the schools that you attended in Mercedes (both physical facility description and school culture/climate).
4. Were you encouraged by your teachers, counselors, administrators, parents to go on to college?
5. Was there communication between you and your parents and school officials such as counselors or administrators?
6. Did you belong to any school organizations or clubs and were you ever an officer in these clubs?
7. What changes have you seen in your home town schools over the years?
8. Did you feel that you were given extra opportunities in school to further your education?
9. Did you feel that you were forced to overcome challenges in school to further your education?
10. Did you feel that you were treated differently from other students by the teachers, counselors or administrators in your school? How did you or your parents respond to being treated differently (if it happened)?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL OFFICIALS

1. State your name and give some basic biographical information about yourself, such as place of birth, where you were educated and some career information.
2. Tell about your involvement with the Mercedes ISD; how you came to work there, a description of the type of jobs you had there and the people you worked with.
3. Describe the school district climate and culture at the time that you worked there, in particular the relationships between Anglo and Mexican Americans.
4. What do you feel were the most pressing problems that Mercedes students, parents and community faced during the time period when you were there.
5. How has the Mercedes ISD changed over time? Physical facilities, district climate and culture, students, parents, community?
6. What do you feel are the most pressing problems that Mexican American students face today regarding education?
7. How did you affect students through your job as teacher/principal/assistant superintendent/superintendent/school board trustee in the Mercedes ISD?
8. What changes did you make to increase educational opportunities for all students?
9. What challenges did you face as a teacher/administrator/school board trustee?
10. Include any other information that I did not ask about but that you feel is pertinent to the topic.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Beatrice de León Edwards was born on July 21, 1950, in Mercedes, Texas. She attended both public and parochial schools in Brownsville and Mercedes. She finished Valedictorian of her Mercedes High School graduating class in 1968. She attended the University of Texas – Pan American obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish and History in 1972, a Master’s degree in Spanish Language and Literature in 1976, and a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership in 2011. She also holds Mid-Management and Supervision Certifications. She has taught Reading; Spanish, levels 7th grade through high school Advanced Placement classes; and Mexican Folkloric Dance during her twenty-three years as a teacher in the Weslaco Independent School District. During her teaching years, she also served as a College Board consultant in Advanced Placement Spanish Language and Literature, and taught Spanish 1303 at the University of Texas – Pan American. As an administrator in public education for twelve years, she served as Dean of Instruction at Weslaco High School, Curriculum Director, Executive Director for Curriculum & Instruction, and Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction in the Weslaco Independent School District. She has served on state peer review teams conducting district monitoring visits for the Texas Education Agency as well as on state assessment review committees in social studies. She retired from Texas public education in 2007, and currently resides with her husband Glen T. Edwards at 770 Blue Sage Ave. SW, Los Lunas, New Mexico, 87031. She has three children, Dr. Sara de González, Rafael, and Adriana; and one granddaughter, Citlalli.