

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 3 | Issue 4

Article 7

1933

Education in New Mexico

Mary Austin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Austin, Mary. "Education in New Mexico." *New Mexico Quarterly* 3, 4 (1933). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol3/iss4/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Education in New Mexico

By MARY AUSTIN

THE first thing that occurs to the reader confronted with the original accounts of the educational problems in the two racial groups, herein presented, is that it will not be possible to handle them successfully in the same program that accommodates the third plain American assembly. Probably nowhere else would so serious an effort be made to bring them all into one educational undertaking, and yet what everybody knows who is at all familiar with the New Mexican situation, is that the three of them get on with singular friendliness and a surprising amount of mutual accommodation. And that the chief item of the solution is that they all know so well that they get on best by sticking to their differences and avoiding any attempt to substitute any one of the individual plans for the others. We have found that out by experimenting, and by recognizing the plain fact that the three peoples of New Mexico do best by themselves and each other when they keep to their distinctive educational needs. It is not easy to say just how we have arrived at this conclusion, but we have tried the widely spread error of other states of running the three streams in one indistinguishable puddle, and the agreement as to its inutility, its waste and misfitting, is unanimous. We are not sure how much is owed to the existence in New Mexico of a group of citizens whose business is so largely creative, citizens who must somehow or other deliver the goods of their special aptitudes, who can't, therefore, waste themselves on an educational scheme which makes no allowance for special aptitudes calling for particular frames of educational behavior. Certainly the influx in the state of numbers of people who are obliged by their own necessities to live creatively, has added greatly to the freedom of creative activity, and the need to make room for it, has had

much to do with the recognition of inherent creativeness as the item demanding the most of our educational systems altogether. It is undoubtedly the recognition of native creativeness within each group that makes the varied peoples of New Mexico so interested in each other and so willing to give room and accommodation to its various types. And perhaps recognition has come the more easily as the creative tendency in both the less favored racial groups lies closer to the surface than is elsewhere the case.

Among the Indian peoples the creative trend lies so near the surface that it is difficult to understand why the governmental complex that has to deal with it, has been able to resist for so long the need of recognizing it. I, myself, whose business it has been for the last forty years to hammer at the governmental sources of Indian education, have not understood why it withstood so long the need of reorganizing its work in that direction, or just how it finally came about that we have finally arrived at a general understanding that what the Indian needed was to work creatively, as an artist works, rather than as an artisan. And it was the long apprenticeship I served at learning what was the matter with Indian education that made it easy for me to see that the worst thing that happened to the Spanish colonists was to have the creative element in their work slighted and suppressed. Neither of these groups had arrived at the point where they could take an interest in learning which was wholly divorced from making things that were expressive as well as useful; that they had each arrived at the point in their own development where the expressiveness of what they made had overtaken its utility, had no doubt slowed down their processes and made them a little more the victims than they should have been of the new American system in which expressiveness had been almost completely overlaid by the rage for utility. And it may be that the general American sub-dissatisfaction with mere utility as a goal, has here in New Mexico a little given way so as to

let through a rift of understanding even to the most sophisticated intelligence. Perhaps the reason why we are able to see here in New Mexico that the crux of the new educational requirements of these two generally *un-American* groups is of more expressiveness in the fields in which that education is exercised. And it comes out more sharply in the field of activity because both these groups are somewhat muscle bound in the field of language. One appreciates the feeling of racial loyalty which in both cases, the Spanish and the Indian, has kept the *un-American* speech for the dear and familiar things, and at the same time one is relieved to find that the tendency for the two alien groups to come together with the American group in the more advanced stages promises a larger release. When neither the Indian nor the Spanish has to hold on to his language defensively, when he can let go of it without feeling that he thereby cuts himself adrift from all intimate expressiveness, he will find himself released into a larger communality of experience.

That of course, is what the Public Schools should stand for, communality of experience, but it will have to come from giving way in both directions. Giving both the Spanish and Indian New Mexican children greater freedom with what is specifically their own should make them free with what is specifically ours; and that freedom is more nearly attained when each can speak with no shame and greater naturalness about what is his own. What we all notice among Indians is the release, along with which comes a renewal of manhood, which he attains now that he is able to talk freely of the thing he makes, and the same thing is beginning to be true of the Spanish.

What one sees coming through Mr. Collier's article is the same thing one discovers shining out of the work that is going on according to Mr. Tireman, at San Jose: the psychic release of being accepted on the basis of what you do well *naturally*. There is also a great release coming to the Indian

through the recognition of himself as an artist by other artists. Nothing has been so good for him in New Mexico as his association with painters and designers who have also the largeness to rate the Indian well in that field. In the same way one sees the descendents of Spanish Colonists coming back out of their inferiority complexes through the revival of appreciation of what they have to offer, music, wood carving, weaving and exquisite needle work. And one feels assured that the capacity to recreate beautiful old handicrafts is the immediate result of the apparent schisms in educational schemes, the restoration of naturalness to Indian activities and the release in schools that have taken their note from San Jose of the particular Spanish way of doing things. The renewal of common respect for the three racial groups among each other is the open sign of the success of having three schemes of education going on among them, education suited to their racial genius, their native aptitudes.

I am inclined to think that this could happen in New Mexico rather than elsewhere, earliest, because here in New Mexico we are less pressed upon by the machine-made pattern of activities and economics. Here, both for Indian and Spanish, as well as by choice among the Americanos, farming for the majority is still a way of life. One owns and works a piece of ground, and on the side weaves, does a little wood carving, works in tin, belongs to the *villejos allegros*, paints, makes pottery, makes songs, produces beautiful and moving dance drama and the inimitable farce of the *Koshares*. It must be quite obvious that for complete and happy functioning in such a life something other is called for in the way of education than our formal regimentation of the school program. This is what explains our apparently jumbled and variant educational system. To one who sees them from the side of a racially varied and on the whole unified social complex, there appears to be working out here through the medium of the public school, by

EDUCATION IN NEW MEXICO [221

taking advantage of its extreme capacity for adaptability, a singularly rewarding type of society. That the rest of the United States, through the barrier of strange languages, is largely cut off from participating in the dramatic and intellectually exciting aspects of the New Mexican experiment, is from the onlooker's point of view a disadvantage, but one that is on the whole protective in its final operation. Too easy access from the outside would undoubtedly put spokes in the wheels of the natural process. Experiments of the magnitude and importance of this one are not always brought about by intention; they happen. It may be we shall discover what the rest of the States have so largely missed, how peoples of profoundly differing levels of culture and stages of experience can set up among themselves a thoroughly rewarding state of society. From the two papers that appear here it is evident that the parts of the experiment that is going on are to a great extent unaware of each other. What we cannot miss, however, is the extent to which and the intensity with which, it is all going on.