

# “Post Racist Society”. The Plight of Mexican Americans: Worse Off Today Than in the Sixties

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Teresa Wiltz in *America's Wire* writes that despite claims of increased educational opportunities for minorities that the performance of black and Latino teenagers remains the same or lower than 30 years ago. In fact, the math and reading performance of black and Latino high school seniors equals that of 13-year-old white students - so much for the post racial society.

Educators and liberal politicians point the finger at low expectations, inequality of resources, less qualified teachers, the income inequality, teacher bias, and inexperienced teachers. They throw in the tracking of black and brown students into remedial class while whites are put into university bound classes.

Further, minority students are more likely to be given “A’s” for work that would receive a “C” in a rich school giving the illusion that they are being educated. Society would not tolerate this record in a football team at any level, or for that matter if we had fewer weapons of mass destruction than 30 years ago.

However, in my view, the major reason for the lack of progress of Mexican American and other minorities is society’s historical amnesia or more aptly its Alzheimer disorder that erases the memory of previous efforts or commitments to bridge the gap between black, brown and white - rich and poor.

The truth be told, educators pay less attention today to Mexican Americans than it did 50 years ago. In the sixties educators and reporters at least talked about it. The late Los Angeles Times’ columnist Ruben Salazar attacked the dropout problem and the failure of the schools to devise a relevant curriculum, as well as the failure to recruit and train effective Mexican American teachers.

In February 1963, Salazar began a series on Mexican American education. He titled his first article, “What Causes Jose’s Trouble in School?: Mexican-Americans Problems Analyzed.” Salazar begins,

Kicked out of school, Jose Mendez at 16 has been trapped in a peculiar twilight zone of American life. They tested him, graded him and pigeonholed him...say some educators, the fault may lie in the tests and the teachers -not in Jose. Educational policy and curriculum are oriented towards the education of the middle-class, monolingual, monocultural English-speaking student ... [Jose] is at a great disadvantage...[he] is a hyphenated American, a Mexican-American ... he is culturally confused.

Salazar interviewed educators, Drs. George I. Sánchez, Paul Sheldon, Julian Samora and high

school teacher Marcos de Leon on why José was dropping out of school. They attributed the dropout problem to the Mexican American's inferiority complex, which has intensified his marginalization.

Salazar blamed the schools for the Mexican Americans failure. Schools nurtured a negative self-image, which was reinforced by the movies and literature, and failed to correct the stereotyping of poor Mexicans. It was a vicious cycle: the schools did think Mexicans could not learn, students developed a low esteem, they failed and dropped out.

The experts advocated bilingual-bicultural education, and initially there was a consensus for these programs, from President Lyndon B. Johnson to Republican St. Ronald Reagan. Yet, the Greek Chorus gained traction and labeled the programs separatist, un-American and racist. This nativist movement allied itself with right wing thinks tanks and foundations, and by the beginning of the 21st century, bilingual ed died a violent death.

By and large educators were mute as bilingual programs were wiped out and university based teacher training programs specializing on Mexican Americans were eliminated. At teacher training institutions grade point average was favored over knowledge of the child's background. Although Latinos comprised 75 percent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, student teachers were given minimal preparation on how to teach Latino students.

The dropout was one of the major reasons for the development of Chicano Studies in 1969. A solution was sought for the high dropout problem that was overexposing Latino students to a life of poverty and not incidentally to the Vietnam draft. One of my first books *Cultures in Conflict: Case Studies of the Mexican American* was written for fifth graders. The purpose was to build a positive image in order to facilitate the acquisition of skills. These skills would prepare students to enter which ever field they wanted.

The importance of self-image is common sense. I remember looking for engineering computer lab with my future wife at UCLA in the 1980s. We asked several students if they knew where the computer lab was. They all gave us blank looks. Finally, we asked a Latino student who told us to ask an Asian. We did and she told us where it was. Talking to Asian fiends they told me that they exceled in math because the teachers expected them to.

Looking back at my own life, I was fortunate that I ended up in a Jesuit high school where I had to take four years of Latin. My relatives would notice my Latin book on the table, would ask my mother who it belonged to, and they would remark that Rudy must be smart. In contrast, in the first grade, before I knew English, I was pushed out of public school as mentally retarded.

When I became smart, that is adhered to their rules, anytime a Mexican student would act up, other teachers would ask me why? When I told them, they generally did not like the answer. They thought I was flip when I said that my solution for the marginalization of Mexicans was to rewrite the bible and substitute the word Mexican for Israeli. In a couple of decades, Mexicans would start looking at themselves as the "chosen people."

This identity has helped Jews survive and endure over 2,000 years of persecution. In my view it comes down to self-image.

This was the premise of the Tucson Unified School District's program. It was the repairing the damage done by marginalization - of being written out of history. The thinking was that

learning history, literature and the arts though their viewpoint would repair the image of the greaser, the loser and the numerous other stereotypes.

From the beginning, the xenophobes tried to send the Mexican American Studies program down the same path as bilingual education. It was unpatriotic to learn any language other than English, it was un-American to learn history other than the American way.

The reasoning ignored the past; it was as if the debates of the sixties and seventies never occurred. They disregarded pedagogical principles that even St. Ronald accepted.

One of the books banned in Tucson was Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It was based on a highly successful literacy campaign conducted in Brazil. The xenophobes' main argument is that Freire was a Marxist, which is ridiculous since the pedagogy goes back to Socrates. With that aside, would we cast aside a cure for cancer because the researcher was a Marxist?

The Cambium Learning Corp's Curriculum Audit of the Tucson Mexican American Studies Department which was commissioned by Arizona Superintendent of Schools John Huppenthal and cost the \$177,000 concluded,

No observable evidence exists that instruction within Mexican American Studies Department promotes resentment towards a race or class of people. The auditors observed the opposite, as students are taught to be accepting of multiple ethnicities of people. MASD teachers are teaching Cesar Chavez alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi, all as peaceful protesters who sacrificed for people and ideas they believed in. Additionally, all ethnicities are welcomed into the program and these very students of multiple backgrounds are being inspired and taught in the same manner as Mexican American students. All evidence points to peace as the essence for program teachings. Resentment does not exist in the context of these courses observable evidence exists that instruction within Mexican American Studies Department promotes resentment towards a race or class of people ... No evidence as seen by the auditors exists to indicate that instruction within Mexican American Studies Department program classes advocates ethnic solidarity; rather it has been proven to treat student as individuals

There has not been any credible proof to refute claims that the program has improved chances of graduation, improved the students' self-images, and motivated them to pursue a higher education.

A society that has historical dementia or Alzheimers cannot correct the defects of the present just like it cannot correct racism, sexism or homophobia.

Stupidity and fanaticism led to the destruction of the most transformative movements in Latin American, Liberation Theology. The forces of reaction in order to protect the large landowners rebaited Liberation Theology and substituted a reactionary evangelical Christian movement that promised that their reward would come in the next world. So it is in Arizona.

With the destruction of Mexican American Studies and the banning of the books, Mexican Americans are being put in their place. Vicariously, they are burning the infidels.

The difference is that students are fighting back! They are reading books and will remember that anybody can learn. It is their right.

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