

2014

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Curtis Acosta

*Acosta Latino Learning Partnership*

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## Recommended Citation

Acosta, Curtis (2014) "Dangerous Minds In Tucson: The Banning of Mexican American Studies and Critical Thinking In Arizona," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 8 : No. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <http://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol8/iss1/9>

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## **Dangerous Minds In Tucson: The Banning of Mexican American Studies and Critical Thinking In Arizona**

Curtis Acosta

Acosta Latino Learning Partnership

It has been over a year since the president of the school board in the Tucson Unified School District wrapped his gavel on the sound block signifying the end of the Mexican American Studies Department in Tucson. This moment not only stood as a temporary victory for the politics of fear and anti-Latin@ legislation and sentiments in Arizona, but also initiated a literal state takeover of our academic spaces. Subsequently, it ushered in a period of censorship that still chills our schools and teachers to this very day. The fact that this was a program that had proven academic success spanning seven cohorts of Chican@/Latin@ students, performances that TUSD had never before attained with their Chican@/Latin@ population, made the actions of the state officials and TUSD school board even more tragic (Cabrera, Milem, & Marx, 2012; Cambium Learning, 2011; Gomez & Jimenez-Silva, 2012; Sleeter, 2011).

In the wake of these traumatic events upon our students and community, a group of youth and I refused to be victimized and established the Chican@ Literature, Art, and Social Studies (CLASS) program which met on Sundays at a local youth center to keep Mexican American Studies (MAS) alive in Tucson. Eventually, word of our program reached Prescott College in Prescott, Arizona, which led to our students receiving free college credit for their dedication and resiliency as scholars. There is a lesson to be learned from such action in terms of refusing to submit to injustice and having the will to carry on through difficult times. These are lessons that I have learned from my students throughout the nearly eight-year attack on our teachers, programs, and community.

However, the past year of collaborating with the youth in CLASS allowed me insight and perspective toward the issues that we faced in Tucson that have connection to a much larger and distressing reality of public education in the United States. In the following piece, it is my aim to engage in an analysis of whether public schools still maintain the tenet and charge of creating a critical democracy through the voices and experiences in Tucson:

- What type of critical thinking is dangerous enough to require surveillance by Arizona state officials, legislation and ultimately state takeover, erasure and destruction of effective educational spaces?
- What type of thinking is being encouraged through state and local leadership?
- What are the implications of not challenging *status quo*, educational practices or the discourse of educational reformers?
- How do we challenge and resist educational hegemony?

## Contemporary Education Policy Toward Critical Thinking

In the summer of 2013, at a public forum to become the new superintendent in TUSD, Dr. Helidoro Torres Sanchez was asked about his opinion regarding the dismantling of our Mexican American Studies program and he said, “I don’t believe that our job in education is to indoctrinate. I believe that our job in education is to inform” (Huffington Post, 2013). This response was hauntingly familiar to the type of rhetoric that Tea Party backed politicians in Arizona used to demonize our classes in an effort to discredit the powerful quantitative and qualitative evidence that supported our program’s unique effectiveness in academic and personal empowerment for our students. It was a claim that was often used as our students democratically participated in the public debate to protect our classes through civic engagement such as attendance at school board meetings, public forums and debates, as well as their right to protest through non-violent civil disobedience. Later Dr. Sanchez added the following:

So, am I saying that Mexican American Studies should go away forever? No, I’m not saying that. What I’m saying is that we need to understand, and I’ll go back to this, whose dignity was violated to the point that there was legislation passed at the state level to target one class? Whose dignity was violated? (Tucson Sentinel, 2013)

This is an excellent question. Although Dr. Sanchez also spoke frankly about not knowing enough of the specific details surrounding the actual MAS classes we taught, his words seem to convey an opinion of sorts. After all, the dignity that he seemed most concerned with from the previous statement is not of the students, teachers, or Mexican American community of Tucson, but for those who were championed by the legislators and politicians of Arizona to eliminate our program. In that same response, Dr. Sanchez purported his belief in critical thought and the ideas that students should receive information and not be politicized, which is an odd thing to say if you are about to enter the educational fray in Tucson, Arizona. Unfortunately for the youth, parents, and educators of our state, politicians do not share the same perspective as TUSD’s new superintendent. In Arizona, education has become intensely political.

In both the local and national context, contemporary education policy and regulation have *jumped the shark*, to use the parlance of our times – contradictions and absurdities abound. In my high school government class as a youth, I remember being introduced to the core tenets of the Republican and Democratic parties and that the former believed in less government oversight, while the latter embraced the concept of government intervention for the good of society. This is not the case in terms of the United States education policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where all parties involved are neck-deep in the regulation and oversight of public schools.

In our case in Tucson, it was Republican officials from Phoenix who usurped the local control and power of the governing board in TUSD, a political act that would have surely made my high school government teacher’s head spin. After all, Arizona State

Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal, one of the key political figures that drove the banning of Mexican American Studies in Tucson, is a fervent supporter of vouchers and parent choice. I remember attending a debate during his campaign to become state superintendent and being struck by the irony of his passion toward parental choice, and yet being willfully unaware of the parents in the auditorium who were advocating for the continuation of MAS.

Similarly, Huppenthal used conflicting messages in his public statements in the wake of finding MAS in violation of Arizona Revised Statute 112-15 (Arizona House Bill 2281, 2010). In his press conference where he unveiled the violations on June 16, 2011, he said the following: "This decision is not about politics; it is about education. I have a legal responsibility to uphold the law and a professional imperative to ensure every student has access to an excellent education" (Huichochea, 2011). Yet, in a subsequent interview with Western Free Press (WFP; 2012), Huppenthal responded to the actions to eliminate MAS in Tucson in a far different manner:

We are not in the entertainment business. We are in the winning values business... This is the eternal battle of all time. The forces of collectivism against the forces of individual liberty and we're a beautiful country because we have balanced those things. Now, right now in our country we're way out of balance. The forces of collectivism are suffocating us – it's a tidal wave that is threatening our individual liberties. And so, we, at the national level need to rebalance this and we need to make sure that what is going on in our schools rebalance this.

From these excerpts, it becomes apparent that contradictions abound with state leadership in Arizona in terms of education legislation and policy. Huppenthal's vision of education is not only tied to political ideology, but to the opaque concept of "winning values," which he does not clearly define or discuss. It is also apparent from the interview, and his actions in office, that the values he is referring to are not those shared by the parents, teachers, students, and community that supported MAS. In all likelihood, these voices represent the forces of collectivism that, in his words, are suffocating this country. Although Huppenthal believes schools should be a place for readjustment of these values, he does not address the overt political nature of such a claim, and, in fact, normalizes his own ideology as status quo public school and the standard for which school activities should be measured.

Huppenthal's rhetoric illustrates a strong correlation to the national education reform movements that have eroded local control of communities over their schools since *A Nation at Risk* was released in 1983. In the guise of individualism and choice, parents, unions, and community coalitions have been losing autonomy and self-determination in regard to the health and management of public schools in the United States. The consequence of such an ideological shift has deeply impacted democracy and freedom for our Chicana@/Latin@ students in Arizona. If choice was so precious to this movement, then why are only some parents and students worthy of their choices to be considered?

Ironically, more oversight and legislative interference by elected officials in regard to education has led to less collaboration with students, parents, and communities in respect to the education they desire. This hyper-authoritative legislation and surveillance of our classrooms, students, and teachers is eerily reminiscent of the Foucauldian concepts of panopticonism, standardization and norms (Foucault, 1984), while also evoking Pierre Bourdieu's (1982) analysis of education as the key mechanism in social reproduction for the state. According to Foucault (1984), standards and norms are established throughout society to measure subjective gaps, which can lead to individuals who fall outside the given parameters to be ostracized and alienated from types of social freedom and liberty. Through a process of normalizing society, technologies of power coerce individuals into following certain behavior patterns and actions as normal, by using the spectre of the strange or forbidden as the mediating factor within the psyche of each person (Foucault, 1984).

This type of control over individuals, or their docile bodies as Foucault (1984) suggests, have a clear relationship with the history of education as mentioned above in reference to power :

The Normal is established as a principle of coercion in teaching with the introduction of a standardized education and the establishment of the *écoles normales* (teachers' training colleges)...Life surveillance and with it, normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age. (p. 196)

The standardization and accountability movement in education, which began in the mid-1990's and continues to drive education practices today, created an educational ecology that reflected Foucault's analysis. The adoption of discourse such as *standards* and *norms* within school districts and administrative leadership, has become commonplace, embraced by the educational institution, and overwhelmingly reflective of European American values. Not coincidentally, this also marks a period of time in United States history of increased legislative and government control of education. In this sense, the government has become the overseer of school districts through normative legislation, eventually creating a sense of panopticonism that could identify schools and classrooms that challenged the norms and hegemonic agenda of the state (Foucault, 1984). As Foucault asserted, in order to control human beings, institutions create regulatory factors and structures that can instill a sense in people that they are constantly being observed, and used the concept of the panopticon to illustrate this point. The panopticon was a prison built in a way where the guards could watch over the prisoner, yet were not visible to the inmates. Thus, the effect upon the prisoners was one where they felt the constant presence and voyeurism of their captors, a process that stripped them of any type of liberty, freedom, and human dignity.

In many instances this same type of surveillance has taken place in education. The state has exercised its power through the process of labeling or grading schools, and the children within them, as failures, and in some instances challenging particular classrooms and pedagogy as illegal and forbidden. Such is the case for bilingual instruction, or

Mexican American Studies and ethnic studies in Arizona. The increased surveillance of the curriculum and pedagogical practices of these programs from the government, from the educational establishment, and from the media, serves to force the teachers and students to comply or risk being stigmatized as malevolent, marginalized, or even eliminated.

### **Political Discourse in Arizona: The *othering* of thinking and activism**

A return to the earliest attacks on MAS by Arizona political figures, and a brief analysis of their discourse, clearly illustrates the strategy of stigmatizing and *othering* in order to enforce the will of the state upon its citizens. In essence, the politicians who were attacking MAS constructed a narrative that characterized the students and teachers of our program as outside the norm. In his “Open Letter to the Citizens of Tucson”, Attorney General Tom Horne (2007), who was State Superintendent of Public Instruction at the time, levied a direct assault upon the students of our classes and my colleagues and me:

I personally observed this at the Tucson Magnet School. My Deputy, Margaret Garcia Dugan, who is Latina and Republican, came to refute the allegation made earlier to the student body, that “Republicans hate Latinos.” Her speech was non-partisan and professional, urging students to think for themselves, and avoid stereotypes. Yet, a small group of La Raza Studies students treated her rudely, and when the principal asked them to sit down and listen, they defiantly walked out. By contrast, teenage Republicans listened politely when Dolores [sic] Huerta told the entire student body that “Republicans hate Latinos.”

In hundreds of visits to schools, I’ve never seen students act rudely and in defiance of authority, except in this one unhappy case. I believe the students did not learn this rudeness at home, but from their Raza teachers. The students are being ill served. Success as adults requires the ability to deal with disagreements in a civil manner. Also, they are creating a hostile atmosphere in the school for the other students, who were not born into their “race.” (Horne, 2007)

The language in this section refers to the behavior of the students, and the superintendent makes a direct comparison between the Mexican American/Raza Studies students and teenage Republicans. In his personal recollection, he refers to the students as treating the Deputy Superintendent “rudely” as well as “defiantly” disregarding the requests of the principal. In contrast the teenage Republicans “listened politely” to the critical words of Dolores Huerta in an early address to the student body. He emphasizes his criticism towards the actions of the students by repeating the words “rudely,” as well as using the words “rudeness” and “defiance” in the following paragraph. The use of these words are also framed within a personal account of the students’ actions as an experience that he has never seen repeated in hundreds of visits to schools. He uses this anecdotal claim, along with his elected office as State Superintendent of Public Instruction, to position himself as expert and authority and to increase his credibility in the criticism of the classes.

Additionally, his comparison to the politeness of the students hearkens to the ideology of social reproduction and the culpability of education as an institution that rewards students who are docile or compliant versus students who challenge authority (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1973; Murray, 2010). Ironically, the superintendent writes that he believes teachers within the education institution itself taught the students this activist behavior, and builds his argument that the students did not individually choose to participate in the action. Earlier in this section, the superintendent includes the details of the Deputy Superintendent's speech that extolled the idea of students' thinking for themselves and shows the contrasting nature of ideologies in his criticism of the students' collective activism. The superintendent furthers the criticism of this action by declaring that the students are being "ill-served" by their "Raza teachers" by attributing blame to the Mexican American/Raza Studies teachers and dismissing the idea that the students acted upon their own accord. This is another example of how the construction of individualism is naturalized as a narrative against the collective actions of the students and their relationship with teachers in the Mexican American/Raza Studies program. It is interesting to note that the major Tucson newspaper, *The Arizona Daily Star*, reported the same event differently, but assessed the content of the speech in a similar manner:

Arizona Deputy Education Superintendent Margaret Garcia Dugan, the day's guest speaker, talked of the importance of individual expression and independent thinking.

Then about 50 students silently stood during her speech, some with tape over their mouths, using the moment to demonstrate their strong belief that lawmakers are unfairly targeting minorities

The students who stood said they wanted to show Dugan that those in her party are attempting to silence minorities, particularly "Chicanos, Hispanics and Latinos," through unbalanced legislation. They also said they should have had the chance to ask Huerta questions after her April 3 speech and during the press conference before Dugan's speech Friday. (Commings, 2006)

In this case, the use of silent protest as a form of collective action in support of equal rights was characterized by the Superintendent as rude behavior and an "unhappy" event orchestrated by the teachers and not by the students themselves, thus, marginalizing the voices of the students and minimizing their intentions for the protest and their autonomy. The Superintendent's claim that the students are being ill-served by their teachers, and not "thinking for themselves," insinuates teacher indoctrination over their students, which is antithetical to American individualism and freedom. Ironically, the superintendent openly celebrates his own participation in collective action during the Civil Rights era and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom as a testament to his own philosophy of individualism; a myopic view, at best, toward the actual intentions and themes of that historic event. This criticism of the students' action also bears a relationship to the reproductive theory of social capital and the ideology that good students should be docile, polite, and submissive – that they should be seen and not heard

(Bourdieu & Passeron, 1973). Toward the end of this section, he contrasts the students' behavior with his own belief that, as adults, students will need to settle "disagreements in a civil manner," insinuating that the students were not civil in their action. In sum, the narrative constructed by the Superintendent's retelling of the event is that the students and teachers are acting in ways that are in opposition to core American beliefs, attitudes, and ideology. Since this behavior is not normal in comparison to the standardized view of students as docile and passive, we were seen as a threat that needed to be eradicated, while politicians such as Horne and Huppenthal fanned their own ideological flames of glorifying individualism and attacking any collective action, a case in point being the earlier excerpts from Huppenthal's interview with Western Free Press.

At this point, it is important to return to Dr. Sanchez's initial question about what type of education was taking place in MAS that initiated state surveillance and finally, unprecedented state intervention. Clearly, liberatory education experiences that empower youth to not only think critically, but to act upon their convictions through civic engagement, activism and non-violent civil disobedience are at the core of the illegalities of the MAS program in Tucson. The political ideology that privileges individualism and the domestication of youth was being disrupted in the minds of state officials such as Horne and Huppenthal, with this type of education deemed threat enough to inspire three separate legislative attempts to eliminate a program that, at its zenith, served only three percent of the students in TUSD.

It is crucial to note the small size of our program, since it emphasizes the lengths that political forces will traverse in order to stop pockets of liberation and springs of hope for Chicana@ students and other marginalized, dispossessed, and silenced youth. Literally, hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent by the state of Arizona to discredit and dismantle MAS, including an \$110,000 audit by Cambium Learning Incorporated that summarized that:

MASD teachers are teaching Cesar Chavez alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi, all peaceful protestors 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. (Cambium Learning Inc., 2011, p. 55)

This evidence was completely disregarded, which falls into line with their agenda to completely ignore facts, outcomes, and the will and voices of our students and parents if it did not fit their preferred narrative and personal agendas. This can be seen in Chicago and other municipalities who have organized students, teachers, and parents to give voice toward the issues of school closures, and in Seattle where a successful boycott of the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test emphasized the desire of local communities to ensure that school is geared toward critical thinking and not simply high-stakes test preparation (Hagopian, 2013). Unfortunately, the organized and authentic voices of those



who work and live daily in public schools in Tucson, Chicago, and Seattle were not embraced by high-ranking school officials and politicians, who rather embrace the neoliberal school reform movement. When excellent scholastic outcomes geared around an ethic of humanity and peace are disregarded for the purposes of personal political advancements, and civically engaged and politically active citizens are repeatedly ignored at school board meetings or public rallies, then we have lost touch with some of the original tenets of public education in the United States – to create a critical democracy and build a more perfect union.

### **Theoretical Pastiche of MAS and CLASS**

So what were actually the theoretical and pedagogical emphases of a program demonized to such a degree by politicians in Arizona? For our students in both CLASS, and its predecessor MAS, the application of critical literacy and the liberatory education work of Paulo Freire have been paramount to the pursuit of a more just classroom experience. For Freire, it was essential that students, regardless of their ages, be literate at a level that would grant them the opportunity to examine their own lived experiences in relation to the context of the larger world in which they lived. For critical pedagogues, the importance of the concepts of conscientization and emancipation is paramount to this end. The Freirian term *conscientização* (Freire, 1970, p. 73-4) refers to students' being able to be critically conscious of their world and the systems that they engage in throughout their lives. Within a social justice education context, students use this critical awareness toward developing analysis of social injustices and engage toward the transformation of such practices, with emphasis upon human dignity and equality. Through a Freirian framework, students not only identify restraints upon their lives, but also engage in action to transform the social conditions that create inequities and inequalities.

The question of whether or not Chicana@ students are empowered to find their voice and academic identity within their classrooms is important in the process of creating an emancipatory experience for students. A liberatory educational experience where students actively participate in their own learning may yield far different results than a typical lecture and discussion class environment in regard to their own expectations of being active citizens. Freire (1970, p. 74) coined the term “banking education” for the type of depository learning in which students are viewed as empty receptacles in need of the expertise of the teacher to fill their heads with the teacher's own knowledge. Education that resembles this model strips students of their human potential and reproduces asymmetrical power relationships within the classroom, all of which are antithetical to critical pedagogy.

Furthermore, critical pedagogy can be a significant tool for the elimination of an education system designed to privilege types of knowledge that exclude and alienate students whose lives are not affirmed by the dominant culture or ideology. In this regard, the work of bell hooks proves pivotal. Her scholarship is infused with the tenets of critical pedagogy in order to specifically address the discriminatory institutional practices that marginalize students through race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. In order

to find a true liberated space for all students, hooks establishes the importance of student voice and dialogue in the classroom to foster empowerment (2003b). For centuries, students have been expected to play the role of the passive recipient of knowledge, similar to Freire's banking education concept. For hooks, this type of silencing of student voice "reinforces bourgeois models of decorum" (2003a, p.144). The lives of students who are not embraced by the values of the dominant culture enter traditional classrooms with trepidation toward an experience that may continue to alienate and dehumanize their experiences in the world.

Our Mexican American Studies classes were pedagogically forged to combat the passivity and acquiescence of student experiences within the status quo of public schools. Specifically, in my Latin@ Literature classes, I intentionally created educational experiences that provided spaces and time for students to reflect upon their world through the lens of the literature we studied in class. This practice, which was based upon indigenous epistemologies from our local community and cultural context, provided the foundation to build, not only an authentic classroom curriculum and climate where the students could analyze the experiences in their world, but also an immediately disrupted traditional school hierarchy through the organic injection of student voice as the initial step toward the rigorous study of literature. Through weekly journaling, casual classroom sharing, as well as formal presentations and discussions, student voice was consistently valued and normalized in the educational experiences of MAS classes.

For example, when reading the first chapters of the short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros (1992), I would ask my students to not only draw upon their own experiences watching *telenovelas*, since the main character forms many of her ideas about love and romantic relationships from them, but to also analyze these fictional worlds for any hegemonic content they may reinforce. The dialogue of the students would be rich with poignant stories of spending time with their *abuel@s* watching *telenovelas* together, as well as sharp critique toward the stereotypes, sexist, and discriminatory themes and messages that were implicit in the content of the episodes. Eventually, these discussions and class assignments would evolve into literary analyses, class teaching projects, or research papers.

These practices were typical of the assignments I constructed for CLASS and MAS, in hopes to embrace the specific form of critical pedagogy that Freire and hooks articulate. Not only were the students scrutinizing the societal injustices found in the literature, but they were also using that lens to examine their own lived experiences and building an academic critique that escapes merely the anecdotal level. Simultaneously, the youth were constructing an academic identity and classroom norm that privileged their voice and experiences as essential to the fluidity and function of the class – a norm that was antithetical to the characterization of the politicians who targeted our spaces for their own selfish intentions.

Along with critical pedagogy, *Funds of Knowledge*, the seminal research of Norma González, Luís Moll, and Cathy Amanti (2005), serves as a theoretical foundation for the development of educational spaces that are reflective of the community networks,

social and cultural capital, and the lived experiences of youth such as CLASS/MAS. Building on the work of Freire's (1970) generative themes, Funds of Knowledge establishes a pedagogical and curriculum ethos that deviates from traditional educational models that reinforce academic elitism and a social hierarchy that places the community, parents, and students in subservient roles. Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez and James Greenberg (2000) also express the importance of transforming such historically damaging policies and practices that have placed Mexican and Latino communities in precarious and powerless positions for generations – historical injustices that yield implications in our education system to this day. By using linguistic, cultural, and social capital already present in Chican@ and Latin@ families and neighborhoods as a basis for education models that are not only more relevant and appropriate to the community, but also academically rigorous, Chican@ and Latin@ students will have a more authentic educational experience and be more likely to develop a positive ethos toward school and life-long academic identity (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Yosso, 2005).

Indigenous and community epistemologies introduced into the classroom spaces can be a substantial shift from the *status quo* curriculum, which can serve as examples of community knowledge creation. The introduction of such knowledge and principles within educational institutions reaffirms the cultural capital, historical and social identities for Chican@ students (Acosta, 2007). Additionally, it is critical to alter or disrupt deficit-model ideologies that serve as the foundation for traditional procedures and policies of schools, which often dehumanize and pathologize Chican@ youth.

In the case of MAS, indigenous funds of knowledge in our Tucson community inspired a unique pedagogical approach for our classes. By infusing indigenous principles that are focused upon human relations such as equality, the pursuit of justice, and societal transformation, classrooms can become spaces of academic power and love that are similar to Freirian pedagogical theory (Acosta, 2007). As a collective of critical pedagogues, we embraced the use of the Mexican concept of the *Nahui Ollin*, or Four Movements, as a guide for curriculum and instruction, as well as the Maya principle of *In Lak Ech*, or *you are my other me*, as our guide for educational pursuits and interactions inside and outside of the classroom. Within the *Nahui Ollin*, the concepts of Tezcatlipoca (self-reflection), Quetzalcoatl (precious and beautiful knowledge), Huitzilopochtli (the will to act), and Xipe Totec (transformation), as well as *In Lak Ech* echo some of the same theoretical underpinnings as found in the work of Freire and hooks. Each of these epistemologies is rooted in humanization and love, and serves as a radical shift from the contemporary educational pressures to create antiseptic learning environments grounded in so-called teacher proof test preparation. Thus, MAS classes became ideal places for Chican@ students to rehumanize their public school educational experience and build relationships with their teachers and peers through authentic caring (Valenzuela, 1999) based upon their own cultural capital. However, the benefits of these indigenous principles also served students who were not of Mexican descent since they are based upon ideals that reach beyond ethnicity and toward a common humanity.

Written reflections from students often mentioned the power of healing academic and personal trauma through class experiences steeped in the principles of *In Lak Ech*.

This included the deep racial divides that became evident during the attacks upon their classes by Arizona legislators, state superintendent of public instruction, and the attorney general. An example of students' responding to these political machinations came from a European American student, Adrian Laurenzi (2008):

Contrary to the assumptions of Horne, Arizona's superintendent of public instruction, I have experienced only love and respect as a white student in Raza Studies (MAS). These classes have enriched my life, and I am honored to have had the opportunity to take them. I am saddened to think misconceptions may be keeping students away from these classes... Through Raza Studies (MAS), I have come to embrace the ideology in the poem "You Are My Other Me" - that we all share a common humanity regardless of race, gender or ethnicity. This idea has enriched not only my education, but also my personal life.

This piece was originally composed as a summative assessment for the rhetoric unit in my class, but as testimony to the empowerment and liberation of the MAS experience, Adrian submitted this as an opinion piece to one of the mainstream newspapers in Tucson as a response to the claims of then State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne. These indigenous principles not only served as the theoretical foundations of the pedagogy and curriculum, but also functioned as the students' internal compass as they internalized the racist characterizations of their class, themselves, peers, and teachers. Simultaneously, Adrian's desire to not simply write a paper for a class assignment, but to pursue the publication of his essay for a public audience was an example of *huitzilopochtli*. His will to enter his voice in the debate is the type of courage that was exemplified by many of our students through the years of our program and an example of how education can be culturally and socially responsive.

### **Dangers of Comfortable Thinking versus Critical Thinking**

"The desire to learn only what is comforting goes hand in hand with a resistance to learning what is discomforting, and this resistance often proves to be a formidable barrier to movements toward justice" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 4).

Cultivating a critical democracy in contemporary public schools is a risky proposition, given the political winds that blow from the Southwest that have unfortunately inspired dehumanizing legislation in Alabama and Georgia. However, engaging in culturally responsive and critical pedagogy has never been more vital. If students who are currently residing in cities, states, and a country that have turned a deaf ear to their experiences and needs, then students must be liberated and empowered within their classrooms. As Kevin Kumashiro warns us, to stay locked inside the parameters of comfort can only exacerbate oppression and inequality. It was not comfortable for the Freedom Riders to board buses and put their lives on the line to expose the injustice of segregation in the South. It was not safe for Harvey Milk and the demonstrators in the gay right's movement in the 1970's to take their voices to the streets of San Francisco., The courage and heroism of the Dreamers in Arizona that self-deported this summer in order to expose the degrading immigration policies of the United States is a

contemporary example of the need to push beyond the parameters of comfort to inspire societal transformation. As educators, if we are not prepared to engage in rigorous examination, analysis, and study of issues that assault the beauty of humanity, then what future are we preparing our students for?

Our MAS program in Tucson was an attempt to achieve this very end, and even after the decimation and dismantling of our classes, I was inspired by the youth of Tucson to persist. In response to the heinous act of banning our history, art and stories, we created Chican@ Literature, Art, and Social Studies (CLASS) that met on Sundays at a local youth center in South Tucson. In many ways, it was an act of love that was born from indignancy toward the hateful rhetoric, policies, and measures practiced by politicians like Attorney General Tom Horne, State Superintendent Huppenthal, TUSD Superintendent John Pedicone, and the TUSD Governing Board. The handful of ten students and I felt it was essential to not let a year go by where students would not have an opportunity to cultivate their love of learning through the lens of their Chican@/Latin@ and youth culture.

This type of engagement and activism in the community from our youth continued through CLASS after the decimation of our MAS program. In the case of Esperanza, who was a student at the most renowned high school in Tucson, the necessity of CLASS being held independently from the school district provided her with an opportunity to experience culturally responsive pedagogy. Previously, she had been unable to take MAS classes since her school did not offer them. Although she had a demanding academic schedule through her many Advanced Placement and college preparatory classes, Esperanza found CLASS to satisfy some of the educational cravings that had previously been absent. She said the following in an interview with me upon the conclusion of the 2012-13 school year:

This is the class that has the most ever community involvement – like my own personal beliefs about my community and the issues going on. Like in this one, we really addressed, I think, every issue, which seems impossible but I'm pretty sure we did. And in school, we did address some stuff in our literature class. It wasn't really community based in school. It was more in general, kind of like why we exist, more general issues. We did kind of talk about the difference between Mexico and the US. Just a little bit we touched upon it. So, I mean we did talk about some stuff that were, you know, important issues, but it wasn't so related to my community. It was more in general.

Creating classrooms where community issues were at a foundational level of the learning process, and not marginalized or dismissed was something that she found to be more authentic to her own academic journey. Instead of abstract or generalized examinations of humanity or social issues, CLASS was grounded in what the students felt were of critical importance to their community. By piercing the pretense that school is apolitical or unbiased space, students were able to find empowerment through academic inquiry of the issues that affected their families and themselves. It was precisely through the discomfort

of publically interrogating these community concerns and problems that challenged students to think more critically and creatively about their world. It inspired them to be leaders both inside and outside of the classroom.

Simultaneously, CLASS continued the pedagogical and philosophical ideals of its predecessor MAS by creating spaces for students to explore their own biases and perspectives through critical inquiry about the issues in their community and the rigorous examination of literature. It became my obligation and charge to find novels, short stories, poetry, essays, and hip-hop that would not only engage students, but also provoke the type of internal examination that is embedded in the concept of Tezcatlipoca. This was definitely the case whenever we read *The Devil's Highway* by Luís Alberto Urrea (2005). As Chican@s and Latin@s that live on the *frontera* or borderlands, the complexities in regard to immigration in the United States is a daily reality for our students. It is an issue that impacts nearly every student I have ever taught in an incredibly intimate way. Thus, a book of such notable literary regard focused upon immigration was critical for CLASS, as well as MAS that came before it, since the book allowed students to pierce through their pre-conceived notions of all the different people and lives affected by immigration policies of the United States and Mexico. Many times students were shocked to find empathy for organizations and people for whom they initially had hostile feelings toward before they read the book. This was the case for my student Santiago in regard to the Border Patrol:

Santiago: Definitely *The Devil's Highway*, I kind of heard a whole new side of the BP (Border Patrol). Yeah. It made me realize even more that everyone's human. We all make mistakes, no one's perfect. We all just try to do our best. Before, people would mention the Border Patrol and they'd think of bad people. This is uh, new, new information for me that, not really information, more like a new way of thinking about them. I just started hearing people telling stories about some of the Border Patrol, that they were actually good people. That they, they would pick up the, the people trying to cross and they would give them shelter for however long they needed it.

Santiago's reaction was one that embraced the idea of *In Lak Ech* toward some of the Border Patrol officers that tried to save the lives of a group of lost immigrants. Although students were challenged to examine their own prior beliefs, such as the Border Patrol being a monolithic evil, studying *The Devil's Highway* also allowed them the opportunity to deepen their political analyses and critiques of the policies that impact the lives captured in the book – realities that are so similar to those they are living each day. Through critical pedagogy, students began to broaden the lens for which they viewed sensitive and complex issues such as immigration and American exceptionalism. Moreover, students were motivated to seek out and develop plans for societal transformation that would counter the stripping of human rights and dignity that were embedded in U.S. policy.

Our classes were also designed to disrupt social reproduction, normalized Whiteness, and essentialism of oppressed populations through the intentional curricular focus of giving voice to counter-narratives. This manifested itself in numerous ways that were more traditionally reflective of Mexican@ culture, such as studying the impact of the United States immigration policy upon Chican@s and Mexican@s and communities in the southwest as represented in *The Devil's Highway*, or how traditional gender roles impact the liberation, safety, and equality of opportunity for women. However, I was also cognizant of including similar struggles for liberation of other oppressed communities in order for students to begin a process of developing empathy toward those who suffer discrimination and injustice.

For example, this was the reason for the inclusion of literature that reflected the lives of LGBTQ students as we read *Lindo y Querido* by Manuel Muñoz and analyzed a few songs by R&B artist Frank Ocean. Through rigorous examination of the themes and lyrics of the stories, students were able to draw connections among the marginalization, dehumanization, and discrimination that homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people face, which served as a way to build a spirit of *In Lak Ech* through counter-narratives that are seldom studied in public school. For my student, Gloria, a young woman who recently came out as lesbian herself, this was a pivotal moment for her as she was able to identify with the intersectionality of herself as a Chicana, lesbian, and activist in an academic setting for the first time in her life. As she stated,

Obviously, like, social justice is reflected through everything, and through all struggles, but instead of focusing on one specific struggle, we kind of listened to music, specifically Frank Ocean with the ear out for the fact that he identified as gay. Kind of dissecting it and analyzing based on that. Trying to see what he was saying about his own experience. We also read *La Llorona (La Llorona: Our Lady of Deformities)* and that story was a trip to me... Like in knowing all those different types of people, reading a story that was so spot on about how they're treated and how the world sees them, it was really like, wow! I want to read more stuff like this 'cause like you don't see, you don't ever hear about it. And so that for me, personally, like wow. Wow, wow, wow! It made me want to read more, to find out more, and stuff like that.

In the effort to build a class where both the pedagogy and curriculum reflected the issues, identities, and lived experiences of my students, I had to step outside of the normalized and standardized curriculum. There are simply no district-adopted textbooks that can reaffirm the lives of persecuted and marginalized youth, or attempt to create a sense of community and empathy in the spirit of *Tú eres mi otro yo/you are my other me*. Consequently, many times educators will implicitly reinforce hegemonic standards and norms simply by offering content that embraces the *status quo*. Of course, by overtly and intentionally crafting a liberatory educational experience that challenges these norms, educators must be prepared to be aware of the possibilities of backlash and attacks from administrators and/or politicians who are not supportive of celebrating our common humanity, nor building community through empathy and love.

## Conclusion:

I felt uncomfortable at school giving my opinion because I felt that no one was going to understand what I was trying to say because no one was going through the same thing I was going through. It's not like if people don't think like me that I can't learn. I guess, I don't like that I use comfortable so much because a lot of times it helps when you're uncomfortable. Like, you made me uncomfortable a lot of times. Like right now you're trying to make me explain something and I have to really think about it and that helps me learn better because I'm uncomfortable when I'm trying to like figure out what I want to say.

-Rita

As Rita explains from her exit interview with me at the end of CLASS, being uncomfortable can be an essential element not only to educational growth, but also to our development as empathetic human beings. What type of *hubris* is embedded in the notion that our schools need not be environments that challenge comfortable notions or the *status quo*? Yet, the examples of our experiences in Arizona through the attack on Mexican American Studies display a reticence and fear to confront our own discomfort. In fact, there is a palpable fear for educators to veer from a hierarchical path that emboldens those who are the most powerful and privileged in this country. It is plainly seen in the comments from politicians such as Tom Horne and John Huppenthal.

How many students in our classrooms everyday feel just like Rita? Are there tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of students who believe that no one wants to listen to them, their perspectives, or their needs? By overtly inverting the relationships of power in our schools and providing students the space, respect, academic skills, and authority to participate in their own learning, we not only can resuscitate hope in students who are so often marginalized and discounted, but also help create a new generation of authentic community leaders.

However, as educators, if we submit to the fear tactics that are a profound part of the contemporary educational discourse of this country, we will most assuredly be complicit in the demise of critical thinking and perpetuate the inequalities and inequities of education that have choked this country for generations. When colleagues create spaces of liberation and emancipation for youth, we must practice *In Lak Ech* amongst ourselves as educators, and stand in solidarity with one another in protecting such spaces. We must recommit to listening to the parents, community members, and most importantly, the students for the type of education they need to pursue their dreams.

And if we do not...as Dr. Sanchez asked before becoming the new superintendent of Tucson Unified School District, whose dignity is being violated? Indeed, that is the question.



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