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Precious Knowledge

An Interview with Film Director, Ari Palos on April 15, 2013

By Celina Meza, Editorial Staff, *Journal of Educational Controversy*

The ethnic studies program in Tuscan Unified School District (TUSD) emerged in the 1990's as a grassroots effort to reverse the disturbingly low trends in Latino academics. Nationally, the dropout rate for Latinos is consistently about 56%, and only 24% of Latino students continue onto college. As a solution to the low achievement, teachers in the TUSD designed ethnic studies classes to be culturally relevant so that students can see themselves and a purpose in the curriculum. The program has been successful; Latinos in the program drop out at a rate of 2.5%, much lower than the national average. In addition, students in the program outperform their peers in state standardized tests (Save Ethnic Studies, 2011).

Though the ethnic studies classes yielded undeniable results, their untraditional curriculum was also highly controversial. Former superintendent, Tom Horne, set out to ban the Mexican American Studies (MAS) on the fearful basis that the classes promote ethnic solidarity and the overthrow of the United States (CITE). In 2009, as political rhetoric to ban ethnic studies was rising, director Ari Palos documented the fight to save ethnic studies in the film Precious Knowledge. Palos stepped into the classrooms in question and provided teachers, students, and community members a space to share their narrative. We interviewed Palos to get insight in the making of the film and the experience of those involved in the fight for ethnic studies.

Celina Meza (CM): Could you explain to our readers what *Precious Knowledge* is about?

Ari Palos (AP): Precious Knowledge (PK) illustrates an academic year in the classrooms of Tucson's famous Mexican American Studies (MAS) classes. My producer, Eren McGinnis, a shoestring crew, and I filmed students becoming engaged through the programs' inspiring teachers and innovative curriculum, while the Arizona Superintendent and lawmakers posture and create legislation to outlaw the classes.

CM: Why is this story so important to tell?

AP: Public education has failed the growing demographic of non-white students while continuing to draft education policy that punishes minoritized students with a tough-love approach. Innovative and active programs do exist in affluent and successful schools while "problem" schools have kids pinned to desks and spoon-fed basics, a "traditional" approach that really has, over the last hundred years or so, proven to unwind inspiration and love of learning. Maybe this is their point.

Tucson's MAS program was a beautiful and real solution to this national crisis. With just a brief visit to the class you would have seen vested teachers, with *barrio* sensibilities

(like many other great programs), combined with real academic rigor and respect for each other. It was lovely to see. And the students then brought this respect to their other classes, to their friends and to their homes.

Just as important is the issue of misguided politics invading the classroom. What you witness with the *politicos* in *PK* is a real fear of change, even positive change. Southern Arizona was the perfect stage for this to play out.

CM: Who is the intended audience for the film?

AP: Like a good dinner party, we try to bring different audiences to the same table. We thought PBS was the perfect nationwide outlet for the film and the style matches this. But we framed the issue through a lens from which teachers, parents, and inspired students might see themselves. Bringing these audiences together is very much the goal.

CM: What process of student learning did you witness while filming in the Mexican-American Studies/Raza Studies classes taught by Mr. Curtis Acosta and Mr. José Gonzalez?

AP: The students enjoyed the Latino literature choices and were able to strongly connect with the characters they read. The women in *So Far from God*, by Ana Castillo were very real to Pricila, one of the students featured in the *PK* film.

We feel *PK* connects with audiences because you can see the transformation of the students. For example, Gilbert says, “I am not going to lie, I hated education.” By the end of the film he is proudly graduating. Crystal admits that she was very shy and sat in the back of the class. Her MAS teachers nurtured the student leader within and by the end of the school year, Crystal is the one with the bullhorn, and she has become a powerful leader for the students. Not only can you see it, you can feel it.

Additionally, their learning was a long process and the camera was a witness to this. While students were learning about social justice they also participated in a battle to try and save their classes. It was not just theory, but the students had to live the battle.

CM: Why do you think the teachers featured in the film were effective?

AP: One of the featured teachers is the wildly charismatic Mr. Acosta and the other is the more subtle and powerful Mr. Gonzalez. Mr. Acosta taught Latino Literature, which the students could use as an English credit, and Mr. Gonzalez taught American Government from a Social Justice Perspective for an American Government credit. Of course, now, since these classes have been outlawed, they are currently forbidden to teach these classes, which makes the *PK* film a historical record of their innovative and effective methods.

Their teaching styles and personalities are completely different; however, they've been trained to use techniques that can be used by anyone. One of the goals of *PK* is not to mythologize or mystify great teaching, but instead to provide an examination of what Mr. Acosta and Mr. Gonzales did, why they did it, and how they did it (their purpose and their process). Our film illustrates what the teachers call Critically Compassionate Intellectualism, a model that includes a counter-hegemonic curriculum, a pedagogy based on the theories of Paulo Freire, and student-teacher interactions centered on authentic caring.

Plus, like many teachers throughout the country, they are very caring mentors. Good teachers are contemporary, unsung heroes and there are many excellent teachers throughout the country. The *PK* film celebrates teachers everywhere.

CM: Students in TUSD who took Ethnic Studies classes showed significant improvements on standardized tests, and graduated and attended college at much higher rates than before. How do you think Ethnic Studies contributed to the rise of student success?

AP: The Ethnic Studies classes helped students embrace their ethnic identity. The students were also taught the concept of *In Lak Ech*, or to “love yourself,” and to love and respect others. The students in Mr. Acosta’s class read Latino literature that they could relate too. For example, *The Devil’s Highway*, by Luis Urrea, has a lot of meaning for the students since they live close by or even in the area called the Devil’s Highway, and some have had relatives cross from Mexico. This literature is alive and real for the students and they are more likely to read this kind of literature. The students’ success was a direct result of a newly found academic identity.

The students were also taught about their Mexican American history and culture. Mexicans, due to the bad publicity of immigration, are not, by and large, loved and respected in our national dialogues swirling with so much anti-immigrant rhetoric. Many of the students come into the classes feeling ashamed of their Mexican ethnicity. The former Mexican American classes helped the students embrace their ethnicity, and this became the key starting point to close the achievement gap. The White students also benefited by gaining a deeper understanding of the tapestry of our history and culture

CM: In the film, Augustine Romero poses the question “Are our schools a part of the community? Or is the community a part of our schools?” (21:00). What is your response to this question? And how would you explain the significance of the differentiation?

AP: Dr. Romero said something similar to this early on, and his words inspired the tone of *PK*. Tucson, like so many American cities, remains deeply segregated. This

segregation is seen even among the Mexican American students who sometimes self-segregate by neighborhood during lunchtime on campus.

However beyond these personal spaces, the Southwest is quite appealing because of the broad cultural borders. When you see taco carts near shopping malls, pachangas next to a golf course, or Aztec warriors depicted on skyscrapers, then it doesn't seem like a stretch to have a school mariachi class or Latino literature instead of a traditional English class.

This integration was very much the political issue. The first bill drafted to eliminate the classes was SB1108 which stated "a primary purpose of public education is to inculcate values of American citizenship." This was the first salvo aimed at critical thinking and also the local community within public education.

CM: The theme of Volume 8 of the *Journal of Educational Controversy* is: "Who defines the public in public education?" Who do you think is the public in public education? And how should the public inform the curriculum?

AP: The public is the community or parents, students, and even those who do not currently have students in the public education system. There are more Latinos in prison cells than college dorms. In some parts of the US, 75% of African American males are being pushed out of the high school educational system. These horrific realities affect us all. One statistic that Dr. Romero states in the *PK* film is that the prison industry examines minority demographic data of second graders to determine how many prisons to build. This pipeline affects the entire community and should be considered carefully.

CM: *Precious Knowledge* can be seen as an advocacy film, with a counter-narrative composed largely of Latino youth. What do you believe is the value in providing student voice?

AP: We noticed the politicians were getting all the airtime on the issue and they had a lot to say about what was going on in the classes. Therefore, we spent several months observing the classroom before rolling the camera. We noticed the teachers and the students creating the space that made it comfortable for discussing lived experiences together. The student voice in the classroom was the key, and this unlocked fearless discussion, including in-depth analyses of racism. Many of the students were experts with a lot of valuable lived experience, and the classroom became a space where they could discuss it.

Since this worked in the classroom, we thought it would work in *Precious Knowledge*. The film is shot from two angles, the teachers' point of view and the students' point of view, giving them equal weight.

CM: Why do you think Ethnic Studies classes are so controversial?

AP: The optimistic view is that Ethnic Studies classes are controversial simply because they are misunderstood. The classes are accused of being un-American when they, in fact, reflect a multicultural America. They are seen as an easy A when they are designed to prepare kids for college by rigorously engaging them in academics. Additionally, they are accused of promoting ethnic solidarity when they actually foster identity.

Our work on *PK* led us to the political view as well, which can be seen quite pessimistically. I cannot say what the real political intentions were in eliminating the classes, but opposition to the classes was a party line leading one to speculate on an underlying agenda or simply fear of oppositional empowerment.

CM: What has the viewer response been to the film? Have you experienced any pushback from people who don't support Ethnic Studies?

AP: The *PK* documentary had a successful broadcast on the PBS Independent Lens series in 2013 and was a "Pick of the Week" in the Sunday New York Times. The program had a rich life leading up to the broadcast, and public screenings are continuing with vigor. The students, teachers, and producer of the film have personally attended well over 100 screenings, including those at Harvard University, Appalachian State University, San Diego State University, Wellesley College, the University of Louisville, the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and many others. Screenings in Napa, California, and also Miami, Ohio, had over 500 in the audience. The teachers have also screened at many education conferences. It is screening at the American Education Research Association conference today with two of the teachers, Dr. Christine Sleeter and Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade!

To raise awareness and inspire audiences, there are public screenings that continue to happen two to three times a week throughout the country. For example, the mayor of Lincoln, Nebraska, just hosted a screening and led the audience in a rousing reading of the poem, "In Lak Ech," which is featured in the film. Interesting partnerships are also being created. Mr. Curtis Acosta was invited to the Google headquarters in Mountain View, California, to do a screening for Google employees and neighboring high school students. This partnership may help him continue with his good work. There are frequently standing ovations, tears, and an incredible amount of excitement from diverse youth across the US. The students see themselves in the *PK* documentary and feel inspired to create positive change in their own communities.

And yes, this incredible success and connection with the audience come with a price.

CM: What is your call to action for those who have seen the film?

AP: We hope that students, educators, and community members will work on the achievement gap in their own communities. The *PK* film has been seen by over a million people and has inspired the formation of numerous social justice groups and even

motivated students to bring Ethnic Studies classes to their own communities. There is a real hunger for the message of this film. We have had students tell us that it has changed their lives! Other students have said it has inspired them to become teachers. One community college social justice group is screening the *PK* film at neighborhood high schools. It has inspired people to work together to bring positive and progressive change in their own communities. The struggle, as seen in the *PK* film, has been an impressive call to action. As an audience member recently said to the students in the film, "Thank you so much for all your hard work - heart and soul! Here's to positive change!"

References

Palos, A. & McGinnis, E. (2011). *Precious Knowledge* [Film]. Dos Vatos Productions.

Save ethnic studies. (2011) Retrieved from <http://saveethnicstudies.org/index.shtml>

Since the filming of Precious Knowledge, Mexican American Studies classes have been banned. Teachers are still fighting to invalidate the ban and hope to continue to provide a rigorous culturally relevant curriculum in the future.