

ESSAYS ON THE MEXICAN AMERICAN

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QUESTIONS FREQUENTLY ASKED ABOUT MEXICAN-AMERICAN SCHOOL CHILDREN
BY EDUCATORS IN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS - 1967-68

The following questions represent those most frequently posed by teachers, administrators and counselors from grades K through 12. These questions were directed to Professor Julian Nava during the course of many lectures, discussions and consultations with educators who are trying to better understand the Spanish-speaking child. Most of these children are Mexican-Americans.

Many educators have valid answers to these questions, but most do not. The questions are examples of a wide gap in understanding between educators and a large number of their students. All Americans will benefit from earnest attention to these questions which reflect a serious educational problem.

- 1- Is the culture of Mexico still alive in those who have been in this country a long time?
- 2- Why is Mexican-American culture so different than ours?
- 3- Why do Mexican-Americans show up more in crime records?
- 4- Why do not Mexican-American families stress education like we do?
- 5- Why do not Mexican-Americans want to acculturate?
- 6- Why does the Mexican-American peer group hold back those who try to achieve in "Anglo society"?
- 7- Should we "Americanize" Mexican-American students at the expense of their own culture?
- 8- How do you change old cultural patterns in school (there is usually a negative connotation to "old cultural patterns")?
- 9- What can I do as an individual teacher to help Mexican-Americans?
- 10- What are the reactions of Mexican-American parents to the teacher who says their children have some problems?
- 11- Will not special attention to the Mexican-American "spoil" the group to where they cannot progress on their own?
- 12- How can we use the Mexican-American family pattern and customs to educational advantage?
- 13- What can teachers do to help build the self-image of the Mexican-American?
- 14- What caused you to go ahead and get an education?

Some Examples of How Mexican-American School Children Are
Conditioned to Accept a Negative Self-Image

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It would surprise many educators to learn that some of their common practices and attitudes teach some children to assume a superior and others an inferior status in life. Over the years, millions of Mexican-American school children in California (and the Southwest as well) have been taught by teachers and their schools that they are inferior to "Anglos." They learn this at an early age and know it well by puberty. The rest of their lives are conditioned by this lesson. This instruction has been deliberate in many cases and unintentional in others. The net effect is the same.

The following material is taken from a doctoral dissertation by Theodore Parsons, Ethnic Cleavage in a California School (Stanford, 1965). There was a report on this shocking report in Phi Delta Kappan (October 1966). The material in this work reflects conditions in a central California town, which are typical in several respects of others in the state and the Southwest.

He made the following observations:

1- A teacher asked why she had called on "Johnny" to lead five Mexicans in orderly file out of a school room, explained: "His father owns one of the big farms in the area and ... one day he will have to know how to handle the Mexicans."

2- Another teacher, following the general practice of calling on the Anglos to help Mexican pupils recite in class, said in praise of the system: "It draws them (the Americans) out and gives them a feeling of importance."

3- The president of the Chamber of Commerce declared in praise of the school principal: "He runs a good school. We never have any trouble in our school. Every kid knows his place... We believe that every kid has to learn to respect authority and his betters."

4- The school principal expounded the "grouping" and departmentalized reading programs instituted under his administration: "We thought that the white children would get more out of school if they could work faster and not slowed down by the Mexicans. We thought the Mexican kids would do better work if they were in classes geared more to their level. We thought that maybe we could give them some special attention ...

"Everybody is happy about the grouping programs ... The Mexican parents have never said anything, but the kids in school are doing better ... I guess the Mexicans are more comfortable in their own group."

5- By admitted subterfuge, the Chamber of Commerce committee sees to it that the artichoke festival "queen" is always an Anglo, with the Mexican candidate in second place as her attendant. An influential citizen told Parsons: "We could never have a Mexican queen represent us at the county fair."

6- Two of the three churches do not accept Mexicans. At the Catholic church, when both groups are assembled for special occasions, the Mexicans sit in the back or stand if seating is inadequate.

7- At school graduation, the Mexicans march in last and sit at the back of the platform. A male teacher explained that this is traditional

and "makes for a better-looking stage." Also, the Americans, who have all the parts in the program, can get more easily to the front. He added:

"Once we did let a Mexican girl give a little talk of some kind and all she did was to mumble around. She had quite an accent, too. Afterwards we had several complaints from other parents, so we haven't done anything like that since ... That was about 12 years ago."

8- The Mexican cub scout pack was in high excitement at the close of one annual town cleanup drive, when their pile was the highest at the 10 a.m. deadline. At 10:40 the garbage collector's large truck arrived and deposited a big load of trash on the Anglo pack's pile. The Anglo pack then was awarded the \$50 prize.

9- A light-skinned Mexican high school graduate promptly lost the job as bank teller she had just been engaged to fill when the manager heard her speak to an acquaintance in Spanish. He said he had not realized she was a Mexican--it was not bank policy to employ Mexicans.

The school teachers, all Anglo, and for the most part indigenous to the area, appeared unanimous in sharing the stereotype of Mexican-Americans--inferior in capacity as well as performance--Parsons reported. So firmly is the pattern in mind that a teacher, in full view of a group of well-dressed, quietly behaved Mexican children, could describe Mexican children as noisy and dirty.

Sociometric tests conducted by Parsons disclosed that even the Mexican children come to share the view constantly held up to them that the Anglos are "smarter" and their good opinion of special value..

"In general, the Anglo informants characterized the Mexicans as immoral, violent, and given to fighting, dirty, unintelligent, improvident, irresponsible, and lazy," wrote Parsons.

"Mexican informants often described Anglos as being unsympathetic, aggressive, interested only in themselves, cold, and demanding ... Not one of the several hundred people contacted during the field investigation had ever visited a home outside of his own ethnic group."

The dissertation, aptly described as a "complacency shocker," has been used to help Western school teachers study discrimination in the classroom and will be published as a case study in cultural anthropology by Holt, Rinehart & Winston in the near future.

The observations speak for themselves. Due to the mobility of people today, schools that do not practice these techniques may well acquire students who have had such experiences elsewhere.

Who is the Mexican American?

Five years ago it was unlikely that about 500 individuals from all over the state in various fields of education could gather in one place for such a purpose as guides the Nuevas Vistas Conference of 1968. We are here at a very timely point in our nation's development during which we see great changes in education in the United States. Much of this process of change gives cause for alarm to some educators.

The fact that we can ask, "Who is the Mexican American?" is not a sign of weakness, but rather an indication of new strength and maturity in the United States. I view the question in a purely positive light. Granted that all of us are witness to unrest and new demands by so-called minority groups, and that some of the conduct is disruptive and negative. Beyond that, we listen to the message rather than the means of communication. Minority demands remind us that there are many unfulfilled promises and some preaching we do not yet, as a people, truly practice. Viewed in a long perspective, the demands of minority groups are fully within American tradition. Except for those small groups that are clearly negative in attitude overall, the demands of minority groups today show confidence in America; confidence that their demands are essentially just and capable of being met through our present system.

I think that our generation is one of the most important in American history in various global and domestic respects. Among the significant domestic developments, minorities will

save the majority from itself. Most of us I trust, will understand what I mean when I say that the minorities will save the majority from the destructive consequences of racism and nativism. However, so many Americans have forgotten that this is a land of immigrants. All of us are a minority, if we scratch only a little below the surface.

Much of the strength of America has stemmed from her racial, religious, and cultural diversity. But although we can see this in retrospect, such a view was not common in our early history when minorities gave rise to fear among the English-speaking, Protestant majority. At independence, most western European nations, that thought they knew better, did not give the United States of America even a fighting chance to survive. Anyone well versed in American and European history during the late 18th century can recall numerous reasons why Europeans doubted we could survive as a nation. Indeed, among the earliest patriots fears arose that diversity threatened to break up the country from within if dangers from without did not.

As a product of zeal for forge a nation, what we call "nativism" developed in the United States by the 1830's. John Higham (Strangers in the Land) has described this suspicion of anything, anyone, or any group that stood out as either alien or different than the new "American man". The French traveler, Alexis de Tocqueville, was the first to clearly describe the new American society, in his classic work Democracy in America. By the 1830's, as an expression of nativism, groups like Royalists (which were still considered a threat), Catholics, secret groups like the Masons, exotic religions like Christian Science, the

Mormons and national or racial groups were identified as "minorities". Nativism and the origin of minorities have a peculiar American definition that springs from our national history.

I think most of you will agree that the so-called melting pot theory has persisted as one of the major themes in our history. Much of the melting was voluntary on the part of immigrants, but most was not. The purpose of the melting pot was to forge a new nation and to take a polyglot people and shape them into a nationality. Whatever the motives or means may have been, the melting pot did not fully work, for minorities were not eliminated. In my opinion, the melting pot idea is a misnomer. What makes more sense is to say that New England, Midwestern culture (we sometimes characterize as WASP) became the mold into which the successive waves of immigrant groups were fit in order to forge a nation. By the way, many nations still do this. In Latin America, Africa, and in much of Asia today, forging a nation is a very powerful idea and process. In Latin America one says, hacer patria ("make motherland") because there isn't one; there is simply a political unit. Returning to American history, the general purpose of nativism was proper. The object was to take immigrants from Scandinavia, Ireland; the Germanies (there was no one Germany until the 1870's), and many other places like Southeastern Europe, and made them Latin Americans. Therefore, the minorities, as they were described, shed their clothes, changed their names, or dropped their accents. Others inter-

married. Some even reshaped their nose and back at the ranch some have said that they are "Spanish"! Of course not all Spanish surnamed are Mexican, but until recently, most "Spanish" restaurants really served Mexican food. The motives of all those millions of Americans who tried to hide their past were understandable, although in many cases pathetic. Much of this pressure to conform did help forge a nation, strong enough to survive the Civil War.

The human costs of the melting pot were very high, however. But the costs were obscured by the territorial, economic, and political success of America that confounded the world. Success gave Americans, mostly Anglo-Americans, the conviction that they were not only superior but virtually invincible. Our "Manifest Destiny" had almost no limits so that America was no longer defensive with respect to Europe by the turn of the 20th century. We were a world power. And yet within the lifetime of some people in this room, our vast power has been curtailed. Despite our victory in the First and Second World Wars, here we are: we fought to a stalemate in Korea, we are bogged down in Vietnam, and we have not gotten back that little boat called the Pueblo. The nuclear stalemate hovers over everyone's head. And to complicate matters even more, before long third and fourth string nations will possess the power of mutual extinction through nuclear weapons.

Thus, many of us are asking new questions that are prompted by realities. One of these realities lies in the fact that Americans are a minority in the world, and a better understanding of our own society may help us survive in a changing

world. We have set the stage for a closer look at this one minority group as it fits into American history. The Mexican American confuses many people because he does not fit the pattern of relatively successful European immigrants. The answer to the problem may lie in the fact that the theories about immigration, acculturation, and assimilation have been based on the transatlantic immigrations and fail to encompass Latin Americans generally, and Mexican Americans particularly.

Thus many people have been sincere when they said, "Germans, the Irish and the Jews have made it. What's the matter with the Mexicans?" This is a question that says much about the commentator. And yet it is a fair question that cries for answers. Amid the answers we may find a definition for the Mexican American.

To begin with, untold thousands of Mexican Americans have "made it". However, most of these get lost in the American crowd and do not change the stereotype. They become invisible due to monetary success, professional achievement, and inter-marriage. Some change their name while others act on the basis of the advertizing slogan, "blonds have more fun". Untold numbers are no longer identified by others nor do they identify themselves as Mexican Americans. By definition therefore, untold numbers of Mexican Americans "pass" constantly. It is a mixed blessing that the Mexican American can get lost much easier than the Negro can pass. Because many Mexican Americans shed their identity, it appears that there is relatively little "progress" on the part of this minority group.

The endless supply of Mexican Americans in the barrios add to the confusion about Mexican Americans. This resource stems from a high birthrate, migration from the countryside into the cities, and the constant immigration from Mexico. New Mexican Americans take the place of those that leave the barrio. Therefore, many of the barrios are passing parades. Although many barrios have a core that remains, many Mexican Americans pass through. Those of us, such as educators, that are stationed in one capacity or another near the barrios may get the impression that there is little progress taking place because we may lose sight of the fact that those who "made it" have moved on. We hear more about the Mexican Americans that seem to pose problems than those who have succeeded.

Most Mexican Americans have not assimilated to the extent that other groups have, and this is due to their peculiar history. We must recall that the relations between the United States and Mexico are unlike those we have had with any other nation. An ill-prepared Republic of Mexico was born in 1824. Within twenty-five years it was overwhelmed by the United States, losing over half of its territory and many of its citizens. After 1848, it was under periodic pressure to sell or to cede more land to the United States. If you are not aware of these pressures upon Mexico it is probably because you have been reading American history textbooks that gloss over these events. Try reading some Mexican textbooks, or simply take a graduate course in any American university that digs deeper into U.S. history.

There you will find records of events that have made Mexicans suspicious, afraid, or literally gun-shy of the giant to the north. Knowledge of Mexican history is indispensable to an understanding of the Mexican American. For whether we are talking about the bracero, a wetback, a tourist from Mexico or a recent immigrant, they bring Mexican history with them.

Mexican Americans, by definition, came into existence in 1848. Therefore, we might say that they are one of the 19th century immigrant groups. This generalization is most imprecise. It does not take into account the prior residence in the Southwest of Hispanos in New Mexico, Californios, or Mexicans living in the Southwest before 1848. Most Mexican Americans have come to the United States during the 20th century, nonetheless. Since 1948, however, this group was assigned a status, out of which it has been very difficult to escape. This position to which he has been assigned is a basic factor in our definition of the Mexican American. In California, this seems like a rather harsh assertion. And yet, it was only last September (1967) that a School District dismissed elementary schools for one week, helped issue work permits and facilitated elementary school Mexican American children going out to help pick crops because of labor shortages. This case is significant, not only because the court's action alleged that a school board willfully violated state statutes, it is also significant because similar occurrences have taken place before in California. In fact, similar things have happened in the last century throughout the Southwest.

The Mexican American in general, has not received equal opportunity in education. Since childhood he has accepted a negative self-image which schools have helped form. He has been caught in a vicious circle that was not of his making. One is tempted to ask where that circle can be broken in order to direct the course of events so more Mexican Americans will understand themselves better and be better understood by others. Confusion about Mexican Americans is a major factor in their inability to get what they want from others with whom they work and live.

Mexican Americans are a heterogeneous group. Since so little is known about them by others, it is understandable that people talk about Mexican Americans as if they were all alike. Most Anglo-Americans believe that minority groups like the Negro, the Jew, or the Japanese American, are all alike. The Mexican Americans combine Spanish, Indian, Negro, Oriental and other elements. Many have little or no racial contributions from the Indian groups. Many Mexican Americans are fairly pure in Spanish genetic background. Even then, they may very well resemble the Aduluz (who is really North African in temperament and appearance) or they may resemble the Saxon or the Germanic type that predominated in Northern Spain. Thus, many Mexican Americans are fair in complexion or blond. On the other hand they may represent one of many different Indian groups in Mexico. Even today, Spanish is a second language for many Mexicans. Most Mexican Americans are part of the mestizo majority; that is, part-Spanish and part-Indian. Some Mexicans are part-Negro, or any of the possible combinations of all of these distinct

groups. It is not surprising that Mexican Americans reflect some emotional and psychological tensions. Confusion around the question of identity has existed in Mexico itself since independence. Since revolutionary times (1910--) it is not fashionable to talk about the Spanish contribution to Mexico. Mexicans talk about the mestizo or the Indian contribution. This ideology sprang from the Revolution of 1910. There is no monument, no plaza, no avenida named after Hernan Cortez in Mexico. Since Mexicans themselves are still in turmoil over what is a Mexican, it is not surprising that Mexican Americans will differ in opinion, and that others may be even more confused.

The Mexican American is a man with a foot on each side of the Rio Grande. There is constant reinforcement of Mexican culture in America today. No other minority group faces such pressures from the motherland as does the Mexican American. I am sure you are aware that Mexican Spanish-speaking radio, newspapers, magazines, movies, television abound in the United States. Personal contacts back and forth across the border number in the millions every year. Therefore, even if you want to, it is harder to escape identification or shed your mexicanidad. In some respects, the predicament of the Mexican American approximates most closely that of the Jew and Oriental. Notice that I did not compare the Mexican American with the Negro. In my opinion, the Negro is 100% American, culturally. The only hang-up is color. The Mexican American is bi-cultural and everything that implies. This heterogeneous group is receiving constant cultural reinforcements from Mexico. These constant influences

change over time and help shape new feelings, new theories and arguments that arise amongst us as to identity. Indeed, nothing will arouse as much heat among a group of Mexican Americans than the mere question, "What do we call ourselves?"

Social and racial prejudice exists among Mexican Americans toward each other. Let me quote a Venezuelan philosopher who got fed up with the color question and said with regards to Venezuela (this applies to Mexico and Mexican Americans), " Todos somos cafe con leche." He went on to say, "lo que ocurre es que algunos tienen mas cafe y otros tienen mas leche". Mexico, next door, is many things, and we must not overlook its diversity. It exerts such a powerful attraction that the Mexican American has a foot on each side of the border. He is caught in the middle of two worlds. In various respects, these two realities are in conflict.

Mexican cultural influence is not declining, it is rising in importance. Across the border fewer people are defensive about Mexico. There is new pride and confidence in things Mexican. Granted, Mexico has some serious problems, but generally the Mexican reputation in art, music, architecture, politics, and economics is steadily rising throughout the world. In fact, the Mexican peso is now a little harder than the dollar in financial centers like Zurich and London. Throughout the world, Mexico arouses increasing respect. Within Latin America, Mexico occupies a situation almost analogous to France in European affairs. Mexico takes the role of the middle man in hemispheric affairs. In recent years, Mexico has dared to pluck the eagle's feathers and has got away with it. Actually, Mexicans

are sometimes professionally critical of the United States. In light of all this, Mexican Americans are more expressive, more confident, and more belligerent with respect to the language and culture that they represent.

Many Mexican Americans have not wanted to Americanize fully. In many cases, reluctance to assimilate has stemmed from resentment (political, economic, or social). Of course, fear among Mexican Americans of being rejected has caused many to hold back from moving in Anglo-American circles of American society. In other cases, however, we find a belief that some Mexican American cultural traits are superior to the Anglo-American traits. To cite but one example, let me ask whether you have noticed some of the ads for Hawaii and the Caribbean Islands. These commercials extol setting work aside, if only for a weekend, relaxing, spending time with your friends or slowing down periodically. These traits that we admire or envy among those who can afford to go to the Bahamas, we now find proposed for the average man. Yet these traits have hitherto been decried among Latin Americans as something which helped explain their low status. Traditionally, many Mexican Americans have preferred traits such as personalism, close family relations, old loyalties, and other virtues such as leisure over those that prevail in our American society, such as progress, industrialism, aggressiveness, financial success, and so forth. In short, for several reasons, Mexican Americans have not assimilated as much as other American minority groups.

These conditions have helped produce certain problems. Yet, if viewed more broadly and more realistically, these problems

are truly prospects for a better society. Who is, after all, the disadvantaged? If being bi-cultural or bi-lingual is a disadvantage, then does it follow that being tri-cultural or tri-lingual is even more of a disadvantage? Indeed, the cultural stubbornness of the Mexican American (as his conduct is often described) can remind us of something we have forgotten. The essence of being American lies in being able to pledge allegiance to the flag and mean it in heart and mind; everything else is secondary. In this light, cultural diversity becomes an asset, rather than a liability. My mother became an American citizen, pledging allegiance in Spanish, thanks to a new law that permitted that, and she was no less an American than someone next to her who did it in French or German.

Cultural diversity can be treasured and enjoyed for its own sake, or as a means to enrich American society. Whether we are concerned with the Mexican American out of political necessity or out of enlightened self-interest, we agree I hope, that the higher educational goal is to make America stronger. We can preserve cultural diversity to help make our society more creative and responsive. or we can preserve cultural traits as an end in itself. The choice is up to us.

Many people have been crying in the wilderness, so to speak, on behalf of the educational needs of the Mexican American. Fortunately, educators are now acting out of principle so as to broaden the base of opportunity in public education. Schools in various states, California in particular, are teaching about the role and contributions of minority groups to United

States History. More awareness of cultural diversity benefits all students. Understanding the Mexican American helps both the minority and the majority pupil.

It would be as unnecessary as taking tacos to Tijuana or "taking coals to Newcastle", to take time outlining data on economics, politics, demography, intermarriage, the family, and religion traits of the Mexican Americans. You know much of this. If you do not, I urge you to read new works such as The Mexican American People, by Leo Gribbler, Moor and Guzman (Free Press, 1970) who has done a good job of analyzing the 1960 Census and describing the Mexican American in recent times. See also, Joan Moore's, Mexican Americans, (Prentice Hall, 1970), my public school text, Mexican Americans: Past, Present and Future, (American Book Company, 1969), or Rudy Acuna's elementary level book, The Story of the Mexican American, (American Book Company, 1970).

"Who is the Mexican American?"---he is an American. Everything we do and say should reinforce this legal fact and then proceed to make it a social reality. I believe that bilingualism or cultural pluralism can simply enhance being an American rather than detract from it. More and more people now agree with this assertion.

Hyphenation makes me indignant. Many are just angry. Others are confused. Among the "majority" we find a backlash to the demands of the minorities. In the long run, we must not react negatively to hyphenation. Our generation must deal honestly and positively with the harmful vestiges of nativism and prejudice. We must set our course toward a higher goal than suppression of minorities or separatism on their part. We

must give attention to what is going on "back at the ranch", that is to say the true realities in our community and schools. Back at the reach house there is a tremendous job to be done in politics, social life, and above all, in education, to resolve the problems that face this curious minority group, the Mexican American. Un-resolved problems that affect all of us are not being to be resolved by wishing that they did not exist or by hoping that they will go away if we do not talk about them.

As long as Mexico is next door we will have a fresh supply of Mexican Americans. Mexico already supplies more immigrants than any foreign country. Although quotas effective 1969, immigration from Latin American nations, Mexican immigration will continue to be substantial. In addition, the high birth rate among Mexican Americans to think of will increase their number also.

The rest of America may not be quite ready for it but, we must fasten our safety belts because it is going to be a long ride and some of it will be a little rough. Most enlightened people who understand the Mexican American, know the kinds of things that we must do. I trust that we realize that if the problems are given prompt, vigorous attention, they will become prospects for a stronger and better America. In solving the riddle of the identity of Mexican Americans, we will cast new light on "Who is an American, anyway?"

Thank You.