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Cultural Backgrounds and Barriers that Affect Learning
by Spanish-Speaking Children

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America is a fascinating society of such size and complexity that no sooner is something firm or true but conditions change and call for a new evaluation. As important as other elements in our history are, nothing is more significant than the people that have formed our United States.

Among the many different peoples that have come to this land at various times, the group which I represent is difficult to understand for many because few historians have given it proper attention. However, it exemplifys both the problems and prospects our country has faced as it endeavors to "Americanize" the many races, cultures and peoples in a new set of conditions that no country has ever faced before.

All educators are concerned with evaluating their teaching in terms of certain goals. In light of this, it is important to point out that the Mexican-American students--taken as a group--have not responded to public education as most educators assume they were. Generally, these young people have not reached the goals we have set for them and pose questions for which educators do not have sufficient answers. A good look at the effects of public education upon Mexican-Americans will show that this ethnic group poses serious problems which cannot be ignored any longer. The resulting costs to our society are too great to assume that the trouble lies alone with the individual student.

The general methods and educationa values we have maintained produce puzzling effects when applied to this group. In an effort to shed some light on the educational problems of Mexican-American students, I would like to focus my attention on the role of language in public education, and how it affects learning by these children.

The teaching of English in public schools has certain social and psychological consequences that many instructors and administrators may not fully realize. Guided by the melting pot theory, it has been an assumption among educators that instruction was for a basically homogeneous student population which was already English speaking.

This is not the case in most of the Southwest, where perhaps about 4 million people have Spanish as a native language. For these people English is a second language. The objectives of schools and teachers are very difficult for Spanish-speaking people to achieve because of their bi-lingual situation. From kindergarten on, the encounter with education spoken in an alien tongue (English), produces in the Spanish-speaking child various profound impressions which are often destructive. For many children the encounter with English language instruction causes greater shock than the child can cope with. A negative pattern is established which helps explain the general failure of most of this ethnic group to develop as our educational institutions desire.

The net effect of English language instruction is often destructive of the self-image and very ego of many Spanish-speaking children. Their individual needs have been submerged or suppressed in favor of a uniform curriculum established to make everyone speak and act like a typical American. Efforts to suppress certain ethnic background cause long-lasting wounds and these result in social maladjustment and under-achievement. These outward manifestations frustrate teachers. Moreover these negative results cause the loss to society of many thousands of potentially highly productive individuals. There is no grand design to bring this about. Our educational institutions find it necessary to deal with general standards or molds into which raw material must fit or suffer the consequences. We have taken little time to study the reactions of Mexican-Americans to an experience which is so alien to our own. Thus we find it hard to accept that millions of young and sensitive minds believe that public education suppresses a major part of their personality and looks down upon them. A sophisticated person would say that public schools damage the self-image they bring to school.

These general observations stem from both professional sources and my personal experience. I have lived through all of this, first as a simple

child that tried to cope with all the frightening forces to which school experiences put me as a bi-lingual child. As an adult, I have looked back in a rational manner to see what happened to me, and what is still happening to countless others.

To focus more sharply, let me confine myself to the group we call the "Mexican-American." Although there are other labels for the group, this combines clarity of meaning and brevity. The Mexican-American constitutes the vast majority of Spanish-speaking people in the Southwest and the country at large. Although recent immigration, such as the Puerto Rican and Cuban, has altered the composition of Spanish speaking population figures, the situation of the Mexican-American is distinct from that of other Latin American peoples in our country. As long as Mexico and the U.S. share a border there will be unique aspects of U.S.-Mexican relations. Mexican-Americans will be in the middle of powerful and complex forces that are not well enough understood.

Most teachers of English are so subject-oriented that they find little time to show concern for the negative effect that English teaching has on many of their bi-lingual students. After all, English teaching is judged by the extent to which students acquire certain skills that will help them fit the pattern we have set for our American public school graduate. We leave to over-loaded counselors the tasks of dealing with personal problems related to school experiences. Crowded schools only aggravate the situation.

We tend to assume that something is wrong with the boy if he cannot do well in school. It is easy to assume that he is either deficient in intelligence or not properly motivated. In either case, there is little we can do beyond keep the class in order, get a minimum amount of subject matter across (maybe some ideas), and survive another day. We are not paid to change society or play God. Many teachers assume that learning involves pain as well as pleasure, anyway. Others feel that curiosity, enthusiasm and pleasure are more creative forces.

Teachers who are aware of after-school situations are perplexed by the Mexican-American school children. The confusion among educators arises in great part from the mis-application of sociological data. Mexican-American low educational achievement has been explained by over-simplifications that stem from our experience with European minorities and the Negro. The failure of simple explanations for low educational achievement of Mexican-Americans has in turn perpetuated critical stereotypes of this group. In many cases, low educational achievement of Mexican-Americans is used as support for prejudice. So many of these children remain aloof from the mainstream and withdraw into a shell that educators despair of helping them --and so do their parents. Many teachers will write-off a Mexican-American student by remarks such as, "well, he is better off going to work anyway!"

The Mexican-American in our society finds that difficulty with English is at the bottom of the entire complex of problems he faces in gaining acceptance and equal opportunity. The learning ability of all children is vitally affected by socio-psychological factors. The training of teachers in the psychological foundations of education may vary across the country, but most teachers know that for the child in school, feelings of personal security, knowledge of acceptance by the peer group and native curiosity about knowledge are all very fragile blossoms that must be cared for tenderly. All of these elements in the personality are hurt by a hostile environment, sometimes permanently.

For Mexican-American children all the general problems are aggravated and compounded by the language gap. Their lack of communication skills, ties their hands and gags them. Their response to learning situations may well be positive and creative, but they cannot express themselves well in English. Teachers find it difficult to wait for them to catch up in English because the teaching schedule must go on. To visualize what happens one must

imagine that the situation is reversed, that all teaching were in Spanish and that a minority of the students speak only English learned at home and their neighborhood. For both national interests and their own, teachers must force the English-speaking minority to speak only Spanish. Of course, many of these will cling together for mutual assistance, reassurance and for a relief from the foreign language. The same teacher would very likely scold or punish the offenders for their poor manners, lack of interest ...and so on. In many cases, teachers imply disdain for the minority culture. Switching back to the Mexican-American vantage point, such classroom experiences constitute a painful ordeal for many Mexican-American children. Few teachers know or guess what is going on behind those dark eyes in class.

An accent is one of the most immediate handicaps a Mexican-American creates by the way in which he speaks English. An accent has always helped identify certain classes or groups, such as immigrants and minorities. In our country, traditionally bent on making its citizens fit the White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) New England model, an accent other than some accepted ones has usually brought ridicule or disdain. Thus an English accent has been generally an asset of at least snob appeal. A Jewish or Italian accent has been a mixed blessing. And so it is true of Mexican or Spanish accent when speaking American English.

Mexican-Americans are the largest single ethnic minority group in the Southwest and one of the least understood in the nation. We can read a legion of specialists on European immigration. And Negroes are the object of a frontal assault by scholarly circles now. But very few have studied the movement north from Mexico. The collision of the two major cultures is often ignored. I have heard even major authorities on American immigration ignore the Hispanic Southwest from their survey of American development. Most authorities lump the peculiar development of this region with later European immigration to the East coast. This uncritical identification has led some to observe: "the Irish and Jews have made it. What's wrong with the Mexicans?"

Mexican-American school children pose a great problem to public education. Their level of education achieved, as measured by the average school years completed (8), is lower than any other minority group, including the Negro. Trouble in school starts with the first experiences in kindergarten. Most Mexican-American children attend schools that are segregated to various degrees. Since their parents tend to live in pockets, which they call colonias or barrios (which academicians call ghettos or slums), it is not difficult to draw school lines so as to put problem children into certain schools. Like craters on the moon, "Mexican schools" dot the Southwest. In larger cities where most Mexican-Americans now live, segregation is less effective, and much of it is self-imposed. Even where they constitute the numerical majority of students, language and personal problems are still serious. A young child is suddenly forced to socialize with and compete in school with other children who speak a foreign tongue. Many of his classmates will soon regard him negatively because he cannot speak English well, if at all. This child falls behind from the start, and tends to stay behind till he drops out voluntarily. He is pushed out in effect, in some indifferent, hostile or over-loaded schools.

School problems often mirror those of society in general. Thus we find that among adults there is a schizophrenia toward Mexican-Americans. Most people like things "Spanish," such as the missions, the dances and music, the old padres and the myths about old California days. But most look differently at the Mexican of today. This is hardly surprising in view of the critical tone of most written sources on the Mexican. It seems like the "Black Legend" of colonial times, whereby northern European writers painted the deeds and culture of Iberian peoples in dark tones, has carried over to their descendants in America. These have inherited the legacy of Northern European hostility to Catholic Spain and its culture on the one hand, and to the Indian on the other. But Mexicans combine the mixed blessings of being both Spanish and Indian! Mexicans are different than Spaniards, and Mexican-

Americans are different from Mexicans (in Mexico). These differences exist for reasons that are not generally understood by the American public. And yet, our society is affected by these realities just the same. Teachers are among the first to see these effects, but they do not, as a group, understand them.

What makes Mexican-Americans different from other minority groups? Ultimately all peoples have some unique qualities, or manifest universal characteristics in different manners. It is a delicate matter to apply labels to national characteristics because of personal feelings run high over these questions. Irish, German, Scotch or French are no different in this. Nothing will arouse such heated debate among Mexican-Americans at any level, as the very use of such a term to describe them. Self-analysis goes on at an increased tempo among "Americans of Mexican descent," and so it is understandable that the majority of Americans (whom this group calls "anglos") is confused. Among the major differences that set this group aside from other minorities, we could suggest that:

- 1- although many Mexican-Americans are literally immigrants or 2nd generation Americans, the group does not fit neatly into the pattern of European immigration. Its role in U.S. history cannot be fully understood if we use the European immigration model.
- 2- Mexican-Americans are of widely varying physical, racial and social types. The group is what I call "indoafrohispanic." Although the vast majority of Mexicans are mestizos (Indian and Spanish to varying degrees), many are mulattoes and zambos (Indian and Negro). And there are also great numbers of pure Spanish blood Mexicans, Indians (about 50 dialects) and Negroes.
- 3- Most Mexican-Americans exemplify a "conquered people." They carry the burden of Spain's conquest over their Mexican Indian

forefathers. In the United States they are not allowed to "forget the Alamo." Socially and politically, they carry the burden of the outcome of the Mexican War. Only American Indians have lived an experience that approximates that of the Mexican-American. However, since the Revolution of 1910 in Mexico, a new pride has been forming around being Mexican, and this has carried over to the U.S.

- 4- most Mexican-Americans are not assimilated into American society after a hundred years of U.S. control over this region. In certain respects, Spanish-speaking Americans are not immigrants at all, for the stamp of Hispano-Mexican culture has been present in the Southwest for 300 years. Some of the reluctance to assimilate stems from the view of Mexican-Americans that many of their values and attitudes are superior to those of the general U.S. population.
- 5- although most Mexicans are Caucasians, they are not always so considered. Even when they are, it is more of a handicap to be of Mexican descent than it is to be Irish or German-American. Many individuals who rise in status by virtue of achievement or recognition try to pass off their name as being Spanish, rather than Mexican. Shame for Mexican identification will bring others to say they are from old Californian or New Mexico Spanish families. This aside, the reception of a Spanish surname does vary greatly. Among some circles it can be an asset, and where there are no problems connected with large numbers of them, Mexican-Americans can be truly free as individuals. The rise of Mexico as a leader in Latin America and its notable progress as a producer of ideas, art and social progress has altered the traditional picture most Americans have of both Mexico and its

people. These changes have brought some benefits to Mexican-Americans.

6- the proximity of Mexico is a constant reinforcement of stereotypes held about the Mexican-American. Within the group, the proximity of Mexico complicates acculturation and assimilation to the U.S. No other U.S. minority group encounters such a situation.

These suggestions as to how Mexican-Americans differ from other minority groups are not all inclusive. But they should help explain why the usual formulas for social betterment do not seem to work as well with this group as they do with others.

How many people are we talking about? In the U.S. there are about 4 million Mexican-Americans. Some estimates take the number up to 5 million. Most are in the Southwest, chiefly in Texas and California.

California's share is steadily increasing at the expense of Texas. Recent data reveal the population of school-age children in California as follows for July, 1966:

White Spanish surname	660,000
Non-Whites	546,000
Other Whites	3,493,000
	4,700,000

For our purposes, it will suffice to point out that Mexican-Americans outnumber Negroes in this state 2 to 1. Moreover, they are found everywhere in the state. Contrary to accepted impressions, they are mostly urban dwellers, although they comprise 60% of the field hands in California agriculture.

Most of these Spanish-speaking children have experienced some of the following situations in school:

1- bi-lingual children have been forced to suppress their mother tongue in favor of wholly English school learning.

- 2- there is commonly a connotation of inferiority to Spanish as against other foreign languages. Besides, "Mexicans don't really speak true Castillian Spanish," you will often hear.
- 3- the suppression of Spanish in school has made most Mexican-Americans feel that something is wrong not only with Spanish, but everything they associate with it. They soon feel ashamed of speaking Spanish and being "Mexican." An inferiority complex often results in a defeatist attitude from an early age.
- 4- most Mexican-Americans have poor English language skills that hamper all educational and social experiences in school.

The magnitude of the problem can be summarized by reminding ourselves that no other racial or ethnic minority group of any consequence produces fewer High School graduates. Millions of Americans of Spanish-speaking extraction have been conditioned to accept second class status. Many educators believe that our society has higher spiritual values and greater interests than to permit such conditions to continue. Others believe Mexican-Americans deserve what they are willing to settle for; this is a common attitude.

What can you do to help the Mexican-American student?

- 1- find out more about the group and how it affects your community.
- 2- help children feel pride in their native language and culture.
- 3- learn Spanish yourself and use it in class as a resource.
- 4- give Hispano-Mexican history its fair share of attention.
- 5- make it clear that all minority groups have enriched our country.

There seems to be a new movement among educators which bodes well for the future. They are starting to deal face to face with many problems which have been ignored. In California, for example, the requirement for some

Spanish instruction in Elementary and Junior High is the beginning of a new and creative era in public education which will benefit all students. This new program will soften the effect whereby English language has served as a form of cultural oppression for Americans of Mexican descent. Much remains to be done, however, in order to enrich our American society through positive and fruitful diversity. Hispano-Mexican peoples do still have much to offer our society. Whether they do depends upon teachers in great part.