

Red Scare in the Red State: The Attack on Mexican-American Studies in Arizona and Opportunities for Building National Solidarity

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Abstract

The attack on ethnic studies in Tucson is a local struggle with broad implications. This essay poses that Arizona is a testing ground for neoliberal laws, policies and practices, including HB2281, an anti-Latino@ law banning ethnic studies courses in public schools. Given that many such political “experiments” have been successfully exported from Arizona, we raise concerns about the implications of this legislation. HB2281 represents contradictions inherent to a wide ranging anti-Latino@ political strategy that deploys an ethic of color-blindness to legitimize attacks on anti-racist projects and produces a rhetoric of new and recycled “enemies” to garner public support for increasingly anti-democratic public policy. We examine some of the stakes of building transformative educational projects in local settings, and pose questions about possibilities for building national networks of likely allies with the capacity to defend and support rigorous, critical public education in the United States.

Introduction

This essay is written from the perspective of two social justice educators living in Arizona who have had the privilege to witness the growth, occasionally collaborate with, and draw inspiration from the successes of one of the nation’s most exemplary and transformative public education projects.... and then recoil in shock and outrage as our legislature has attacked, sought to discredit, and finally dismantled the Tucson Unified School District’s (TUSD) Mexican American Studies Program (MAS). Among much more important consequences of these events, we were forced to reckon with our own misguided, tragically uncritical assumption that the program was “safe” because it was producing the results the state demands -- high test scores, graduation rates, and college entry levels among mostly Latino@ graduates in a low income school district in a state that hovers at 50th in K-12 school funding (U.S. Census 2010). These successes, of course, were not the only reason we valued the program; they were what we assumed would be “insurance” against the ravages of No Child Left Behind policies that have devastated so-called “underperforming” schools in low income communities across the nation.

We also valued MAS because we were inspired by the innovative critically compassionate intellectualism (Cammarota & Romero, 2009), the ability of the teachers to set high expectations and facilitate each student’s success, to embed curriculum in social justice struggles that are relevant to students’ lives, to foster a profoundly just and radically inclusive learning community, and we were, and continue to be, most spectacularly inspired by the accomplishments and the commitment of the students themselves. Despite degrees in Multicultural Education and Cultural Studies, despite years of immersion in critical academic scholarship and lived experiences that should have inspired caution, we loved what we saw, and we were inspired to imagine this work expanding, and making a contribution to a more just future. Nobody from MAS is giving up on their vision, and neither are we. We do, however, see a need to step back from the lure of the local and consider some of the broader forces of neoliberalism that have contributed to the current crisis for MAS as well as possibilities for mobilizing resources beyond Tucson, Arizona to support a transformed future for public education.

Since the early 1980’s, Arizona has been used as a testing ground for neoliberal policies, practices, and rhetoric that, when successful, are often exported. From the rampant spread of charter schools and the statewide elimination of bilingual education, to the use of unmanned drones on the border that now fly over Afghanistan and Iraq, to the passage of SB 1070, the draconian anti-immigrant legislation that has subsequently been introduced in over 24 states, Arizona has served as a laboratory for ramping up coercive state capacities,

limiting popular participation in governance, redistributing wealth upward, and scapegoating (im)migrants, the Latino@ community, and poor people of color. This analysis considers Arizona's recent ban on ethnic studies curricula in the contexts of larger neoliberal trends, explores the stakes of the decision to dismantle TUSD's Mexican American Studies Program, and poses questions about possibilities for building national networks of likely allies with the capacity to defend and support rigorous, critical public education in the United States.

While Arizona is what John Stewart refers to as the "meth lab of democracy" (*Daily Show*, April 26, 2010) and ranks as one of the lowest performing states in Education, it also offers one the most successful high school Mexican American Studies program in the country (Sleeter, 2011). The Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) is home to the only full-fledged Ethnic Studies program for high school students (Sleeter, 2011), which includes, among other areas, Mexican-American Studies. This program was developed specifically to address the need for TUSD to implement changes to increase the achievement of Latino@ students in the district, in response to a desegregation law.

TUSD's Mexican-American Studies program has not only been successful in ensuring that Latino@ students stay in school, it has surpassed the percentage of students not enrolled in the program with higher standardized test scores, higher graduation rates and a higher rate of students attending college after high school (Scott, 2011). Graduates of the Mexican-American Studies program not only excel in these standard measures of success, they also surpass their peers with attributes that colleges and universities look for when considering admission of students. These include: exceptional communication skills, both written and oral; diversity of thought and openness to multiple perspectives; and the ability to apply theoretical concepts to the analysis of every day issues. A core element of TUSD's program is teaching students to apply academic skills to make positive change in their communities. TUSD's program follows the model of teaching labeled "Critically Compassionate Intellectualism" (Camarota & Romero, 2009) combining culturally relevant, social justice curriculum with critically conscious pedagogy and a focus on relationships – between teachers, students, and families. Alumni of the MAS program describe the impact of their education as life changing:

Everything I did in those classes, it changed me, it changed how I look at things and the teachers told me they would hold me to high expectations and no one ever told me that before.

Before MAS classes I didn't care about school. School was so boring I was unengaged and then the things they started to teach me were so interesting I never wanted to miss a class.

TUSD's demographics include 61% Latino@ students and while not all students in the MAS program are Latino@, these demographics and the focus on Latino@ history and literature, attract a majority of non-white students. Students engage deeply in the curriculum and its focus on Latino@ perspectives giving them the opportunity to critically investigate statistical research, literary works focused on the Southwest U.S., and histories often excluded from traditional textbooks and classes. Action research is taught as an effective way to learn about an issue and make suggestions or organize actions for direct change in one's community. Students choose projects for their action research that are situated in their own schools or neighborhoods, allowing them to recognize the often unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. One example involved students conducting in depth research of Arizona's anti-immigrant laws, producing films depicting their findings and organizing tours to educational institutions around the state to share their films and raise awareness of these issues.

The MAS program essentially encourages students to put grassroots democracy into action: by knowing their histories, learning to measure and analyze social inequality in their own communities, understanding the law, and analyzing political and social movements, students learn why they should and how they can participate in shaping the future. MAS students read widely from texts usually reserved for college courses – Freire, Giroux, Anzaldúa, Acuña etc. and use interdisciplinary frameworks to inform their actions and research – all resulting in a 90% graduation rate and 80% of those graduates moving on to college (Cambium Report, 2011). In comparison, Latino@ students not in the MAS program, drop out of high school at a rate of 41% with only 24% moving on to a higher education (Solarzano & Yosso, 2006). Hence, the combination of curriculum grounded in critically engaged practice and the educational outcomes of MAS link the project of multiculturalism with the project of

political transformation. This linkage of cultural and political projects, we argue, is precisely the project that HB2281 aims to destroy.

The political purpose of the law is explicit, yet cloaked in the popular understanding that individualism is inherently inclusive, and the related assumption that any form of thought that is not exclusively individualistic is inherently unjust. HB2281 (now ARS 15-111 & 15-112), passed by the Arizona state legislature in 2010, prohibits Arizona's public schools from offering courses that 'promote ethnic solidarity or resentment against a particular ethnic group, advocate the overthrow of the U.S. government, treat students as members of an ethnic group rather than as individuals, or are designed exclusively for a particular ethnic group.'

Neoliberal Racism

Widely framed in the media as the outcome of AZ state Attorney General Tom Horne's personal vendetta against TUSD's Mexican American Studies Program, passage of the law is more than an act of simple vengeance carried out by an ambitious and racially divisive elected official, (though it is certainly also that). The wording of the law itself is exemplary of what Henry Giroux (2004) calls "neoliberal racism," a strategy that rejects (and claims to be offended by) older forms of racism grounded in claims of white superiority. Horne, in fact, relentlessly quotes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in diatribes against the teaching of ethnic studies in public schools. Neoliberal racism instead favors an approach that claims to be "racially neutral" in its insistence on assessing failure and success exclusively in terms of "individual responsibility." Among other goals, neoliberal racism seeks to delegitimize assessments of systemic and institutional racial disparities on the grounds that they are "race-based," in short, insisting that any attempt to measure racism by recognizing the existence of socially differentiated groups of people is, in and of itself, both racist and morally reprehensible. Not only does this strategy moralize against the very recognition of systemic and institutional racism, ironically labeling such recognition "racist," neoliberal racism promotes entrenched racial hierarchies by demanding the use of the institutional capacities of an increasingly authoritarian state to surveil, criminalize, and crush anti-racist, reparational, and unequivocally democratic projects, such as the hugely successful TUSD MAS Program.

"Bad Feelings"

The racist and anti-intellectual public sentiments mobilized by the characterization of MAS in HB2281 go hand in hand. Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues (2009) that one of the problems in contemporary U.S. politics is the widespread tendency to think of racism as a problem of "bad feelings," while ignoring the deadly impacts of institutional and systemic racism (Bierra, 2009). The language of HB2281 combines this limited understanding of racism as a problematic set of "bad feelings" (especially "resentment" and "ethnic solidarity") with an argument that understands these "bad feelings" as the manipulative result of an education offering evidence-based understandings of systemic social inequality. This approach not only demands that racism be understood as a set of immoral feelings, it also insists that racism not be understood in terms of its measurable social impacts, such as uneven educational opportunities or racially disproportionate incarceration, poverty, and premature death rates.

Further, through a strategy that might be interpreted as an attempt to mobilize nostalgia for pre-Civil Rights movement school segregation and McCarthyism, the attack on Latin@ education and culture in Arizona is fueled, in part, by an anachronistic strategy of red-baiting. Despite the fact that no MAS teachers or administrators have ever described themselves as communist, Marxist, or socialist, the law's sponsors and public advocates have relentlessly used the words "communism," "Marxism," and "socialism" during media interviews and in public hearings to describe MAS teachers, the MAS curriculum, and the authors taught in MAS courses. Though BH2281's advocates repeatedly call for an educational approach that "includes all sides," it is notable that their implied demand for the curricular erasure of any intellectual work that references, debates or engages with worldwide traditions and widespread scholarly practices of socialist and Marxist thought cannot rationally claim to "include all sides." It seems possible that the relentless use of red-scare terminology in this setting links a tactic aimed predominantly at white people -- to link passionate emotions of moral outrage over

the “racism” of anti-racism (sometimes called “reverse racism”) -- with a strategy aimed at Arizona’s strong voting block of conservative retirees, to reanimate Cold War fears of foreign invasion and domestic labor militancy. Regardless of the level of political savvy that may or may not be driving this red-scare messaging, the “feeling” that a powerful anti-racist, working class social movement would pose significant challenges to entrenched race and class hierarchies is not baseless. Repeated references to “Marxist communists” in public appearances by HB2281’s boosters may sound comical when mocked on *The Daily Show*, but they also reveal that the larger vision animating the law is the suppression of future possibilities for both ethnic and class solidarity and movements for social justice. In fact, the attack on MAS started with celebrated union organizer Dolores Huerta making the public statement, while speaking in Tucson, that “Republicans hate Latino@s,” to which Arizona Republicans responded by dismantling the MAS program. (Apparently, their outrage in response Huerta’s claim was not over its veracity.)

The conditions that made this contradictory response achievable have to do, in part, with the capacity of the state to produce common sense and public feelings. As Gramsci (1971) argues, the modern state functions as an “educator,” both perpetuating (through the framing and circulation of state narratives) and enforcing (via law enforcement, public policy bureaucracy, and institutions) dominant forms of “common sense” that teach the public to understand themselves as subjects in ways that legitimize state power. In this sense, the framing, wording, implementation, and policy debates over HB2281 aim to “educate” the (imagined as white) public to understand itself as both anti-racist, and vulnerable to cultural displacement. The attack on MAS sends different messages to different audiences, seeking to mobilize different kinds of fear: to Latino@s, the message is, “we are willing and able to remove you and your culture from our state by any means necessary” and to the dominant demographic, the message conveyed is, “Latin@s have a Marxist plot to overthrow the government, reclaim the Southwest as Aztlan, and they are dangerously resentful toward white people.” This narrative has been laid out to ensure that any group encouraging the analysis of unequal distribution of power be marked as racist, dangerous, and Communist.

Black Lists and Book Burning

HB2281 cruelly poses the MAS program’s success as the rationale for its very demise. Teachers who have supported the remarkable educational success of MAS students have now been reassigned to non-MAS classes, to teach in areas outside of their expertise. The inspired director of MAS has been fired. In addition, many of the most effective books used by these teachers to engage students, have been banned from the classroom (literally boxed up and removed in front of weeping students) along with any discussions of racism and oppression, even if those discussions are instigated by students. Such drastic actions make it clear that this successful program has been dismantled due to its success in preparing students to be democratically engaged, activist citizens – all widely celebrated benefits of a privileged education, yet when made accessible to low-income, brown youth, laws are passed, hearings are held, the program is abolished and the opportunities eliminated.

Arizona politicians have fought hard to use the MAS program as evidence that anti-racist projects: should be equated with racism, that racism is a problem of “bad feelings,” and that rigorous, intellectual analysis of racism is un-American. The neoliberal ideal of a color-blind society is being actively fought for (and against) as the end goal for the U.S., for education, and especially for public education projects serving students of color.

The Fight Is Not Finished

As stated earlier, no one from MAS is giving up on their vision and neither are we. There are a number of obstacles to the triumph of HB2281 that offer possibilities for different outcomes. The law as well as the neoliberal visions that animate it stand in direct contradiction to longtime federal mandates to desegregate Arizona schools, to Arizona state education standards in Social Studies, to national and state calls to improve educational equity in contexts of diminishing state budgets, and to the scholarly and institutional accomplishments of ethnic studies and social justice education and activism across the nation. Currently, a growing legal team of

attorneys (from as far away as the Fred T. Korematsu Center for Law and Equity at Seattle University School of Law) representing MAS teachers and students is building a case, including a Federal Justice Department investigation, arguing that HB2281 targets Latin@ students and will result in a chilling effect on educational equity. In addition to this legal vulnerability, the curricular mandates of HB2281 are destined to be challenged by the very state government that is tasked with enforcing them. The Arizona State standards in Social Studies require students to study the Civil Rights movement(s) in depth as well as “apply the skills of historical analysis to current social, political, geographic, and economic issues facing the world,” a performance objective impossible to meet with this kind of censorship. Beyond these legal and policy contradictions that make HB2281 vulnerable to state intervention, the fight to save ethnic studies is taking a broader, grass-roots turn that exemplifies the MAS educational mission to link multicultural literacy and opportunity with transformative, democratic political empowerment.

Building Power

As we watch national solidarity building in response to the recent ban on Mexican American Studies in Tucson, those organizations speaking out give us hope that a network of allies can build power to counter the movement against critical pedagogy, critical theory and Ethnic Studies. National organizations have made official statements and staged demonstrations criticizing Arizona’s racist agenda, which is both welcome, and also is only the first step toward building sustainable, national opposition in the form of organized, effective projects and campaigns. This summer of 2012 marked Tucson Freedom Summer, a call to educators, activists, organizers and artists to converge on Tucson and organize resistance to the elimination of MAS. Such work is necessary not only to counter Arizona’s attack on rigorous, critical education and on education equity, but in preparation for the inevitable harassment to come from the neo-liberal, conservative groups pushing for more standardized, rote and ethnocentric education across the country.

Building national resources and networks to support anti-racist, social justice education that has critical pedagogy and critical theory at their core, must include support from teachers’ unions, social justice organizations, faculty unions, parent organizations, labor organizations and political groups all united for the cause of protecting education. Our teachers’ unions must move out of the business model to the organizing model and our future teachers must be trained to not only be critical educators but also activist organizers. In Arizona, the need for these coalitions to be put into place is immediate and essential as we watch Latino@ children be stripped of their education and the literal banning of Latin@ literature taking place in our public schools. From anti-immigrant legislation and the elimination of MAS, to the raiding of public education budgets to build more prisons, Arizona’s anti Latin@ swell has swept so far over to the extreme that small groups of teachers, parents and faculty can no longer sustain this fight alone. The stakes are high and risk-filled when building power to counter the neo-liberal agenda and yet we can not stand by and allow our educational system, and most importantly our children, be the pawns of a political fight to erase the histories of oppressed groups and to eliminate programs that clearly offer success and empowerment to Latin@ students. A national call for solidarity to address these issues is an immediate necessity as well as a direct obligation of those of us in social justice fields.

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