



PART I
Advancing the Conversation

Huitzilopochtli: The Will and Resiliency of Tucson Youth to Keep Mexican American Studies Alive

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In response to the banning of Mexican American Studies in Tucson, students in the newly formed Chican@¹ Literature, Art, and Social Studies program displayed their resiliency in the face of the oppressive actions of the Tucson Unified School District and the state of Arizona. This article serves as a platform for the voices of these dedicated youth who continued their educational and activist journey on Sundays throughout the 2012–2013 academic school year. The students share their impressions of why the Chican@ Literature, Art, and Social Studies program was important to them and how the curriculum, pedagogy, and relationships with classmates and their teacher shaped their continued struggle to revive Mexican American Studies for future generations and the transformation of the world.

Introduction

In the wake of the regressive politics in Arizona and the criminalization of Mexican American Studies (MAS) in Tucson, I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to continue my work with educators throughout the country. During these visits with students and maestr@s, I am often asked about developments in our struggle to revive MAS in Tucson. Unfortunately, there has been much misinformation provided by the media and Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) that gives the impression that our classes, and our team of educators who fought to protect our program, are back in business. The truth is that this is not the case; although a federal desegregation order has mandated a return of culturally relevant curriculum, the courses, pedagogy, and curriculum that my colleagues and I created are still banned.

Yet, as the new school year started in August of 2012, I was inspired by the youth of Tucson to keep MAS alive by creating the Chican@ Literature, Art, and Social Studies (CLASS) program. We knew we could not wait as the lawyers, superintendent, local and state politicians haggled over the details of creating a new program on the grave of the most effective educational program for Chican@ students in the history of our district (Cabrera, Milem, & Marx, 2012; Cambium Learning, 2011; Gómez & Jiménez-Silva, 2012; Sleeter, 2011). It was our goal to keep the stories, history, art, and pedagogy of MAS moving forward, knowing how dangerous it would be for our town if MAS disappeared for an entire year.

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¹Traditionally the term “Chicano” would be used for individuals of Mexican descent in the United States, and “Latino” is a pan-ethnic term that is inclusive of the people of South American and Central American descent. Due to the gendered nature of languages, the use of Chican@ and Latin@ have become more commonly used in Educational, Feminist, and Ethnic Studies scholarship as a representation of both Chicanas/Chicanos and Latinas/Latinos. It is a way to embrace equality and respect toward everyone.

Thus, a group of 10 students and I met every Sunday during the 2012–2013 academic school year as a progressive response to the tragic circumstances of the Arizona state takeover, local destruction, and banning of MAS. It is an honor for me to share their voices with you since I learned so much about courage, sacrifice, and love from these young people. They were much more my maestr@s than I was theirs.

The Foundation for Action

Before students can be empowered to find their own voices as critical democrats and activists, there must be a foundation of trust established in the classroom. Authentic and empathetic relationships between everyone involved in the classroom must be created, cultivated, and sustained.

In CLASS/MAS, this was achieved through our use of indigenous epistemologies that helped rehumanize the educational experience for our students; they needed to have a safe space to reflect and analyze their world, while also reestablishing their own humanity and belief in education. The Maya concept of “In Lak Ech,” which translates to “you are my other self,” was our guiding principle for why we should interrogate our world. After all, if we had the ability to identify injustices and inequalities that were preventing our fellow brothers and sisters from following their dreams, then we must do our part to diligently work toward eradicating such realities through societal transformation.

These concepts are grounded in the belief that equality, trust, and love are essential in classrooms in order for education to be used as a means toward liberation and a disruption to the systemic hierarchy and power relationships between students and teachers.

In Lak Ech is also related to the ideas of *confianza* (trust) and authentic caring, two powerful principles that were created to address an academic approach that led to deeper engagement and success for Chican@/Latin@ students (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). These concepts are grounded in the belief that equality, trust, and love are essential in classrooms in order for education to be used as a means toward

liberation and a disruption to the systemic hierarchy and power relationships between students and teachers.

Creating academic spaces that are simultaneously challenging, loving, and healing can assist students in finding value in their educational journeys and developing the resiliency needed to persevere. To this point, Gloria, one of the students in CLASS, sheds some light on our teacher–student relationship and how it impacted her scholarly path, stating:

That constant challenge. That constant joking around and laughing, and like, being not only a teacher, but a friend and a mentor. Kind of like being really critical but in a friendly way . . . I think more than anything, it’s just being able to look (at) somebody, more than a teacher and more than just a person telling you to do something. You’re a friend, you’re a mentor, you’re somebody I can trust, you’re somebody I can talk to. I think that’s what’s the most positive, like, the most positive anything I’ve had about school.

For Gloria, my own humanity, which ranged from the playful and humorous to academic earnestness, was essential for her to examine and reflect upon her own worldviews and actions. The sincere nature of our relationship not only allowed me to serve as Gloria’s guide, but to also inspire her to achieve her own potential as a scholar–activist. At times, teachers who are fervent believers in social justice education skip this initial step in a hurry to artificially stimulate activism rather than embracing the longer road.

Critical pedagogy and “In Lak Ech” emphasize the human potential and power of students as equal partners in learning with the potential of transforming the world. If one truly walks shoulder to shoulder with their youth, then education avoids inculcation, indoctrination, and becomes counter hegemonic. As another CLASS scholar, Concepcion articulated:

I feel like teachers don’t really focus on the familial aspect to make everybody in the classroom feel confident to say what they’re thinking . . . Whereas, it’s different from being in a familial (class) where you feel comfortable in that space and you feel that you’re not going to be judged or criticized, then it’s easier to share your opinion even if it’s not the most popular opinion because you know these people aren’t going to criticize you and you know it’s a safe environment. So, even if they don’t accept it, not that they won’t accept it, even if they don’t agree, they will accept it.

The pedagogy of In Lak Ech can be seen in Concepcion’s sentiments, since diverging student opinions are not marginalized or discounted for being unpopular. There is space to disagree in a civil and respectful way—a manner that emphasizes a common humanity regardless

of ideological differences. Through such a lens, *confianza* can be established in order to proceed in the challenging work of societal transformation.

The formation of CLASS itself was an extension of this same type of pedagogical lens, as we refused to be victimized by the anti-democratic machinations of Arizona politicians. Instead of retreating to a reactionary mindset, I was motivated to continue to be positive, progressive, and creative by offering CLASS on Sundays. In a moment that typifies how much I learned from my students, Esperanza discussed how she viewed our Sunday meetings as activist work, stating:

Because this class was prohibited. Like they told us that you can't learn about this stuff. You know, it's like illegal material, it's bad for you and we still went out of our way to learn it, learn about it, engage in it. That's really politically (active). Like you're going against what the government is telling you, so that is protesting. . . . I've never seen it (activism) in a negative way . . . Non-violent protesting is the best, and that's why I think CLASS was really great because we could have done violent stuff, we could have protested, we could have been angrier, but we didn't. We did it in a peaceful way and we still got a lot of attention for it and it was fun.

It was this spirit that drove the handful of us to CLASS on Sundays, although nearly all of us were spending Monday–Friday in public school, college, or university classes. Like Esperanza, Santiago also proved to be much more aware of his activism by participating in CLASS, stating:

I guess someone that does something else. Something creative. Always moving a step ahead in a creative way. I mean, I guess an example would be, there were nine, ten kids enrolled in CLASS (who) were all being conscious and engaged . . . because we could have been doing something else at the time. So, it would make sense to say that that was being a conscious human being.

I had seen our time together in CLASS as life saving for me personally, since I was banned from all of my former curriculum, pedagogy, and intellectual property after the state takeover of our classroom spaces. This was a directive from our school district upon the termination of our program along with the mandate that we were no longer to teach from a “Mexican American Studies perspective.” Of course, this was never defined for us, yet we knew that these edicts were truly telling us to abandon everything we had created for our MAS students. It was like teaching with your mind in prison.

Without CLASS I may have succumbed to the pain, anger, and despair that has engulfed so many of our former students, community members, and colleagues. However, our time learning outside of the banned spaces fueled

my dedication and advocacy toward work grounded in education for liberation and social justice. Activism through scholarly work continued to be emancipatory, life affirming, and healing.

In both MAS and CLASS, our pedagogy was tied to the Nahui Ollin (four movements), pre-Columbian indigenous knowledge from Mexico that was taught to us by elders in our community. It was the use of these principles that allowed us the opportunity to reaffirm the humanity of our students through the concepts of Tezcatlipoca (self-reflection), Quetzalcoatl (precious and beautiful knowledge), Huitzilopochtli (the will to act), and Xipe Totec (transformation). In this particular instance, students understood that the banning of MAS was an affront to their humanity and educational growth—their pursuit of Quetzalcoatl or precious and beautiful knowledge. Thus, they actively sought out and participated in a CLASS and that was just the start of how they embraced Huitzilopochtli in their lives.

CLASS Beyond the Classroom

Ironically, less than six months after the TUSD Governing Board abolished MAS, a 30-year desegregation order was reinstated by the federal courts. This put the district in an odd situation of having to recreate culturally relevant classes for Mexican American students after decimating a highly successful program that had been doing just that. To make matters worse, TUSD board members and the superintendent, John Pedicone, emphasized in numerous public statements that the new classes would not have any relationship to MAS curriculum, pedagogy, or the teachers that had originally created and taught the courses.

CLASS scholars also took on the responsibility to unite MAS advocates and leaders within our community in an effort to impact the desegregation public forums during the fall of 2012. CLASS students were not deterred by the dismissive rhetoric of the district, and brought together a wounded community in order to reestablish solidarity before the public forums took place. Although the plan was revealed only a few days before the first public meeting, CLASS students were able to organize and moderate a community meeting of advocates, activists, teachers, and students and produce a unified plan for the forums. This included CLASS students synthesizing the ideas brought forth and producing a document titled the “Declaration of Intellectual Warriors.”

Although the students were pleased that the community meeting had been well attended, they also expressed a disappointment in the lack of former MAS students and younger youth. CLASS students also reiterated how difficult it was to reach younger students in middle school and elementary school to provide information about the

meeting. This was related to the fact that we no longer had spaces in public schools to organize and inform our community as we once had through MAS classes. In addition, the Chican@ community had been destabilized and an intense chill had taken root in our neighborhoods and *familias*. Teachers had been fired. Students had lost their classes. Fear was no longer theoretical—it was actualized and omnipresent.

Although the local context had changed, the gathering organized by CLASS served as a rallying point for the community. At the desegregation hearings, speaker after speaker cited their support for the “Declaration of Intellectual Warriors.” Concepcion added the following:

And then at the Tucson High board meeting (desegregation forums) where people kept coming up to us and asking us for copies (of “Declaration of Intellectual Warriors”) that was a really cool feeling because now other people want to know and it was just spreading the word so that was really cool Because at first when the first person went up there and they’re like I support the Intellectual Warriors document that was just a little tickle in my stomach. Like, ahhh, I co-wrote that.

As the process unfolded and a final draft of the Unitary Status Plan (USP) was submitted to the federal court and TUSD for approval, there were noticeable changes that reflected the desires of the community coalition that the students had cultivated. The special master assigned to the desegregation plan, Dr. Willis Hawley, sent word to the CLASS students that he was impressed by their passion and dedication to the issue—that their voices mattered to him. This was quite a paradigm shift from the status quo in Tucson toward devaluing student voices by education leaders, politicians, and authorities. Thus, it left quite an impression on the students of CLASS as Rita describes:

My experience at school, my voice really hasn’t been heard, and like it doesn’t matter. I guess (the USP) showed that we were doing something different, that they were finally listening to us. That our ideas were important and that they were needed. I mean, it’s awesome. School is supposed to be for the kids, so it felt cool that finally they were listening or caring what we thought and our opinion was an important part of what they were going to do.

However, while CLASS students were pleased with the changes made due to their activism and organizing, most of the students were disappointed in how TUSD has implemented the USP in the months that followed. Delays and public comments disparaging the former MAS classes and teachers eroded the faith of the young people toward TUSD, which was already tenuous after years of having their voices and desires in support of Mexican American Studies ignored. Esperanza summarized the feelings

of many members of our community that fervently supported the preservation of MAS, stating:

I think it’s detachment. I think it’s kind of like, okay, you want to do this new class, well I’m not a part of it. Like you do it your way, I’m out of there. I mean it’s good that we told them what we wanted because we were expressing ourselves and we gave them an option to either go with us or disregard our opinions entirely. It’s good we give them the option, too, because they might do some stuff that we wanted, but I feel like they won’t really. But I think it’s still good we voiced our opinions. So, I mean, now it’s up to them. Like we did all we could to influence the new plan. Now it’s up to them whether they listen to us or not.

Although it is heartbreaking to hear young students like Esperanza voice such pessimism toward TUSD, I admire her keen analysis of how the political machinations in Tucson manifest themselves. Esperanza does not naively expect immediate societal transformation simply because her classmates and she entered the political fray with positive, impactful, and creative community organizing. There is a maturity and deeper understanding of how our system currently works in Tucson that cannot simply be taught in Advanced Placement Government classes. It is a wisdom only gathered through a committed participation in the work of changing the world.

She is confident that the process that the youth engaged in was purposeful, powerful, and essential. She knows that CLASS activism was the right thing ethically and democratically, and that it would have been far more damaging to remain silent—this may have reinforced the fictive narrative that Chican@ students do not have the will, passion, and ability to craft the expectations for their own educational experiences. They have taken that tired piece off the chessboard and put the responsibility squarely in the hands of those *politicos* in power to either embrace or disregard the will of the people.

Through all the cynicism, defeatism, anguish, and rage, CLASS became an oasis of positivity, action, and personal inspiration for me to keep on pushing.

The Future

Since the unprecedented tactics of the Arizona Department of Education and TUSD in banning indigenous and Mexican American content from our schools, our

community has suffered. Colleagues of mine have been fired or marginalized. Some former students and youth activists, who fiercely stood up for their beliefs and exercised their democratic rights and political will, have since left the movement or Tucson. There is much pain here at home, and each day I wake up wondering if friendships and relationships that have been tested and ruptured will ever heal.

Yet, I also know that the work continues through the Huitzilopochtli of the students in CLASS. Through all the cynicism, defeatism, anguish, and rage, CLASS became an oasis of positivity, action, and personal inspiration for me to keep on pushing. It was the resiliency and optimism of CLASS students that inspired the creation of the Xican@ Institute for Teaching and Organizing (XITO) in collaboration with Prescott College in northern Arizona to make CLASS a college accredited program, and one we intend to keep free to youth in Tucson who hunger for precious and beautiful knowledge and are eager to change the world.

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