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ABSTRACT

Stereotypes of the Mexican, the Chicano, and the American Indian are noted to be recurrent in many educational publications and considered to be a major obstacle in overcoming commonly held biases and prejudices which work against the educational and social advancement of minority groups. This paper discusses means to improve the educational curriculum and help eliminate negative stereotyping of ethnic minorities. (RL)

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By: F. LeRoy Walser

Across the length of the United States still stretches the symbol of the Mexican peon, asleep against the wall of an adobe hut or at the foot of a saguaro cactus. He is known as a lazy fellow, given to putting things off until mañana. He and his burro adorn the menus and neon signs of restaurants and motels all across the country. At some point in his life, our image tells us, the Mexican peon woke up, took a swig of tequila, put on his sombrero and his sandals and emigrated to the United States by swimming across the Rio Grande, of course. Once here, a sinister element was added to his picturesque ways. Now he is proud and hot-blooded, easily offended, insanely jealous, and a heavy drinker. He is pictured on the one hand as the peon holding the reins for the rich rancher in the movies, or on the other hand, as the glamorous hidalgo in glittering charro suit, a participant in the Rose Bowl parade. Between these fanciful extremes is the

real American of Mexican ancestry -- an alien, still unknown in his own land with his history, his language, and his culture either ignored or hopelessly romanticized.[1]

By reason of their early colonization of the Southwest, the Spanish were far removed from the English and Colonial American influences that compelled assimilation in the eastern part of the country. Their descendants either failed -- or refused, depending on your point of view -- to be assimilated. Indeed, it was not until after World War II that Anglo-Americans outnumbered Indians and Spanish-speaking Americans in most of the Southwest. When we talk of the "Chicano" and of Spanish-speaking Americans, all too often it is not really clear that we are talking about American citizens. They are here in their own country and their native language which they have spoken for generations is Spanish.

It seems a shame that many of the nation's Spanish teachers, some of them far removed from the Southwest and

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[1]Adapted from a speech given by Armando Rodriguez, Director, Office for Spanish Affairs, U. S. Office of Education, on March 13, 1970, for the Salt Lake County Board, Salt Lake City, Utah.

other equally large concentrated Spanish-speaking populations, perpetuate the stereotype just described -- some of them in the best spirit of presenting "realia" and creating cultural "atmosphere" for their classes. Travel posters of charros, cockfights, and bull fights adorn their classrooms, and their students are somehow given the idea that Spanish is strictly a "foreign" language. It is part of the exciting culture of far-away Spain and Latin-America, but hardly of California, or New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, Illinois, Florida, and New York. Furthermore, they teach that Spanish will be of great benefit to their students when traveling. But somehow the immense economic, emotional, and communicative reality of Spanish <u>today</u> for ten to twelve million American citizens is seldom considered.

Bilingual and ethnic studies programs are now being utilized as increasingly important tools for easing tensions among all the people of this country. One of the suggested steps for such programs includes "the introduction of Black, Brown and other ethnic studies into existing courses and through additional offerings to increase understanding, rather

than fear, of cultural differences."[1] The idea is not only to reinforce the ethnic heritage of the Chicanos and other Spanish-speaking Americans, but also to educate the dominant majority on the realities of history; that through economic development, land expansion and political accommodation, the United States inherited a diverse citizenry of Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican and other Latin ancestry whose potentials and contributions have not yet been recognized.

One defense used by the Spanish teacher just described is that he is contributing to good international relations as he is teaching the Spanish language and culture of other countries. However, perhaps the most important reason for bilingual, bicultural programs is not international, but domestic -- for the improvement of our relations with each other here at home. We must teach that diversity is not to be feared or suspected, but enjoyed and valued. Ethnic studies, together with our great numbers of Spanish teachers scattered across the country, are certainly the most obvious

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[1]From a speech given by James E. Allen, Commissioner of Education, September 2, 1969.

vehicles for such education. In contributing to the achievement of this goal, the Spanish teacher must take the utmost care that he is educating rather than de-educating the native Spanish speaking student who enters his classroom.

Statistics tell us that far too many Chicano students are sinking as their language and culture are undermined. And for the cause of this abrasion, we can look just beyond the Spanish teacher to the program which trained him. The courses that prepare our future Spanish teachers concentrate on the basic mechanics of the language and adorn them with an "icing" of literary studies which concentrate on the poems of 17th Century Spain, the Quixote, and the plays of Lope de Vega. These literary studies are extremely rewarding in terms of cultural enrichment in its esoteric definition, but they do not produce teachers who appreciate the human implications of living culture and the communicative realities of <u>today</u>. They do not produce teachers who have an appreciation of the variety and differences of the Spanish-speaking groups of the world, not to mention the diversity here within the United States. And the teachers they do produce just may be guilty of a syndrome called "leap frog vision." That is, they

concentrate on the Spanish (language or literature) of some foreign country, or a non-cultural conglomerate of words that do not and cannot relate to a cultural home, ignoring the Spanish that has been spoken in the United States since long before Plymouth Rock. At this point, ethnic studies again enters the program. It calls for the use of language in a vital living progressing society dealing with the political, social, and economic well-being of each student.

A special problem exists for the Chicano student who lives where he may be the only native Spanish speaker in his school, or maybe one of five or six. What to do with these students raises a major problem to his school system. All too common a solution is to place "Carlos" in Spanish I or Spanish II because "he does not know the grammar." And all too often, Carlos agrees with this solution because he anticipates an easy grade. His parents shake their heads in disbelief that such a thing should be, but their cultural inclination is not to interfere with the schools, so they usually do not complain. Imagine everyone's horror when Carlos brings home a "C". Obviously, this tells the story of a student bored to death with the elementary studies, refusing to do his homework since it is simply beneath him.

This same student may not do very well in more advanced Spanish classes either, since a lack of knowledge of the rules of grammar will penalize him on written examinations. However, how sad to think that a native Spanish speaker cannot earn an A in a beginning Spanish language class. A good solution to this problem just does not seem to be found yet, but I certainly suggest a redirection of research effort to find it.

These many and varied problems with no apparent solution, and frankly, the little effort directed to finding solutions to date, have created a problem for language departments. They have found themselves saddled with the image of a sterile, isolated, non-relevant area of academia where there exists limited concern for the Chicano individual, for his needs as they relate to his family and social realities, for his political awareness and most importantly for his economic survival and the fulfillment of his potential to himself and to our society. And let us face it. If the product of our teaching process is not wanted, the producer will go out of business. The declining enrollment of our Spanish classes nationwide, and the employment

rate of Spanish teachers illustrates these problems most dramatically.

Now -- what are the areas where intensified research redirected can improve ethnic studies for the Chicano and Anglo in terms of Spanish language teaching. First and foremost, more concern for the individual in our classroom, including the establishment of sets of criteria against which to diagnose and measure linguistic skills. The Spanish teaching profession should be able to assess a student's language competency and help him move on to accomplish specific objectives and goals as rapidly and efficiently as possible.

Secondly, the development of curriculum which will allow the student to utilize his language, not as an end but as a means to an end. For example, what are the alternatives available to the Spanish student, both Anglo and Chicano, to grow into a variety of economically rewarding professions and skills? How can Spanish become a useful tool in career education -- after all, this is the number one education priority of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. As a part of this curriculum

effort, Spanish must be studied as a communicative skill that enables an individual and his total family to achieve self actualization and total interdependence.

Lastly, the image of academic insensitivity and professional sterility must be dispelled. And this can surely be achieved by the actualization of these research goals, and the putting into effect of the resulting programs.