
Please Do Bother Them

In Texas, as in many states, the Hispanic population is fast becoming a majority. Whether Hispanic students become part of the mainstream at school, however, often depends entirely upon their teachers.

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Four out of ten Hispanic students drop out of high school. At South Houston High School where more than one third of our 2,300 students are Hispanic, the drop-out rate for Hispanic students is almost 47 percent. This means that of the 800 Hispanic students in our school, 375 of them probably will not graduate.

So, you say, how does this affect me, an Anglo teacher? Quite simply, higher taxes, increased crime, overcrowded prisons, and increased social services. Closer to home, district scores suffer, making it appear that teachers aren't doing their job. The public image of teachers continues to diminish.

As a teacher, I, too, have these concerns, but with an added twist—I'm an Hispanic teacher. My concerns are threefold: concern for the future of my country, concern for the future of the Hispanic culture, concern for students who are missing their opportunity to be educated.

Often, the tendency among Hispanic students is to sit passively or shyly by in their classrooms. They don't ask questions. They don't challenge or even participate until they feel comfortable or until their shyness wears off. Whether they become part

of the mainstream at school often depends entirely upon their teacher. And the attitude of many teachers is, "Well, they're not disturbing my class, so I won't bother them!"

I am now pleading, "Please do bother them!" Of course, I am not speaking in the negative sense, but, rather, please do bother with them. These students desperately need our help and we can no longer neglect their silent roar.

"What can I do?" you ask. The answer is not so complex. Jaime Escalante, the high school teacher who achieved great success teaching calculus to his "average" students, showed that Hispanic students possess

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a wealth of intelligence that only waits to be tapped. Escalante realized that what he was taught in his education methods classes wasn't sufficient for today's diversified classrooms. It is obvious that we no longer have the children from June Cleaver's household in our classrooms, and in states such as Texas and California, just to mention a few, this has not been the case for many decades. Yet many teachers have not adjusted their teaching accordingly. We, as educators, need to open our eyes and see the boy sitting in our classroom with the long black hair, the tattoo, the slouching walk, for he, too, is part of our future, positive or negative.

Believe in them. What Jaime Escalante accomplished was not so miraculous that the rest of us could not do it. He simply did what I often tell my English classes that writers must do: know their audience. Beyond that, we must believe in these children. We must believe, first, that these children do have the intelligence worthy of our extra efforts and, second, that we have the ability to make a difference.

Challenge them academically. Now, I realize full well that many Hispanic students are functioning quite well in our classrooms. In fact, many are excelling. Again, however, the counselors and teachers who they look to for guidance in furthering their education very often cheat them out of the best possible choices—a subtle form of discrimination. Take the case of a young girl who was involved in school activities, an officer in the National Honor Society. Because her parents lacked college experience, as many of

these families do, the family was looking into a business school for their bright young daughter. This family, having no idea of what a college education costs, was willing to spend \$7,000 to send their daughter to a business school for eight months! Had the student discussed this with her counselor? Yes indeed, and received her full blessings. And the roar grows louder.

Respect their names. This suggestion is very simple, so simple that we have almost completely forgotten the basic human right, respect.

I have seen teachers not want to bother with the Spanish names. Martinez becomes Martínez, even when corrected. For many of these students, their name is all they have that is truly theirs, and for too long this personal property has been mutilated.

A coach I know came in from practice, laughing about his team roster. "Half of them don't speak English," he said. That's funny, I thought, they speak English to me in my class.

Teachers must not criticize those individuals who, when they have been in this country only a few years, continue to struggle with our language.

Encourage them to reach out. Recently, I read a poem by Naomi Nye to my English class. It begins:

A boy told me
if he rollerskated fast enough,
his loneliness couldn't catch up to him.¹

At first the kids snickered. Then we talked about the things we do to escape loneliness. I told them, "There are some lonely people in this school and very often you don't even stop and say 'Hello.'" Teenagers, for all their striving to be different, want all their friends to look just alike. Many speak to the same five people all week. I advise my students to speak to at least five new people each week.

I've been in this school six years and I see the number of lonely children increasing.

End our exclusiveness. We must do what we can to stop ourselves from indulging in "we-they" thinking. A kind of aloofness is practiced by all kinds of groups—fourth-generation Hispanics who do not speak to newcomers, South Americans who do not want to be mistaken for Central Americans, and the list goes on. We must get past our differences and end our isolation from one another.

Unfortunately, the system of tracking students feeds this "we-they" thinking. Too often, Hispanic students end up in Basics classes, unknown and knowing no one in Honors classes.

Appreciate family ties. Many Hispanic students don't become totally involved in school activities because they are working to help their families. Many go to after-school jobs at fast food restaurants, stores, or car washes. Others help with the cooking, cleaning, and grocery buying. Surely no adult can judge that this is wrong. Yet many teachers are prejudiced

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against students who aren't involved in extracurricular activities. If they understood students' family situations, they would know why.

A senior in one of my classes is trying to succeed in three areas. She's working hard in her classes. She's an officer for the drill team, and she works from 5 to 10 p.m. most evenings. Why is she working? To buy her own clothes, thus reducing a burden for her parents. Clothes aren't that important, you say. Ask any teenager if this is so.

Boost their self-image. In a world where blonde hair and blue eyes are most desirable, the issues of self-esteem and self-confidence must be addressed. Hispanic students face a deluge of advertisements in which very few of the participants look like them. It is crucial that we teachers do our part to boost our Hispanic students' self-confidence. With our praise and understanding, students will gravitate to us and learn to build a much needed trust in the classroom.

In Texas, as in many states, the Hispanic population is fast becoming a majority; consequently, these children represent an integral part of our future. We must now adopt a new paradigm of diversity and sensitivity in our classrooms if we are to prepare these children for the 21st century. Choosing to neglect their needs can sentence many to a life of poverty and underachievement and remains an insidious form of racism. In answering the pleas of these Hispanic students, we also help ourselves to a more secure future for our country. □

¹N. S. Nye, (1990), "The Rider," in *The Place My Words Are Looking For*, ed. P. B. Janeczko, (New York: Macmillan).

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