



On Hispanic Education:

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MLK and Hispanics

The birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was made into a federal holiday in 1986 and is observed on the third Monday in January. This is a prime opportunity for Hispanics from preschool to postgraduate studies to examine what MLK stood for and how this applies to the struggles of Hispanics in this nation. The philosophical and social ideals of MLK apply as much to Hispanics as they do to blacks, Native Americans, and other oppressed minorities in the U.S. No month of January should go by, therefore, in which we don't take time to teach our Hispanic students about the words and actions of Dr. King and the ideals for which he lived and died. When Hispanic students examine the ideals and concepts involved with Dr. King's struggles, they will find a very good set of principles which they will want to apply to their lives. Five of the concepts around which MLK can be remembered and to which Hispanics can relate are a) equality, b) justice, c) freedom, d) peace at home and abroad, and, e) love of humanity. Let's examine these concepts.

MLK struggled for equal rights for everyone and our Hispanic children should be taught early on that Hispanics comprise another group that has been denied full equality in American society. Additionally, our Hispanic students should be taught that equality as an ideal in America has more to do with equalness of opportunity. Our Hispanic children should be made sensitive as to whether Hispanics as a group, for example, have obtained equality of opportunity (in comparison to the white middle class) in education, housing, employment, and economic progress. Equality exists only if there is an equal opportunity by Hispanics and other minorities to have equal access to and equal benefits from our institutions and resources. MLK wanted our children to live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin or their national ancestry, but by the content of their character. This kind of equality of treatment is part of what we seek when we speak of equality in America.

Another very important concept that Hispanic students should learn in our schools is the concept of freedom. Basic to this concept is the freedom to have life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Added to this is the freedom to exercise our Constitutional rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, etc. MLK, for example, fought for the fundamental right to vote, the right to sit at a lunch counter without discrimination, and the right to protest peaceably.

Freedom in America, however, also extends to the conditions in which minorities find themselves, disproportionate to our numbers in the overall population. Not only must Hispanics have **freedom of** something, they must also have **freedom from** those things that are negative in their lives. MLK had the audacity to believe that people everywhere could have three meals a day, a roof over their heads, and an education; yet, Hispanics and other minorities still have no freedom from poverty, hunger, illness, ignorance, and crime. Finally, MLK stressed that the freedom of minorities was inextricably tied to the freedom of all peoples, and that no one could be

free until all of us were free. This latter value must be firmly internalized by Hispanic students in our schools and in our homes.

The concept of justice also is important in the philosophical and social ideals of Martin Luther King, Jr. He wrote that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." MLK saw himself as an extremist for justice and a drum major for justice. Justice in the courts, justice in the marketplace, justice in schools, and justice for all were ideas he frequently advocated. Our Hispanic students should constantly be reminded that justice is still not a reality for the majority of ethnic, racial, and language minorities in America. Justice under the law, for example, has not been fully realized for Hispanics when we have a greater number of arrests, harsher sentences, and a larger number of incarcerations disproportionate to our numbers in the general population. Justice in our schools should be particularly examined by Hispanic parents and students to see if Hispanic students are being too frequently or too harshly disciplined disproportionate to their numbers in a school building or in a school district.

Another cornerstone of the philosophical ideals of Martin Luther King was the concept of peace at home and abroad. MLK believed that humanity would be triumphant over war and bloodshed, and that nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land." Our school curriculum for Hispanics should demonstrate that advocacy for worldwide peace begins with advocacy for nonviolence in our nation, and that the concept of peace extends to preventing verbal and physical violence to others in our homes, our schools, and in our personal lives. Child abuse, spouse abuse, and elderly abuse have to be prevented along with the dangers of thermonuclear destruction. In addition, Dr. King advocated nonviolent direct action to create tension in a community which had constantly refused to negotiate or to confront an issue. King distinguished, however, between violent tension, which he opposed, and nonviolent tension, which he saw as constructive and necessary for growth. Our Hispanic students should fully understand and know how to use the strategy of nonviolent protest to defend the rights of Hispanics and other oppressed minorities.

Finally, Dr. King had such a love for humanity that he wanted chiefly to be remembered for trying to give his life to serving others. He said that he would like to have others say "that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody." He also stated, "I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity." MLK did not want to be remembered for his education, winning the Nobel Peace Prize, nor for the countless honors and awards he received. Instead, he wanted to be remembered for standing up against unjust wars, for feeding the hungry, for clothing the naked, visiting those who were in prison, comforting the ill, and for loving humanity in general. As we strive to educate our Hispanic children more effectively in our schools, we will want to encourage them to emulate Dr. King's love of humanity and to dedicate their lives, as he did, to achieving equality, justice, freedom, and peace in our nation and in our world.