



On Hispanic Education:

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The Social Studies and Hispanics: Part III

In the first two parts to this three-part article, I wrote about four of the five areas of the social studies in which I felt appropriate instruction for Hispanics was essential. For those of you who did not read Part I and II of this series, feel free to contact me and I will provide you with copies. The fifth and last area I will cover within this article is the area of the social status of Hispanics.

It is crucial in my opinion that Hispanic students from kindergarten through college be kept aware of their status as a group in our society. We must never lose sight of characteristics, criteria, or factors that distinguish us as a group from others. Because we are a minority and unlike others ethnically, culturally, and linguistically in this country, we have to be ever vigilant of our social status lest we are oppressed ethnically, culturally, or linguistically. Additionally, the development of a collective consciousness in our Hispanic young people is key to enabling us to identify and possibly solve our problems as a group in the United States. We also benefit the country as a whole because we act as a barometer to the ill or good that this society does to minorities who are culturally different.

The social studies curriculum for Hispanic students would do well to examine selected social and economic characteristics of all persons of Hispanic origin in the U.S. Such information is already available through the U.S. census reports. Selected social characteristics include such things as age, marital status, education, type of family and size of family. Selected economic characteristics of Hispanics include our labor force status, occupation, family income, and our below-poverty-level status. These group-wide characteristics need to be scrutinized by our Hispanic students to more closely understand what is happening to us as a minority group in the U.S.

There are many social characteristics that could be introduced early in the social studies curriculum for Hispanic students. For example, the most obvious characteristic in the minority status of Hispanics in the U.S. As of March 1985, Hispanics comprised 16.9 million people or 7.2 percent of the total U.S. population. Currently, we are the second largest minority, so even within minorities we are a minority. It is important for our Hispanic students to know and keep in mind our minority status because this impacts on our philosophical outlook and strategic maneuvering when we want something from those in the majority. Philosophically we need to know what our minority rights are in spite of majority rule in our democracy; strategically we need to have the moral advantage over those who may be numerically superior to us and we need to be very well organized so that we can do more with less numbers as opposed to doing less with greater numbers. Sometimes more can be achieved with acupuncture than with a big blunt instrument.

As we look at ourselves as a group, we should also be aware of how we break up as ethnic groups within the umbrella term of "Hispanic." Knowing how the whole of

Hispanics in the U.S. is made up will enable us to appreciate the multiethnic character of our minority group and, therefore, the diverse nature of our problems, and possibly, the solutions to those problems. Looking at the total count of Hispanics in the U.S., for example, 60.6 percent of them are of Mexican descent, 15.1 percent of Puerto Rican descent, 10.2 percent of Central or South American descent, 8.0 percent of "other Spanish" descent, and 6.1 of Cuban descent. If we look at the percentages of all Hispanic families in the U.S. living below the poverty level, however, there are disproportions to the above percentages. For example, 42 percent of all Hispanic families below the poverty level are of Puerto Rican descent, 24 percent of Mexican descent, and 13 percent of Cuban descent. By looking into the causes of these disparities we stand to learn why we differ in poverty levels among ourselves as Hispanics and why the total Hispanic population has double the poverty level rate (25 percent) than the entire U.S. population (12 percent).

The key social characteristic of Hispanics that is of concern to me is the educational status of Hispanics. The Hispanic population is both the youngest and fastest growing minority group in the U.S. The low median age of Hispanics in 1985, for example, was 25 years as compared to the national median age of 31.4. In addition, higher Hispanic birth rates than those for the population as a whole ensure that Hispanics will continue to grow as a proportion of the U.S. population. In the five year time period between 1980 and 1985 alone, the U.S. Hispanic population jumped 16 percent! By the year 2000, the Hispanic proportion of the U.S. population is expected to increase from 7.2 percent to between 8.6 and 9.9 percent; Hispanic youth will account for the bulk of this increase no matter how small or large the projection of the growth.

About one quarter (25.3 percent) of our Hispanic population today is under age 17; 10 percent of our youth are under five years old. This means that over a third of our entire Hispanic population in the U.S. is either preparing to go to school, enrolled in school, or should be in school! Yet Hispanics are also one of the most undereducated minority groups in the U.S. Looking at the educational attainment of persons of Hispanic origin, for example, Hispanics 25 years old and over had an educational attainment below that of the general population. About 14 percent of Hispanics had completed less than 5 years of school, compared to only 2 percent for non-Hispanic persons. In addition, the proportion of high school graduates among Hispanics was only 48 percent as compared to 76 percent for non-Hispanics. Only 8 percent of Hispanics had completed 4 years of college or more as compared with 20 percent for non-Hispanics.

Clearly the social studies curriculum for Hispanics must educate our children about the social status of our people in this country. Only by knowing our social status as compared to the general population or to non-Hispanics, can we begin to find solutions to the problems which beset us in this society.