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Mesocentrism and students of Mexican background: A community intervention for culturally relevant instruction

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Mesocentrism and Students of Mexican Background: A Community Intervention for Culturally Relevant Instruction

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How does the integration of information about a student’s ancestral culture elicit a more positive motivation for their learning at school? Chicano activists in the Southwest exposed middle school students to a program of instruction based on Mesoamerican ancestry. The program’s effectiveness is analyzed through a quasi-experiment. A pre- and postsurvey measured cultural awareness, desire, effect, reading preference, self-esteem, and self-concept. Informal student narratives were used to interpret treatment effects. Results indicated that the intervention enhanced students’ sense of cultural awareness and voluntary reading preferences. Implications for the study include how culturally relevant instruction can be a valuable stepping stone for motivating traditionally marginalized students into a meaningful engagement with content-area literacy.

Key words: content area literacy, culturally relevant instruction, mesoamerican, mesocentrism, Mexican American, reading preferences

As a Chicano educator who specializes in Mexican culture, I have been periodically invited to share my knowledge with public school students. I usually ask students: What were the pyramids of Mexico used for? I’m always surprised by their comments, and I’ve mostly received variations of two responses: “that is where their kings are buried,” and “that is where they sacrificed people.” The first response confuses practices associated with Egyptian pyramids. The second re-

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sponse describes pre-Columbian sacrificial practices, yet students seldom realize that not a single colonizer ever witnessed a human sacrifice in Mesoamerica. Usually, student’s notions about Mesoamerica reflect a popular discourse that adumbrates ancestral culture and diminishes a more meaningful connection to intellectual inquiry. Why does ancestral culture reflect a particular discourse? For many persons of Mexican background, ancestral culture can reflect a negative connotation derived from many different sources.

However, some researchers indicate that a student’s understanding of ancestral culture’s relation to the present day and the future is important for academic success in school (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992; Hess, Chih-Mei, & McDermot, 1987). For example, Caplan et al. (1992) pointed out that Asian students who maintained a knowledge of their ancestral culture succeeded academically and even surpassed more affluent peers. Other variables, such as family support, also influence student success (Caplan et al., 1992), but sensitization to original culture reflects a plausible connection for improving educational opportunities for minority students.

Ogbu (1994; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) described Mexican American students as a disenfranchised minority group that has suffered from the colonial domination of Western culture. Mexican American students may share a negative frame of reference for positive participation in the school setting because they view school culture as an oppositional dynamic (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). For Ogbu, positive participation in the school setting mostly reflects a process that does not readily acknowledge the home culture of the student. Mexican background students share “funds of knowledge” that can be important for teachers to tap into for culturally relevant instruction (Moll, 1992; Moll & González, 1994). It would be beneficial to re-examine the intellectual merit of ancestral culture and its potential for use in the classroom. I remain concerned about the limited information students have about Mesoamerican cultures scientific and intellectual complexity, and how information about a student’s ancestral culture could cultivate a more positive frame of reference for success in the public school system. The relation between ancestral culture and its efficacy as an impetus for enhancing positive educational participation among Mexican background students is the focus of this study.

POSTCOLONIAL CHICANO IDENTITY

Mesoamerican culture once flourished on the North American continent until disease, enslavement, political subjugation, and religious persecution forced the beliefs and practices of the indigenous Mexican to go underground or merge with European practices. The suppression of ancestral cultural practices and beliefs have had a negative influence on subsequent generations of colonial subjects. Students of Mexican background may not fully understand, distinguish, or acknowledge
their hybridized customs and beliefs because they may not be taught about their ancestral heritage at school. Since 1521, Mexicans have been subject to European conquests that have aggressively impeded an awareness of indigenous culture.

Historically, Spain, France, and the United States have all contributed to the "mestizaje," or hybridization, of the indigenous Mexican. The Spanish conquest of Mexico nearly eradicated traditional cultural practices unique to Mesoamerica under an oppressive reign that forcibly established new institutions of religion and government. For the colonized subject, the alternative of integrating colonial beliefs became necessary for survival, and examples of hybridized cultural practices are abundant. For example, in the Catholic Church, copal incense is burned as part of a purification ritual, couples to be married are adjoined with a ceremonial knot, and Matachine dancers simulate Aztec dance to honor the church. These present-day practices had their origin in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Other examples can be found in architecture, food, language, folklore, and social customs. Ancestral culture represents a treasure trove of information that can help inform an educator's desire to present culturally relevant instruction to minority students. However, some impediments to that instruction include psychological barriers for students who may view their ancestral culture in a negative manner as a result of generations of social conditioning.

Internalized Colonization: “Soy un Tonto”

We know that Mexican Americans and Native Americans both share an indigenous ancestry on the North American continent (Batalla, 1988; Grande, 2000). However, persons of Mexican background may share a stigmatized association with Native American culture. Paredes (1984) explained that an early influence for negative perceptions about Mexican background people has been the European rationalization for the brutal conquest of Mexico through which Europeans exaggerated the savagery of the conquered heathens.

The negative association with indigenous culture has been ingrained into Mexican beliefs and can be exemplified through day-to-day examples; such as calling someone “Tonto,” which refers to someone who is stupid—yet this word can be traced to the Tonto Indians who lived in Mexico and were stereotyped as being stupid by the Colonial Spanish. Another example includes the intercultural use of the phrase "Es contra-Indios" (It's anti-Indian), which refers to someone who can't succeed at something complex or technological. For example, if a student is attempting to work with a computer, but just can't get it to do what he or she wants, then another student may walk up and say "Es contra-Indios," indicating that the student is perhaps not "Western" enough to do something so complex, that the student is still too Indian to advance to an intelligent application. Students of Mexican background may not fully recognize the derogatory intercultural references to their indigenous cultures, nor fully comprehend the negative colonial discourse
that impedes the cultural pride and positive self-esteem offered through a more positive understanding of their cultural heritage.

The desire for persons of Mexican background to deny their ancestral culture prevails in their desire to participate in U.S. society (Hernández, 1973). Still, persons of Mexican background may eat food similar to what was eaten during Mesoamerican times, have similar physical features, speak with a dialect that integrates Mesoamerican languages, and have customs and celebrations that originated in Mesoamerican times. They may also acknowledge their affiliation with Mesoamerican symbols, such as the stepped-pyramid and the Aztec calendar. Those images are reproduced on murals in many Mexican American barrios across the United States, and can be found in a myriad of other innocuous places such as the imprinting on tortilla packages and the t-shirt graphics worn by students at school. Despite persons of Mexican background being designated particular symbols about ancestral Mexican culture, they are usually not taught about those symbols at school, nor are they made aware of the unique intercultural complexity that exists within indigenous Mexican culture. It is important to note that the Aztec civilization that is generally associated with Mexican ancestry represents only one component of a rich and diverse Mesoamerican cultural heritage.

There has been a tradition of educational neglect pertaining to students of Mexican background (Delgado-Gaitán & Trueba, 1991). A sophisticated understanding of Mesoamerican culture can elude many contemporary Mexican Americans partly because the public school system serves as an assimilative institution for integrating students into the dominant culture. Some typical school practices that reify the dominant culture reflect how a Halloween costume dance is typical, but not a celebration of El Día de Los Muertos, or how schools may recognize a Christmas play with a nativity scene, as opposed to Kwaanzan or Passover. The ceremonies and beliefs of the majority culture permeate the belief systems of most ethnic groups, and not assimilating those beliefs alienates nonparticipants (Giroux, 1990). Colonial authority maintains a tradition of not recognizing, even subduing, a colonial subject’s ability to understand the world in a manner that legitimates individual differences.

Community Influences

Community support groups can have success in addressing social and educational problems affecting at-risk youth and minorities (Nettles, 1991). However, the success of some of these alternative groups has led to conflicts with the very public school systems they support (Meier, 1991). Community support groups often consist of average citizens without university degrees or teaching certificates (Serow, 1991). These groups often deal with problems unresolved by the social institutions established to serve the community. For example, the community expects the educational system to adjust itself to new problems that include the rise in gang vio-
lence, drug abuse, AIDS awareness, and the lack of culturally relevant curriculum for minority students. The nature of community support groups puts them at odds with established bureaucracies and the professionals who work within them. The success of alternative groups in resolving problems could result in the disenfranchisement of established institutions that were created through the dominant culture to deal with these issues.

Despite bilingual education legislation stipulating that bicultural education be integrated within its programs (Office of Civil Rights, 1975), there is little curriculum, literature, and research that examines the intellectual, scientific, and cosmological content of Mesoamerica that could inform culturally relevant instruction for students of Mexican background. We know that politics instead of practical pedagogy is a strong influence on negative views toward bilingual education in the United States (Crawford, 1991; Macedo, 2000). There is also a shortage of teachers certified to work in bilingual education and offer a normal level of expertise for culturally relevant instruction (Merino & Faltis, 1993). We also know that the teacher population is predominantly White and may not have the background knowledge necessary for a sophisticated level of cultural instruction, nor would they be required to even include such an emphasis in their teaching practice. Even teachers of Mexican background who are familiar with Mesoamerican ancestry may harbor negative perceptions about those teachings because it reflects a stigmatized association.

Thus, access to information about indigenous culture has been mostly limited to some community advocacy groups from the Chicano movement who emphasize this indigenous past and have distanced themselves from colonial influences (Griswold Del Castillo, 1990). Some of the groups that have had success in introducing Mesoamerican culture into the classroom include the Xinachtli Project coordinated by Carlos Aceves in El Paso, Texas; the Xinachtli Project coordinated by Tupac Enrique from the Tonatierra Community Center in Phoenix, Arizona; and the Mexica Multicultural Education Charter School coordinated by Ignacio Briseño in West St. Paul, Minnesota. These groups have been viable organizations that have been actively working to introduce a Mesoamerican philosophy within the public school system.

What Constitutes a Mesocentric Curriculum?

There are many variations in how a Mesocentric curriculum can be taught in a public school setting, but these are several consistent components. These include conveying information about the following:

1. Aztec calendar.
5. Ceremonial practices.
6. Folk medicine.
7. Agriculture.

Although these components are described briefly in the following sections, it is important to understand each as one part of an integrated system that forms the basis of a Mesoamerican cosmology. For example, the pyramids were constructed to keep track of the sun and the cosmos, hence a “cosmological” system. The Aztec calendar is like a log that documents the interpretations of those early astronomers who used the pyramids as observatories. The cosmological information derived from the calendar and pyramids in turn scheduled the cultivation of crops and a sequence of ceremonial events, such as Dia de los Muertos. Danza Azteca is a physical manifestation of those cosmological interpretations. So, although each of these elements can be described separately, it is important to understand them as part of a holistic system.

The Aztec calendar is a prominent symbol of Mexican culture, but it is only one of several calendar systems used by ancient Mesoamericans. Aveni (1980) detailed the sophisticated complexity of Mesoamerican astronomy in his landmark book *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico*, where he describes how ancient Mesoamericans could track the path of Venus, calculate the solstice, equinox, lunar and solar eclipses, and ever determine the ellipsis of the Earth. For public school students, even understanding the Aztec calendar at a rudimentary mathematic and scientific level constitutes an important step beyond its present symbolic status. The Aztec calendar implements 20 symbols around the central ring for calculating the solar year, as well as metaphorical symbols, such as a rabbit, deer, water, and knife. The Aztec calendar could be considered more accurate for interpreting cosmological events than the contemporary Julian calendar that was created under the leadership of Julius Caesar for the timely collection of taxes.

Mesoamerican pyramid structures exist throughout Mexico and Central America, but a Mesoamerican “stepped” pyramid structure has been found as far north as Cahokia, Illinois. The largest Mesoamerican pyramid is Teotihuacan, the Pyramid of the Sun, located near Mexico City. As mentioned before, the pyramids were tools through which observers constructed a cosmological record, but they also served as ceremonial centers for Mesoamerican people. For use within the public school curriculum, a shift needs to occur for interpreting the Mesoamerican pyramids through a scientific lens, and more discussion needs to open up the negative discourse surrounding the popular interpretation of Mesoamerican peoples as savages that needed to be civilized through Western colonization.

“Nahuatl” is the language of the Aztecs, but it is far from being a “dead” language. In fact, it is the most spoken indigenous language on the North American continent, with about 3 million speakers of Nahuatl presently living in Mexico.
(Lastra, 1992). It is also an enduring example of ancestral culture for persons who speak the Mexican dialect of Spanish (Siméon, 1988). Nahuatl language manifests itself through everyday words for speakers of Mexican Spanish. Other dialects of Spanish, such as Southwest Spanish and Calo, are similarly influenced by Indian languages (Reyes, 1988). There are thousands of cognates between Nahuatl and Spanish, as well as other Mexican indigenous languages and Spanish, but there also exists some interesting cognates across the three languages of English, Spanish, and Nahuatl.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nahuatl</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>achah</td>
<td>hacha</td>
<td>hatchet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ahuacatl</td>
<td>aguacate</td>
<td>avocado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anaca</td>
<td>hamaca</td>
<td>hammock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ca'eh</td>
<td>cafe</td>
<td>coffee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chilli</td>
<td>chile</td>
<td>chili</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolatl</td>
<td>chocolate</td>
<td>chocolate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coyotl</td>
<td>coyote</td>
<td>coyote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ilinoh</td>
<td>limon</td>
<td>lemon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moyotl</td>
<td>mosquito</td>
<td>mosquito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necatl</td>
<td>nectar</td>
<td>nectar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oca'acac</td>
<td>acueducto</td>
<td>aqueduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ocelotl</td>
<td>ocelote</td>
<td>ocelot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quitarah</td>
<td>guitarra</td>
<td>guitar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Danza Azteca is an ancient dance form that dramatizes the cosmological symbolism within Mesoamerican philosophy. Danza Azteca interweaves music, ceremony, and physical agility in a dramatic performance. In Mexico and the United States, Andres Segura was an important figure in the history of Aztec dance who was responsible for the training of hundreds of disciplined dancers.

Instruments used for Danza Azteca include the conch shell that invokes the beginning of the dance and is also blown at the end of the dance. Dancers perform various steps following a rhythmic beat on a drum. Copal incense is burned in a ceramic censer and has a piney odor much like a forest. Aztec dancers also use “Ayoyotes,” a traditional leg garment made from seed pods that makes a sound like cascading water. By using these ceremonial objects, the four elements integral to indigenous culture manifest themselves. These are fire, air, water, and earth, again invoking an interrelated cosmology.

Ceremonial practices are an important part of a Mesocentric curriculum, and some of the ceremonial practices used today by some persons of Mexican background include the sweat lodge, or “Temezkal.” However, the adaptation of ceremonial practice in the public school can also reflect a more simple, but still “ceremonial,” process. This includes learning to take turns in a systematic round-robin
dialog. Other ceremonial practices that have found their way into public school curriculums include recognizing *el Dia de los Muertos*. A ceremonial application for that event can involve the construction of an altar to commemorate deceased persons, although other ceremonial structures exist in the public school setting.

Folk medicine is an established tradition among some persons of Mexican background (Flueber & Sandstrom, 2001). Other medicinal practices include “sobando,” or therapeutic massage. Folk medicine incorporates religious elements and ceremonial beliefs to rid emotional and physical afflictions. These include afflictions such as “mal de ojo,” or “evil eye,” whereby a person is thought to be afflicted by another person’s intense gaze on them. Another affliction is “empacho,” a digestive disorder usually cured through massage. People who practice these traditional methods of folk medicine within Mexican communities are called “Curanderos,” and this knowledge has both historical and practical origins because folk medicine has been typically practiced among populations with limited access to Western medicine (Flores, 2002).

Agriculture is another important component to a Mesocentric curriculum, and the significance of agricultural contributions from Mesoamerican culture cannot be underestimated. These contributions are evident in present day usage among many people in the United States, and the relation to corn is something that is especially unique to indigenous cultures across the Western hemisphere. Persons of Mexican background have been accustomed to a myriad of corn-based foods, such as tacos and other foods made with tortillas, including posole, atole, and tamales. Mesoamericans understood principals of hydroponic gardening through the “Chinampa” system of floating agriculture, and this understanding is still evident in the floating gardens of Xochimilco that are still being used for cultivating crops (Carrasco, 1998).

**Background of the Xinachtli Project**

The Xinachtli Project is one educational program that addresses the loss of ancestral culture of Mexican background students. “Xinachtli” is a Nahuatl word that means *seed*, and it can also be interpreted as a metaphorical expression that describes the seed of culture being nurtured to grow. Students in the Xinachtli Project are taught that the moment a seed begins to grow is a moment of infinite possibilities. A small seed can become a mighty tree or a beautiful flower. This metaphor can also reflect a person’s faith in the future for positive growth. The Xinachtli Project teaches Mesoamerican culture through a series of presentations and lectures. The program allows for students of Mexican background to become aware of the richness of their ancestral past by relating present-day experiences through symbols, science, and oral language.

Two community activists, Tupac Enrique and Carlos Aceves, have invested considerable time in developing the Xinachtli Project and teaching it to students in
public schools. Tupac Enrique states that teachers play a critical role in facilitating the instruction of the Xinachtli Project when they participate along with their class in learning a new cultural philosophy. Carlos Aceves believes that making students aware of the deeper significance of symbolism attributed to Mexican culture is an important facet for understanding the innovation within a Mesocentric approach. Symbols, such as the Aztec calendar and Mesoamerican pyramids, are prominent aesthetic icons, but they need to be understood by students as practical tools for constructing and comprehending a reality that can influence a positive sense of self-esteem. He explained:

You can think of the symbols as being like a car. You can give a car to a person, but if you don’t teach them how to drive it then it’s useless. The symbols are only valid for the student when they learn how to use them.

Carlos has further encountered that parents are very receptive to their children learning how to read the Aztec calendar because they understand that it is a complex instrument, but information about how to read it has been limited. Aceves described that many parents believed that it was an illegible document from the past, and they are extremely pleased with the process of learning how to read it along with their children.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

Participants

Participants included 92 seventh- and eighth-grade students attending a middle school in a Southwestern suburb. According to a recent school profile, the total number of students enrolled in this middle school was slightly over 1,000. The ethnic composition of the school was 63% Latino, 33% White, and 3% African American. All of the participants were enrolled in either a reading or a Spanish language class and prior to the treatment had received little or no detailed instruction related to indigenous Mexican cultures. Sixty-one students were finally selected from the original pool of 92 students for two reasons. First, 81 subjects took both the pre- and postinterest survey and could be paired in dyads. Second, I wanted to focus on students of Mexican background, so the Mexican American sample of 61 was isolated. Boy and girl participants remained nearly equal in both the overall sample and the Mexican American sample. Pseudonyms are used to describe the students.

Interest Inventory

For the pre- and postsurvey respondents were administered an interest inventory that I created (see Appendix). The instrument consisted of 23 multiple-choice
questions examining student’s cultural knowledge, self-esteem, goals, reading preferences, and attitudes toward reading. Similar to a Likert-survey scale, respondents self-reported data through a range of five choices from 1 (Yes, very much) to 4 (No, not at all) and included “I don’t know” should the student not have an answer for a particular question. Students were also asked three open-ended questions about career choice, reading topics, and college goals for which they could respond with a few words or a short sentence.

Data Collection Procedures

The pre- and postsurveys were administered by teachers during a regular class session 1 week prior and 3 weeks after the treatment was administered. No control group was used for the study. Essay response questions also were given to some of the students as part of a journal assignment (e.g., What do you want to be when you grow up? What do you like to read about? Do you plan to go to college?). Also, I took field notes on the 3 days of the presentations and conducted about 10 hr of informal interviews with Carlos Aceves and Tupac Enrique. A video was made of one of the dance presentations and several photographs were taken throughout the presentations.

Treatment

The treatment entailed 2 days of lecture and 1 day of Danza Azteca; both were conducted in the middle school auditorium by Tupac Enrique from Phoenix, Arizona. Students were released from their regular classrooms and went to the auditorium for those 3 days. On arrival, students were distributed a five-page handout that contained pictures depicting the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacán, the central symbol of the Aztec calendar; a graphic describing the year count for the Aztec calendar; and a copy of the Codex Mendoza. The handout contained no readable text other than the picture glyphs. An overhead projector was used to elaborate on and describe the pictures in the handouts.

During the first part of the lecture, Tupac Enrique described everyday words and slang that have an etymological relation to Nahua. Examples included words such as coyote, chocolate, tomato, maize, and avocado. Tupac also explained the use of the idioms ititio and itote to describe something big or small. Then, students and teachers discussed how Nahua existed in their everyday language.

Tupac Enrique also lectured about the Aztec calendar, such as how to read the date and year, and students were familiarized with the 20-day glyphs and the Mesoamerican system of counting. For the students, the Aztec calendar shifted from being an aesthetic symbol of Mexican culture into a readable tool for measuring time and place. The scientific content of the Aztec calendar was brought to the forefront of the presentation.
On the 3rd day, students participated in an interactive demonstration of Danza Azteca. Tupac Enrique considered this event to be important because the students crossed over from being observers to active participants. The dance was conducted in a ceremonial manner described in the previous section. At the beginning of the dance a conch shell was blown to the four directions. The dance was a group activity that reinforced previously taught concepts through physical application. The cafeteria was transformed into a place that was quite different from the usual middle-school frenzy of the lunch hour.

Data Analysis

Data was entered using the statistical program SPSS and t tests were run with paired samples for the pre- and postsurvey results. For statistical analysis, question responses were collapsed to yes (a., b.) and no (c., d.) responses. A yes response was scored as a 1, a no response was scored as a 2, and a don’t know response was scored as 0. Participants were dropped from the pre–post dyad if they left a survey question blank or selected to forego answering a question and checked “e. I don’t know”—this would vary by only two or three dyads.

Because some of the questions tapped similar topics, they were grouped within one of three general categories: (a) awareness of ancestral culture for questions 2, 3, 20, 21, 22, and 23; (b) desire to learn about other cultures for questions 4, 7, 9, 12, 16, 17, and 18; and (c) affect for questions 5, 6, 8, and 15. Pre- and postsurvey means were computed for each category, and a t test analysis was run on this data.

RESULTS

The paired t test analysis indicated that there were significant differences in student responses to questions 1, 2, 3, 22, and 23. Table 1 gives the pre- and postintervention means and standard deviations for each of these questions. It is interesting to note that during the pretest students felt comfortable to indicate “yes” to question 1, t(56) = 2.46, p < .05, “Would you say you know a lot about your own culture?” Yet, after the treatment, students were more inclined to say that they knew less about their culture. This difference could indicate how some students realized that they knew less about their culture after being exposed to in-depth cultural information in the treatment that was not taught in the regular school curriculum.

Overall, familiarity with Aztec culture increased as indicated by question 2, “Are you familiar with the Aztec culture?” t(39) = -2.24, p < .05, showing that students had become more familiar with the topic. Question 3, “Would you say you know a lot about Aztec culture?” also reflected an increase in familiarity, t(51) = -2.43, p < .05. Two items reflecting the highest gains of the interest inventory indi-
### TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Statistically Significant Items on the Pre- and Postintervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Preintervention</th>
<th>Postintervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Would you say you know a lot about your own culture?</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Are you familiar with the Aztec culture?</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Would you say you know a lot about Aztec culture?</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Are you familiar with the Aztec calendar?</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Are you familiar with Aztec dance?</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .005.

### TABLE 2
Grouped Means and Standard Deviations for Scores on the Pre- and Postintervention by Question Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Category</th>
<th>Preintervention</th>
<th>Postintervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural awareness</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to learn about other cultures</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

cated increased familiarity with both the Aztec calendar, question 22, *t*(47) = −2.59, *p* < .05; and Aztec Dance, question 23, *t*(48) = −3.27, *p* < .005.

The three grouped questions describing awareness, affect, and desire were analyzed with a one-sample *t* test that grouped mean scores from 61 participants who answered each of the questions in the three categories. Table 2 gives the pre- and postintervention means and standard deviations for these question categories. Only the grouping for awareness resulted in significant positive change after the treatment, *t*(59) = 10.27, *p* < .05. Students were more likely to be aware and familiar with Aztec culture after the treatment.

The statistically significant questions were all related to cultural familiarity (1, 2, 3, 22, 23), and this gain could have contributed to subsequent student motivation for learning more about Mexican culture through voluntarily reading. The narrative responses also reflected a positive influence by the treatment upon reading preferences and attitudes toward reading. On question 25 in the posttest, written responses, students indicated more interest in reading books about topics related to Mexican culture that were not mentioned in the pretest and were not part of the reg-
cular school curriculum. The new reading topics students mentioned in the posttest included the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anthropology</th>
<th>Aztecs, Aztec history</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>Mexican history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican heroes</td>
<td>Mexican Indians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Revolution</td>
<td>Pancho Villa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places about Mexico</td>
<td>Low Rider magazines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

The intervention had an interesting effect on White and African American students who also participated, but were excluded because of the instrument focus on students of Mexican background. One White student commented that he had learned a lot from the program because it deepened his knowledge about his peers’ culture. It would be important to examine the cross-cultural implications of Mesocentric curriculum with racial and ethnic groups other than those who share a Mexican background. The innovation of this culturally relevant focus would lead the participants to examine how officially sanctioned “knowledge” is situated within the existing school curriculum.

The instrument used to measure the effects of the treatment was content oriented, but the treatment also consisted of a ceremonial context and interpretation of unique symbols. The instrument might have recorded other gains if these could have been differentiated. The knowledge conveyed by the treatment may not be immediately measurable by one program treatment, and a control group would have also aided in differentiating the treatment’s impact on the students. The innovation of culture is perhaps difficult to quantitatively measure so soon after the treatment, even given the 3 weeks that were allotted between pre- and postsurvey, but may require a more longitudinal examination that takes into account other variables, such as class, gender, and popular culture related to identity formation.

McCarthy (1988, 1998) has defined how notions of culture are “nonsynchronous” or otherwise fractured through influences of gender, class, and popular discourses about culture. A basic limitation for a Mesocentric intervention would have to acknowledge the often complex illusion that culture can be “centered” around a particular ancestral connection to an ethnic or racial community. However, we know that there are proponents of Afrocentrism (Asante, 1993) and Eurocentrism (Bennet, 1987; Hirsch, 1983), who similarly share beliefs that African American culture can be centered in Africa or White culture centered in Greek and Roman ancestry. Future studies should shift their focus toward the pedagogical opportunities that could be used to initially engage traditionally marginalized
students, but not be limited to an exclusively centered approach that does not take into account other influences upon student identity and participation in school.

For the students in the study, the prominent symbols of Mexican culture became more accessible, whereas before those symbols did not fully inform knowledge about their cultural heritage. Many of their narrative comments were compelling affirmations about their cultural heritage:

I thought it was very interesting to learn about my ancestors. Before, I didn’t care about any of those things. I always hated history, but after that presentation I changed my mind. Something got into me that just made me change my mind about my ancestors and their history. (Manuel, seventh-grade student)

The Aztec culture is really smart because it knows about life. They are like scientists. They were smart. In the future, I hope more people learn the ways the Aztecs lived. (Oscar, seventh grade)

I think that it was good to remember our ancestors and to know where we come from and what kind of Indians we are. The Aztecs did amazing things, and they were very intelligent. I think we should be proud to have a race like that who survives for 500 years and still lives today. It is good to keep in touch with our culture. (Rosalba, eighth grade)

Thus, one of the positive consequences of this program of instruction was the student’s own reassessment of their heritage. Students began to consider how they had ancestors who were intelligent, and students began moving toward a more positive perception about their participation in an academic setting.

As teachers and students begin to diversify, it is hoped that the established order of education redefines itself into one that embraces the diversity of previously marginalized minority groups. Educators need to be perceptive of the unique forms of knowledge advocated by community activists, and be reminded of the emancipatory commitment by proponents of culturally relevant instruction situated in ancestral history. Giroux (1992) has invoked a “language of remembrance” for the educational reform of minority youth:

Educational leaders need to be skilled in the language of remembrance. Remembrance rejects knowledge as merely an inheritance, with transmission as its only form of practice. Remembrance sees knowledge as a social and historical construction that is always the object of struggle. (Giroux, 1992, p. 10)

By seeking to expand knowledge of what is already known, or remembered, we can perhaps create one of many paths that need to be engaged for the subsequent
academic pursuits that foreshadow positive avenues for upward social mobility by students of Mexican background.

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APPENDIX
Pre- and Postsurvey Questions

1. Would you say you know a lot about your own culture?
2. Are you familiar with Aztec culture?
3. Would you say you know a lot about Aztec culture?
4. Would you like to learn more about Aztec culture?
5. Do you feel good about yourself?
6. Do you feel good about going to school?
7. Would you feel better about going to school if you could learn more about
   your culture?
8. Do you like to read?
9. Would you like reading more if you could read books about your culture?
10. Do you believe it is important to read books about your own culture?
11. Do you believe it is important to learn about your culture?
12. Do you believe it is important to learn about other peoples’ culture besides
    your own?
13. Do you believe that the schools you have attended have done a good job teaching you about your culture?
14. Do you believe that if you know a lot about your own culture you would be more inclined to succeed in life?
15. Do you believe that feeling good about yourself, being positive is why you succeed in life?
16. Do you believe that if you do not know anything about your culture, but you feel good about yourself, you will be inclined to succeed in life?
17. Would knowing about your own culture make you a better person?
18. Do you believe that it is really not that important to learn about your culture?
19. Do you believe that it makes no difference in life if you do not know very much about your culture?
20. Do you recognize the Aztec system of mathematics?
21. Do you recognize the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs?
22. Are you familiar with the Aztec calendar?
23. Are you familiar with Aztec dance?

Narrative Response Questions

24. What do you want to be when you grow up?
25. What subject do you like to read about the most?
26. Do you plan on going to college when you get out of high school?