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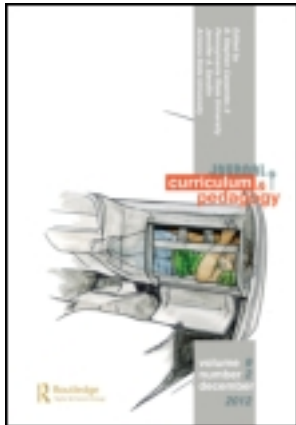
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A State-Mandated Epistemology of Ignorance: Arizona's HB2281 and Mexican American/*Raza* Studies

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Charles Mills (1997) argues White Supremacy relies upon a denial that racism exists, or, “*an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance*” (italics original, p. 18). Arizona's racial politics surrounding the Tucson Unified School District's (TUSD) Mexican American Studies (MAS) take this collective denial one step further. HB2281 demonstrates how the power of the state can mandate an epistemology of ignorance as educational practice for communities of color. HB2281 (now A.R.S.§15–112) prohibits any classes in Arizona public schools that:

- Promote the overthrow of the United States Government.
- Promote resentment toward a race or class of people.
- Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.
- Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of treatment of pupils as individuals.¹

Once passed, the State Superintendent could withhold 10% of a district's funding if he finds any classes are in violation. The superintendent findings of noncompliance against TUSD demonstrate how HB2281 in practice represents a state-mandated epistemology of ignorance.

FINDINGS OF NON-COMPLIANCE

Then Superintendent Tom Horne began his finding as follows, “... Martin Luther King stated that he wanted his children to be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin” (Horne, 2010, p. 1). Misusing Dr. King's words is commonplace among opponents of multiculturalism (e.g., Steele, 1990), and highlights an ignorance of Dr. King's radicalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Subsequently, Horne found TUSD out of compliance despite never attending a class or auditing the program. He criticized the original name of the program *Raza* Studies, “The very name ‘Raza’ is translated as ‘the race’ [and is therefore racist]” (Horne, 2010, p. 7). While *raza* “more properly connotes the cultural and historical ties which unite Spanish-speaking people” (Delgado & Palacios, 1998, p. 289), HB2281 gave Horne the power to officially declare *raza* as racist.

Targeting the curriculum, Horne attacked Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* because, "students should be taught that this is the land of opportunity They should not be taught that they are oppressed" (Horne, 2010, p. 7). Oppression of Latina/os exists (Acuña, 2000; Feagin, 2010), but Horne's epistemology of ignorance forcibly denied this reality and instead he castigated teachers for promoting "victimization." Lost in this attack was the remarkable pedagogical accomplishment of high school students reading Freire.

Horne left office before his finding of non-compliance could take effect, and his successor, John Huppenthal, continued the attacks as expected.² After Huppenthal's own audit found *no* violations of A.R.S.§15-112 (Cappellucci et al., 2011), he still declared TUSD out of compliance, arguing "Reviewed materials present only one perspective of historical events—that of the Latino people being persecuted, oppressed, and subjugated by the 'hegemony'—otherwise known in this material as white America" (2011, p. 2). Despite the misuse of hegemony, Huppenthal's ruling highlighted a simple issue: Within his epistemology of ignorance, oppression does not exist, and those who taught it were guilty of "promoting resentment toward a race or class of people" (Huppenthal, 2011, p. 2).

After a failed appeal by the TUSD board, Huppenthal affirmed his findings of non-compliance. In his press conference, he argued that MAS courses taught students that "Latino minorities have been and continue to be oppressed by a Caucasian majority. This harmful, dispiriting message has no place in public education" (Huppenthal, 2012, January 6). While the historical and contemporary oppression of Latina/os has been substantiated (Acuña, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2010), the only acceptable form of Arizona public education is one that denies this reality.

CONCLUSION

On January 11, 2012, the TUSD board capitulated and eliminated MAS, demonstrating that epistemologies of ignorance go beyond, "the selective process of what is deemed worthy of 'knowing' [being] institutionalized" (Malewski & Jaramillo, 2011, p. 5). HB2281 created punitive mechanisms to ensure teachers did not deviate from a color-blind worldview. Thus, Arizona's public education system functions as a state-mandated epistemology of ignorance having a two-fold effect. First, MAS significantly improved student performance (Cabrera, Milem, & Marx, 2012), but epistemologies of ignorance outlawed effective educational practice. Second, if students cannot explore racial oppression, they cannot change it. In the absence of this critical engagement, they are left with more of the same: Systemic racism where Latina/o students are an underclass.

CONTRIBUTOR

Nolan L. Cabrera is an Assistant Professor in the University of Arizona's Center for the Study of Higher Education. His research focuses on Whiteness, racism, and Latina/o students within institutions of higher education. He is currently assessing the impact of Tucson Unified School District's Mexican American Studies program on academic achievement.

NOTES

1. For the full text of the bill, please see: <http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/hb2281s.pdf>
2. When campaigning, he promised that if elected he would stop *la raza*. To see Huppenthal discuss this campaign promise, refer to: http://www.democracynow.org/2012/1/18/debating_tucson_school_districts_book_ban

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Immigration, Incarceration, and Cultural Exclusion

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Policy is a cultural construct, the product of a deliberate configuration of dominant ideologies, political interests, economic contexts, and social issues embedded within power relations of privilege and exclusion (Apple, 2000). As a product of culture, policy is relational and contested, promoting a specific vision for education. Arizona's anti-immigration policy SB 1070, which incarcerates "unauthorized persons" crossing the U.S.–Mexico border, and HB 2281, which bans the teaching of ethnic studies from public schools in the state, represent historical and political commitments to a vision that is destructive to education as a democratic practice in a multiracial and multicultural society.

Therefore, it is with deep concern that I examine two critical questions: What kinds of visions for education do Arizona's anti-immigration policies promote? What is the link between Arizona's anti-immigration policies, growth of private prison corporations, and mass incarceration of Latino "unauthorized persons" crossing the U.S.–Mexico border? A review of recent research and media reports on Arizona and elsewhere in the United States suggests private prison corporations are behind the policy shifts toward criminalization of immigration. In the last decade alone, two of the largest private prison corporations, Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and GEO Group increased their prison capacity to double annual profits from millions to billion-dollar revenue (Sloan, 2012).

Accordingly, between 1990 and 2009, the total federal prison population in the United States has doubled; in contrast, the for-profit private prison population grew 17 times (Pacific Institute for Community Organization, 2011). As this article goes to press, the Arizona legislature awarded a new contract to CCA on September 1, 2012, to add 2,000 beds, reallocating funds from a 50 million dollar housing settlement with the federal government