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The Struggle for Mexican American Studies in Texas K-12 Public Schools: A Movement for Epistemic Justice through Creation/Resistance

Lilliana Patricia Saldaña

University of Texas at San Antonio

Abstract

This article traces how Mexican American Studies (MAS) scholar activists led and supported a statewide movement for MAS in Texas. As a Xicana feminist scholar activist, Saldaña draws from her retrospective memory and personal archive of organizational notes, movement documents, personal testimonies before the State Board of Education, and photos, to document her journey within this epistemic justice movement. In doing so, she narrates the processes of creation/resistance that led to change in a state that has historically excluded Black, Brown, and Indigenous histories from school curricula. As a scholar activist involved in various parts of this movement, Saldaña also examines the various interconnected layers of this movement—from local efforts in San Antonio, where she teaches, to statewide organizing—to chronicle the institutional and grassroots processes that led to this historic victory in Texas.

Keywords: Mexican American Studies, epistemic justice, creation/resistance, Texas K-12 education, scholar activism

During the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of Mexican American students throughout the U.S. Southwest walked out of their schools in protest of the educational oppression they experienced at the hands of racist and classist schools that had, for generations, perpetuated the marginality and exclusion of Mexican Americans in society. In 1968 in East Los Angeles, 15,000 students walked out of their schools to protest the high push out/drop out and tracking rate of Brown students into vocational programs—a pattern that was pervasive across Mexican American schools in the United States (Berta-Avila, Tijerina, & Figueroa, 2011). They also protested the “no Spanish” school policies that punished students for speaking Spanish on campus and demanded better facilities and academic programs that would prepare them to go to college rather than funneling them into the military or low-wage and low-status employment. In San Antonio, 3,000 students from Edgewood Independent School District (ISD) also walked out to protest the systemic inequities they experienced, including the dilapidated buildings that were symptomatic of the inequitable school finance system in Texas that impacted poor and working-class Mexican students and communities in one of the most segregated cities in the United States (Poggio, 2015).

Students at Lanier High School (San Antonio ISD) also organized school walkouts. While the Lanier High School walkout never materialized, students demanded the right to speak Spanish at school and called for the implementation of courses on Mexican American history and culture to counter the assimilationist and whitewashed curricula forced on Mexican American youth. Their calls for what we now call Chicana/x/o Studies or in Texas, Mexican American Studies, as it is now widely recognized, reflects the community’s resistance to colonial schooling and their calls for epistemic justice in schools. In Texas, it would take 50 years after the Chicano Civil Rights Movement before Mexican American children and youth would have access to MAS in K-12 schools.

As a MAS scholar, I recognize that this struggle for epistemic justice—the right to our knowledge in the face of white supremacy and U.S. settler schooling—is not a new movement. It’s a movement that is at least 500 years old and is rooted in Indigenous resistance to the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being. Within the context of U.S. public schooling, it’s a movement that has roots in the *Escuelitas* or little schools of the early 1900s

which were a community response to segregated schooling, racial discrimination, language oppression and the imposition of a white supremacist curriculum (Barragán Goetz, 2020). The contemporary struggle for MAS in public schools also builds on the political activism of Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s that called for the creation of what we now call MAS or Chicana/x/o Studies (Berta-Avila, Revilla, & Figueroa, 2011).

It is important to note that the contemporary struggle for MAS in Texas K-12 public schools (a movement which is still very much on-going seven years after the initial organizing) did not happen overnight. Students, parents, teachers, scholars, and civil rights organizations mobilized within and across generational, language, ideological, and class differences in support of MAS in public schools. This movement also has relied on the intellectual, institutional, and organizing wisdom of senior scholars in our community—many who advocated for educational rights during the Chicano Movement and who have made significant contributions to the field of MAS in academia.

When I became involved in this movement, I was relatively new to the professoriate; I had only been a MAS professor for four years and was not tenured. As a Xicana feminist activist/pedagogue, I wanted to make sure I was not inserting myself in this space, but supporting the movement by learning from those who had been fighting for Chicana/x/o Studies since its inception. As such, I spent a lot of my initial time in this movement listening, observing, and advocating from my positionality as a “new” activist in the movement.

As a Xicana feminist activist rooted in my community’s historical legacy of activism and social change, and as one of the MAS scholar-activist-educators on the frontlines of this movement, I document and examine the various parts of this epistemic justice movement. I specifically examine the ways in which the community of MAS scholars, with support of parents, students, State Board of Education allies, and Mexican American civil rights organizations (like LULAC, G.I. Forum, MALDEF) came together to mobilize for MAS—from our collective call before the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE), to organizing political and movement spaces like the Statewide Summit on MAS organized by NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 Committee. I also document and reflect on the ways in which MAS scholars responded to the community’s fight for epistemic justice building spaces like the MAS Teachers’ Academy in San

Antonio which offers K-12 teachers with the curricular, epistemological, methodological and pedagogical support to teach MAS within a community of praxis. As one of the MAS scholars in this movement, I draw from my retrospective memory, organizational notes, copies of my expert testimonies before the State Board of Education, and photos at rallies and press conferences, which all form part of a personal and collective archive of this movement. Within the tradition of Xicana feminist methodologies (Delgado Bernal, 1999), I weave my retrospective memory and embodied knowledge to narrate the movement's collective struggles and victories, and the lessons I've learned from being a part of various interconnected spaces within this movement. First, I begin with a theoretical discussion on what I mean by epistemic justice and why the MAS K-12 movement in Texas is an epistemic justice movement that relied on a creation/resistance approach, to borrow from Roberto Rodriguez' (2016) concept. This is significant given that Texas has and continues to be an anti-Mexican (and anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-queer) state despite the glaring demographics and political shifts in the state.

The MAS K-12 as a Movement for Epistemic Justice: Fighting Against Epistemic Racism

In Texas, the struggle for Mexican American Studies as a decolonial epistemic movement is rooted in a century-long fight for educational rights in a state that has perpetuated patterns of cultural violence and epistemic erasure in Mexican American schools (San Miguel, 1999; Valencia, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). I draw from Miranda Fricker's (2009) concept of epistemic justice, a concept that originated in the field of social epistemology. Epistemic justice has to do with the arrangement of knowledge in society. Epistemic justice is also concerned with the distribution of knowledge—who knows what and who is allowed to know what—which has implications for what is taught and learned in schools. From a decolonial perspective, epistemic justice cannot be separated from centuries old processes of coloniality in the form of epistemic racism and white supremacy inside and outside institutions of teaching/learning. As such, I situate the contemporary movement for MAS in K-12 schools as an epistemic justice movement in which the community of MAS scholars and allies mobilized for the creation of a curriculum that would provide students with access to Mexican American history and culture.

Epistemic justice also implores the “right for one’s view to be taken seriously if, for instance, one is an expert on the matter in question, or is testifying from direct experience, or if one makes a valid argument” (Kotzee, 2014, p. 344). Epistemic justice is also evidenced when members of oppressed communities fight against methodologies of denial, silencing, and in case of the MAS movement, re-naming by members of the dominant group. In sum, epistemic justice questions the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being as well as the mode of producing knowledge that perpetuates these asymmetrical relations of power.

The Banning of Mexican American Studies in Arizona

The banning of MAS in Arizona in 2010 spurred a nationwide movement for MAS, particularly in the Southwest. Proponents of Arizona’s SB 2281 claimed that MAS promoted the overthrow of the U.S. government and promoted solidarity among students, rather than individualism. Right-wing conservatives also claimed that MAS promoted resentment towards white people (a very similar argument was made in Texas with the passage of HB 3979, the “anti-Critical Race Theory” law which was signed by Gov. Abbot in June 2021). The ban on ethnic studies in Arizona was clearly anti-Mexican since only MAS was banned (this was the same year that SB 1070, the “Show me your papers” bill that legalized racial profiling, went into effect, as well).

Mounting evidence showed that MAS courses contributed to students’ academic achievement, even in non-MAS courses (Cabrera et al, 2014). In other words, there was no pedagogical basis for the ban. It was a racially motivated law to keep Brown youth from questioning Eurocentric narratives and the systems of privilege and oppression that have historically benefited whites. Given the demographic changes in the Southwest where K-12 schools are now majority Brown, these laws were intended to subvert the community’s power to dismantle white supremacy by policing and banning knowledge.

MAS/Chicano Studies in Higher Education: From Grassroots Mobilizing to Institutionalization

Chicano Studies programs were born out of students who claimed a Chicana and Chicano political identity and consciousness in their activism. During the 1960s, Chicano youth

in California drafted El Plan de Santa Barbara—both a political manifesto and blueprint—that demanded a paradigm shift in higher education—from the hiring of Chicano faculty, administrative leadership, and counselors to the creation of dedicated research centers and Chicano Studies programs. In California, the University of California Los Angeles and California State University were the first universities to offer Chicano Studies in 1969. In Texas, community activists and students mobilized at the local level and across the state to create grassroots educational spaces that would be accessible to youth. Activist-educators like Aurelio Montemayor—who is a part of the MAS Teachers' Academy today—for example, co-founded Colegio Jacinto Treviño—a Chicano college created out of the mobilizing efforts of the Mexican American Youth Organization—and co-founded Lincoln-Juarez University (Cantú, 2016). While these grassroots universities did not survive after the movement, a few institutions of higher education began to create Chicano Studies programs and offer undergraduate degrees, often with little institutional support.

In San Antonio, my home institution implemented its MAS program in 1993, almost 20 years after Chicano Studies had been institutionalized in colleges and universities in California and other Southwest states. Community colleges in San Antonio began to offer MAS related courses as early as the 1980s. However, it was not until 2004, through the approval of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, that community colleges in the state were allowed to offer Associate of Arts degrees in MAS (Alamo Colleges, 2013).

It would take almost 50 years since the Chicano Movement for MAS to reach K-12 schools through movement building and organizing, largely through NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 committee and within our local MAS professional/academic organizations, with the support of students, educators, civil rights organizations, and allies. We mobilized even when our own programs in higher education had little institutional support to survive (much less thrive) and when faculty had scarce resources to build visionary and decolonial spaces like the MAS Teachers' Academy.

MAS in K-12 Schools in Texas

The contemporary struggle for MAS in Texas K-12 schools reflects the community's historic struggles for a humanizing education that dignifies Mexican American people past and

present. Debates relating to epistemology—whose histories should be taught—are significant in Texas as it is the United States’s second most populous state with a majority student of color population. At least 52% of school age children are classified as Hispanic; this is much higher in cities like San Antonio where close to 70% of the city is of Mexican descent (Every Texan, 2016).

The idea of proposing a MAS high school elective course emerged out of National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) Tejas Foco (regional chapter) meetings in 2013. While I was not a part of these initial conversations, it was evident that this would be an epistemic battle in a State Board with an overwhelming conservative majority that did not reflect the demographic and political reality of the state. In 2014, a group of NACCS Tejas Foco scholars, including Trinidad Gonzalez, Christopher Carmona, Emilio Zamora, Angela Valenzuela, Juan Tejeda, and Marie “Keta” Miranda began to organize a campaign for MAS at the SBOE. The battle for a MAS elective course would take four years to materialize. Conservative members (10 out of 15 SBOE members were Republican) did not think Mexicans needed a stand-alone course. Mexicans were still seen as an interest group as opposed to a colonized group with ancestral connections to this continent.

The Creation of a Special Topics Course in MAS

Given the conservative politics of the board, in 2014, SBOE member Ruben Cortez (D) introduced a strategy to get MAS into Texas K-12 public schools. While the NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 Committee had advocated for a stand-alone course, a mostly conservative board supported a special topics course that would be open to other area studies—a move that we saw as a victory for Ethnic Studies and Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in the state. In April 2014, the SBOE took a vote for this special-topics course and drafted “Proclamation 2016,” which would request that publishers submit textbooks for MAS and other ethnic studies like African American, Native American, and Asian American Studies. The SBOE also voted to allow individual districts to offer these special topics courses, making the special topics course optional rather than mandatory as part of a high school degree requirement. While this was not the course, nor the direction that MAS scholars had been advocating for,

we saw this compromise as a huge victory since this was the first time that any kind of ethnic studies course had been approved by the Texas SBOE (and any state board of education in the United States for that matter). It was the first step in advancing MAS in K-12 schools and it opened the doors for other ethnic studies fields. As such, it was a collective victory for communities of color in a state that continues to uphold white supremacist policies and anti-Brown nativist rhetoric. The battles for epistemic justice did not end with this victory in 2014; our resistance continued well into 2018 and continues today with the passing of House Bill 3979 and Senate Bill 3 (an extension of HB 3979), which limits the teaching of racism, settler colonialism and slavery in social studies curricula, and House Bills like 2497, also called the 1836 Project, which propose that educators teach a whitewashed Texas history.

Building a MAS Community at the Local Level: Somos MAS

I first became involved with Somos MAS—a local network of Mexican American Studies professors at community colleges and four-year universities—in San Antonio about eight years ago (Somos MAS has since then expanded to include K-12 MAS educators). The founding members of this organization—Juan Tejeda, Teresita Aguilar, and Marie “Keta” Miranda—all served as program directors of MAS programs at Palo Alto College, Our Lady of the Lake University, and the University of Texas at San Antonio, respectively, where I currently serve as MAS faculty and director/coordinator of the MAS program. They were also active members of NACCS Tejas Foco—the regional chapter of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (See Figure 1).

As a collective of MAS scholars in San Antonio, we would meet once a month to discuss curricula, course transfer plans, and educational policies from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board that directly impacted MAS. We also raised scholarship monies to send students to NACCS Tejas Foco every year, supported the creation of dual-credit MAS courses for high school and community college credit, and worked across our institutions to strengthen the visibility of MAS programs. In essence, we cultivated institutional solidarities that we were able to activate and sustain in our statewide campaign for MAS in K-12 schools. Moreover, as scholars in the field of Chicana/x/o Studies, we continued to build transformative intellectual spaces and bridged academia with social justice movements in the community.

Figure 1.

Somos MAS



From left to right: Jose Castillo (University of Texas at San Antonio MAS student), Soledad Nuñez (UTSA MAS student), Rita Urquijo Ruiz (Trinity University professor), Lilliana P. Saldaña (UTSA professor), Maria “Keta” Miranda (UTSA professor), Deborah Vasquez (OLLU professor), and Juan Tejeda (Palo Alto College professor) at the MLK Jr. March, January 27, 2014.

Bridging Local with Statewide Advocacy

A few months after the SBOE approved of the special topics in MAS, I joined my colleagues from Somos MAS to advocate for MAS at the local level. It was time to get MAS into our schools. In October 2014, San Antonio SBOE representative, Marisa Perez Diaz, hosted a meeting at Texas Educational Region 20 and invited district representatives and regional school board members to discuss the possibility of integrating Mexican American Studies in K-12 classrooms. All the MAS advocates from San Antonio—Juan Tejeda, Marie “Keta” Mirada, June Pedraza, Cynthia Cortez, and Pedro Rodriguez—were in attendance. Emilio Zamora, MAS advocate and History professor from the University of Texas at Austin, drove to San Antonio to support our efforts. Before our meeting, I had reached out to Nolan Cabrera at the University of Arizona at the recommendation of Roberto Rodriguez, who had been writing extensively on the banning of MAS in Arizona. He knew that Cabrera and his colleagues had just published a study on the effects of MAS on student achievement in the *American Educational*

Research Journal. Cabrera graciously shared a copy of their manuscript, which I then shared with school leaders at this gathering (Cabrera et. al., 2014). Our goal was to encourage instructional coordinators, principals, and superintendents to support the MAS Special Topics course at their campuses (See Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Somos MAS Region 20 Meeting



From left to right: Two unidentified school leaders, Emilio Zamora (UT-Austin) and members of Somos MAS—June Pedraza (Northwest Vista College), Pedro Rodriguez (community advocate), Cynthia Cortez (St. Phillip’s College), Lilliana P. Saldaña (University of Texas at San Antonio), Juan Tejeda (Palo Alto College), Marie “Keta” Miranda (University of Texas at San Antonio)--and Rubina Pantoja (Harlandale ISD) and two other unidentified school leaders from local school districts, October 31, 2014.

This ground-breaking research was important to growing the MAS movement in Texas as it demonstrated that MAS classes improved student achievement as measured by standardized test scores and graduation rates. It also demonstrated that the more MAS classes students took, the greater the likelihood of success. While only a handful of school leaders attended this city-wide meeting, we remained committed to this epistemic justice movement

and continued to mobilize at the local and statewide level through Somos MAS, NACCS Tejas Foco, and other professional and academic spaces. It was during these months that my colleague Marie “Keta” Miranda founded the MAS Teacher’s Academy—a scholar-teacher led summer institute for social studies teachers interested in teaching the newly approved MAS Special Topics course.

As a new member of Somos MAS, I spent a lot of time listening in at the meetings and learning from my colleagues, most of whom were activists during the Chicano Movement and who continue to advocate for Brown communities through their research and advocacy today. As scholars, they bridged their institutional knowledge, leadership, and grassroots activism to sustain MAS programs in higher education, oftentimes with little to no resources despite our programs’ transformative impact. It was at these meetings that I learned to draw from our communities’ rich legacy of mutuality, solidarity, and political praxis to advocate for the existence of our programs in Hispanic Serving Institutions and cities like San Antonio, an overwhelming majority Mexican American city. These solidarities would prove critical in the movement for MAS in K-12 schools, particularly as we made a case for why a state like Texas needed MAS and Ethnic Studies. These solidarities continue to be critical today as we fight against epistemically repressive and white supremacist educational policies like HB 3979 and SB 3.

“Reject the Text” Campaign: Mobilizing against Epistemic Racism

When the SBOE voted to approve of the Special Topics in Mexican American Studies in 2014, it voted for an elective class without adopting any curricular standards. This became a problem once textbook writers submitted books for adoption through Proclamation 2016. In spring 2016, Cynthia Dunbar, former member of the SBOE and an outspoken ultra-conservative, submitted the first textbook for adoption. As soon as the book was made available for public view, members of NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 committee immediately expressed their concerns regarding the racist arguments presented in the book and began to mobilize with other groups to oppose the adoption of this book.

My full integration in the statewide movement took place during the summer months of 2016. Celina Moreno, who served as attorney for MALDEF at the time, invited me to join the Responsible Ethnic Studies Textbooks (REST) Coalition. She knew I had been active with the local Somos MAS group and wanted to see more women of color scholars in this organizing space. Over the next few months, members of NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 Committee, LULAC, the G.I. Forum, and the Mexican American School Board Association—civil rights organizations that have historically fought against school segregation, anti-Mexican racial discrimination, and inequitable school funding in Texas—and the Texas Freedom Network—strategized against the adoption of this racist book and mobilized our communities to join the “Reject the Text” campaign. Members of the coalition wrote op-eds, organized press rallies, studied political profiles, and drafted arguments in preparation for the November SBOE hearing. This would be the first of many consecutive mobilizations we would organize until 2018.

During these months, SBOE Ruben Cortez formed an Ad Hoc Committee of MAS scholars (historians, anthropologists, public policy, education scholars, and teachers) to produce an expert review of the book: “Ad Hoc Committee Report on Proposed Social Studies Topic Textbook *Mexican American Heritage*” (2016). The committee found that the textbook was riddled with more than 140 factual, interpretive, and omission errors. Some of the excerpts that the coalition protested included:

- In a discussion on the Chicano movement: “Chicanos, on the other hand, adopted a revolutionary narrative that opposed Western civilization and wanted to destroy this society.” (p. 415-416)
- “Stereotypically, Mexicans were viewed as lazy compared to European or American workers.” (p. 248)
- In a discussion on Mexican workers: “[M]exican laborers were not reared to put in a full day’s work so vigorously. There was a cultural attitude of ‘*mañana*,’ or ‘tomorrow,’ when it came to high-gear production. It was also traditional to skip work on Mondays, and drinking on the job could be a problem. The result was that Mexican laborers were seen as inferior and kept in low-paying, unskilled jobs that

did not provide a pathway upward.” (p. 248)

- On immigration: “Illegal immigration has since caused a number of economic and security problems in the United States over which people are divided on how to solve. Poverty, non-assimilation, drugs, crime, and exploitation are among some of these problems.” (p. 428)
- In a section on “The Cold War”: “College youth attempted to force their campuses to provide *indigenismo*-oriented curriculum, Spanish-speaking faculty, and scholarships for poor and illegal students...During the Cold War, as the United States fought Communism worldwide, these kinds of separatist and supremacy doctrines were concerning. While solidarity with one’s heritage was understood, Mexican pride at the expense of American culture did not seem productive” (p. 470).
- In a section titled “The Latino and American Identity”: “Pressure exists that those of Mexican origin are not ‘Mexican enough’ or do not have enough sympathy and respect for their roots if they venture beyond the Spanish-speaking world. This belief, along with the idea that Latin culture must be held up as superior and separate from American culture, holds many back today (p. 473).

As a coalition, we argued that this book did not meet the basic standards for use in any Mexican American Studies classroom. On the contrary, it reproduced racial stereotypes and perpetuated false narratives about Mexican immigrant and Mexican American communities and used dehumanizing language to describe our communities (for example, the use of the term “illegal” which is not a term MAS scholars use to describe any human being). Moreover, very little in the book actually related to Mexican American people. In a 500-page book, only a few pages focused on civil and labor rights issues. A large chunk focused on Mexican history (e.g. wars of independence, the Mexican Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Cold War). The book also referenced Latin American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende as Mexican American writers, and claimed tango and salsa were popular genres in Mexican American communities. In sum, the book was not only inaccurate, poorly written and conceptualized, it was blatantly racist.

Before the hearing, the “Reject the Text” coalition organized a press rally at the Texas Education Agency headquarters before offering public testimony at the State Board of Education. Public testimonies lasted more than three hours with more than three dozen scholars and activists speaking against the book. I remember being incredibly nervous as I had never participated as a speaker at a press rally or testified before a SBOE. The coalition had also circulated a petition against the adoption of the book. Close to 15,000 people across the state signed the petition to support the coalition. After much mobilizing and national attention on this book, the SBOE took a unanimous vote to reject the book which was a great victory. But it took months of mobilizing and organizing to get the SBOE to reject a racist textbook for a MAS class the MAS community fought so hard to get. In the meantime, the board submitted another call for textbooks. We would continue to fight against the spiritual violence and epistemic racism before the SBOE (this was the first of many public rallies at the SBOE), while creating political and pedagogical spaces to build MAS in K-12 Texas schools (See Figure 3).

Figure 3.

“Reject the Text” rally



SBOE member Marisa Perez Diaz at the “Reject the Text” press rally organized by the Responsible Ethnic Studies Textbook (REST) Coalition, September 16, 2016.

Building MAS through Creation/Resistance

While we were mobilizing against this racist textbook, we also organized the first Annual Statewide Summit on MAS in K-12 Schools through NACCS Tejas Foco—the largest statewide meeting on MAS in public schools. Our goal was to connect parents, teachers, policymakers, students, scholars, and advocates throughout the state to develop a strategic plan for implementing MAS in Texas schools. The simultaneous processes of resisting (mobilizing against) epistemic racism and creating (mobilizing for) MAS reflects what MAS scholar Roberto Rodriguez calls “creation/resistance” (2012, 2014). Rodriguez’s concept is significant in this discussion as resisting (reacting against) and creating are both equally important strategies for humanization and social justice. Rodriguez’s concept is also significant as it reminds me that we cannot expend all of our energies resisting, even though we do not have the privilege of ignoring these reprehensible policies and practices. We must continue to create, dream, celebrate, connect, and build the pedagogical and political spaces that will contribute to our communities’ wellbeing. This part of creation/resistance is, needless to say, more challenging to do under repressive regimes that inflict spiritual violence through epistemically racist policies in our public schools.

The NACCS Tejas Foco Statewide Summit on MAS played an important role in building the statewide movement MAS in K-12 schools. For the first four years, Somos MAS in San Antonio served as the site coordinating committee for the Annual Summit (we did hold the summit virtually during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021). Our collective goal as an organization was to support teachers and schools in implementing MAS across all grade levels, content areas, and program models like dual-language education. Below are key developments that took place at every summit:

2016

- Close to 300 teachers, parents, and advocates drove from across the state to attend this inaugural summit at San Antonio College.

- We addressed plans to fight against the adoption of the *Mexican American Heritage* textbook and held various sessions on political and legislative strategies, curriculum development for K-12, and growing support for MAS.
- We also collected data on what individual teachers were doing to teach MAS and developed a plan to increase the number of classes across the state. Teachers also shared resources they were using to create their individual MAS curricula since there were not state standards.

2017

- Dr. Marie “Keta” Miranda, MAS Program Coordinator at UTSA, organized the summit with Somos MAS and the MAS K-12 Committee. More than 200 educators and advocates from across the state gathered at the UTSA Downtown Campus in June.
- We continued to meet in various groups to identify teachers’ and parents’ concerns around teaching MAS and establish goals to move MAS forward.

2018

- Close to 300 educators, administrators, parents, and students gathered at Northwest Vista College to identify institutional barriers, establish priorities, and develop a plan of action to establish MAS in K-12 schools and in the broader community. Dr. Sandra Garza, MAS Coordinator at Northwest Vista College, coordinated the summit with support of Somos MAS and the MAS K-12 Committee.
- The summit partnered with an annual symposium I organized every summer: “Decolonial Epistemologies Symposium: Pedagogies of Liberation in Chicana and Chicano Communities,” held at the UTSA Downtown Campus. It is also important to note that during this time, I also served as an invited MAS faculty at the MAS Teacher’s Academy which took place the week leading to the Statewide Summit.

2019

- The summit was organized by MAS professor Aimee Villarreal, member of Somos MAS and NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 Committee. Close to 200 advocates gathered at Our Lady of the Lake University.

- Sessions focused on best practices for adoption and curriculum development.
- The NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 Committee drafted a resolution to encourage school districts to commit resources necessary to implement MAS courses.
- We added a new Bilingual Education session centered on integrating MAS content into the curriculum at the elementary and middle school level.
- We also added a Higher Education Committee.

2020

- We held our annual statewide summit virtually in Fall 2020, rather than the summer.
- We launched our “Now is the time for MAS!” campaign and invited Congressman Joaquin Castro and Congresswoman Sylvia Garcia, as well as Representatives Rafael Anchia, Mary Gonzalez, and Christina Morales. Rep. Morales would file HB 1504, an ethnic studies bill at the state legislation.

The “Protest the Name Change” Campaign

As we built this mobilizing, organizing, and political space, NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 committee continued to fight for a MAS social studies elective course, with curricular standards that came from the community of scholars. A few months after the SBOE voted against the adoption of the *Mexican American Heritage* textbook, NACCS Tejas Foco wrote a public statement to SBOE member Ruben Cortez outlining all the schools that offered MAS—more than 300 in the state, and more than 100 MAS dual credit courses. Given the increase of students taking MAS (as special topics courses or under the innovative course under the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the geographic diversity where courses were being offered, we pressed for a MAS course and offered our expertise to create MAS TEKS standards. In our letter, we stated: “The current lack of an official TEKS [curricular state standards] for the state is preventing the course from being offered as an elective option across the state as most schools do not have the resources to develop their curriculum. Also, the lack of a recognized course does not provide an incentive for publishers to create a textbook. Despite the lack of a SBOE approved course and textbook the desire to offer a MAS course is only growing.”

As early as November 2017, we began to press for curricular standards in the absence of a worthy textbook (publishers were not likely going to write a book unless there were standards). In colloquial terms, the SBOE had put the “cart before the horse” when it called for a textbook without curricular standards to guide the writing of the textbook. To make matters worse, the first book submitted had been written by non-experts in the field with no knowledge of MAS. So, members of NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 Committee began to build on the standards created by the Houston ISD MAS Innovative course.

In February 2018, the MAS K-12 Committee held a meeting at the NACCS Tejas Foco conference held at Texas Lutheran University and strategized for the SBOE’s historic vote, which took place on April 10. We specifically discussed our online petition, the media campaign, legislative strategy, state board of education strategy, and formed a planning committee for the MAS demonstration in Austin on April 10th. We also crafted a resolution that organizations could support that called on the SBOE to adopt TEKS standards. We argued that TEKS standards would provide curricular coherence to MAS teachers across the state and would encourage districts to adopt MAS at their campuses.

Finally, on April 13, 2018, the Texas SBOE approved TEKS standards for MAS. This was the first time in Texas and U.S. history that a state board had approved a MAS course (it also opened the pathway for the approval of other ethnic studies courses like African American Studies and Native American Studies). However, the SBOE dimmed this victory when the majority Republican board voted to change the name of the course from “Mexican American Studies” to “Ethnic studies: An Overview of Americans of Mexican descent.” As an organization, we protested this racist proposal and demanded that the SBOE change the name of the course to reflect the name of the field which was recognized by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the counterpart to the Texas SBOE. This unexpected name change was a racist attack on the field and on our community (in the four years we had been organizing for MAS, no one had ever expressed concern with the name of the course)—one that called for the committee to launch yet another statewide campaign for epistemic justice.

One of the main arguments we presented before the SBOE was that using the MAS designation would allow us to align MAS curriculum across the educational pipeline; it would

also grant the courses the necessary transferability from the high schools to the community colleges and universities. We also made the argument that changing the name of the course was ahistorical and misleading. The term Mexican American was not divisive or biased, nor did it suggest a hyphenated (or unassimilable) condition. In our collective statement, we noted: “Mexican American has been the most popular English-language self-referent since at least the middle 1800s and the typical way to refer to Mexican-origin persons. It affirms an American identity and national allegiance at the same time that it claims a Mexican ancestry. In that sense, the term is no different from other groups, such as African Americans, Italian Americans, and Native Americans. Lastly, the use of Mexican is meant to expand on, and not detract from, the meaning of American. The remark by board member Bradley, that to adopt Mexican American Studies is to accept the idea that ‘hyphenated Americans’ do not accept and embrace an American identity, is preposterous, misleading and divisive” (NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 Committee, 2018).

We also argued that names are important, and that Mexican Americans have the inalienable right to name themselves, the field of study our community created out of student activism, and courses that reflected the methodological, epistemological and theoretical frameworks in the field. In defense of our field, we argued that MAS reflects the communities we serve given that Mexican American students comprise 52% of the almost 5.4 million students in Texas schools Pre-K-12 schools. In cities like San Antonio, close to 70% of school age children are of Mexican descent. We also expressed that the name change singled out Mexican American Studies, and in doing so, the SBOE had created a “glaring inconsistency with the other courses included in the vote: Native American Studies, African American Studies, Latino Studies and Asian/Pacific Islander Studies.” Furthermore, we argued that the word “Overview” in the proposed title of this course called “for a cursory treatment and not an in-depth examination of the subject, in contradiction with the broad purpose and content of this course” (MAS K-12 Committee, 2018).

As experts in the field, we also protested the use of “Americans of Mexican Descent” as this was “not a term that most Mexican Americans or Chicanxs identify with and is a throwback to the 1950s Jim Crow era of segregation when Black and Brown children and youth

were denigrated for their race and ethnicity in Texas schools” (MAS K-12 SBOE Public Testimony). We also made the case that Mexican Americans, as Indigenous people to this continent and ethnic/racial minorities in what is today the United States, have the right to self-identification. This right to name oneself at the individual and collective level is protected by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, specifically the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, inspired by provision of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The right to name ourselves and to name courses in an academic field of study created by Brown scholars in our own community is an epistemic justice issue—one that we collectively fought for in the creation of this historic movement.

The SBOE’s decision to misname this MAS course represented another obstacle in our movement for MAS—a reflection of the epistemic racism and spiritual violence we continuously had to fight against over the course of this movement. In preparation for the SBOE’s public hearing on the name change in June 2018, NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 committee members Juan Tejeda, Christopher Carmona (Committee Chair), Angela Valenzuela, Emilio Zamora, and other members of the group drafted a press release in May. We agreed to change our tactic from an “academic approach” of trying to convince the board to change the name of the course based on a number of arguments to a more direct political plan that named the epistemic racism we were confronting. The NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 Committee’s press release questioned the SBOE’s decision:

In light of the naming actions of the TXSBOE: What motivated you to change the name of an entire people? Is it true, as board member Bradley stated to the press, that the TXSBOE would never have approved the MAS course if they had not changed the name? Or is it the case that you wish to discipline Mexican Americans into denying their self-referent and accepting your understanding of who they are?

Given your decision on African American Studies, Native American Studies and Asian and Pacific Islanders Studies courses, why did you single out Mexican American Studies with a different course title? Does this constitute outright discrimination or unconscious bias? Do not all students in Texas public schools deserve to know and understand the

contributions of Mexican Americans to American history without needless political obstructions? (NACCS Tejas MAS K-12 Committee, 2018)

We had a couple weeks to organize our protests and rallies, draft letters to SBOE members, and write op-eds, and educate the community on the importance of electing SBOE leaders who would advocate for Mexican Americans in a state where more than half of school age children are of Mexican heritage.

Through community mobilization, we were able to pressure the SBOE to restore the name of the course to align with the field of study. Immediately following this victory, we mobilized another campaign to press the SBOE to approve state curricular standards—standards reviewed and written by scholars in the field (at no charge to the state). We continued to re-iterate the academic outcomes of students in MAS and Ethnic Studies courses, as demonstrated by the body of research, including higher graduation rates, higher rates of retention, higher grades and overall academic engagement. We also made the case that MAS was already being offered at many high schools across the state and that standards would provide curricular coherence and give publishers standards to develop quality textbooks and instructional materials which would then encourage more districts to implement MAS at their campuses. We also counted on the support of statewide organizations like the Mexican American School Board Association (MASBA), which adopted a resolution in support of TEKS standards for the MAS course. We made our recommendations on June 15th on the day the SBOE voted on the name change and made additional curricular standards, including: (1) more representation of Texas Indigenous people's history to allow students to analyze processes of colonization and its continued impact upon people and the environment; (2) an equitable representation of women throughout the course and their roles in the political, social, cultural, and economic development of Texas and the United States; and (3) room for local histories to reflect community struggles, experiences, and contributions. The committee made additional recommendations in September 2018 (See Figure 4).

Figure 4.

“Protest the Name Change” poster

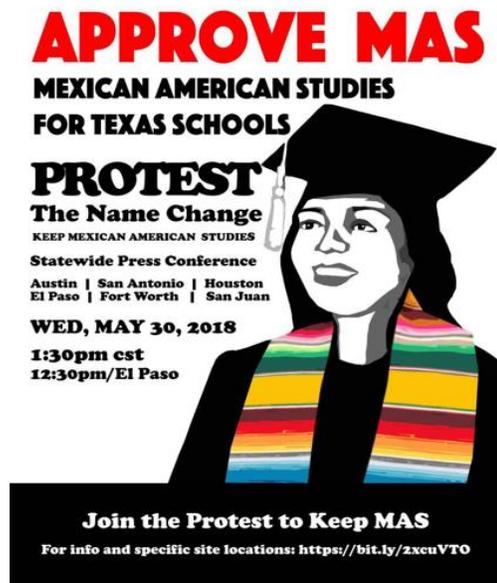


Image created by Ernesto Cuevas, Jr. This poster was created to promote our statewide press conference in preparation for the June 12, 2019 SBOE hearing on the name of the course. The SBOE voted to approve the name of the course to Ethnic Studies: Mexican American Studies on June 15th.

The MAS Teachers’ Academy: Building MAS in the Classroom

In 2015, following the SBOE’s approval of the Special Topics in MAS course, my colleague Dr. Marie “Keta” Miranda created the MAS Teachers’ Academy to support social studies teachers who would be teaching this course for the first time. The MAS academy was and continues to part of the creation/resistance in this decolonial epistemic justice movement.

I joined the MAS Teachers’ Academy in 2018, in the midst of fighting against the epistemic racism and obstacles presented by the majority conservative SBOE. As one of the members of the planning team, I worked with Dr. Marie “Keta” Miranda, graduate students, and school leaders like Dr. Elizabeth Rivas who served as a social studies instructional coach at Harlandale ISD (she had worked with Dr. Miranda since the founding of the academy in 2015). Rivas’ invaluable experience as a curriculum coach and her expertise as a scholar helped create a space that bridged MAS methodological, analytic, and epistemological frameworks in the field, with a decolonial application of content through social studies pedagogies.

It became clear that the academy had little institutional support from the university—just enough funding to cover food (for one of the five days), a Graduate Assistant, and some supplies for teachers to use during the week. The University’s Institute of Texan Cultures (ITC) also hosted us during the week and provided participants with a tour of Los Tejanos exhibit and the archives. As an underfunded academy, we provided the intellectual, pedagogical, curricular, and organizational labor pro bono, for months leading up to the academy, and continued afterwards once the one-week institute ended to plan ahead for the next year. Even though we did not have much institutional funding, we continued to grow the academy once curricular standards were adopted. This support was significant since a majority of the teachers then and now do not have a MAS or Ethnic Studies background in their undergraduate education or teacher preparation.

We also extended the academy in summer 2018 to offer additional professional development workshops for MAS teachers in fall and spring semesters. With the collaboration of Andres Lopez, who had joined the academy as a participant and then joined the academy as part of the planning committee, we began to offer teacher-led workshops for K-12 teachers. He also connected us with Aurelio Montemayor and other members of the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) who became invaluable partners in growing the academy and the movement for MAS in K-12 schools. Montemayor, who was a MAS advocate during the Chicano Movement (and one of the co-founders of the “Curso de la Raza” movement and one of the co-founders of Jacinto Treviño College), brought a liberatory vision and Freirian approach to the epistemic work we were doing. The MAS Teachers’ Academy fall and spring professional development workshops would provide teachers with a space to lead pedagogical and curriculum sessions and where they would share resources through the creation of a “Community of Practice.” Our first Fall workshop in October 2018 was a complete success; close to 100 teachers, parents, and students attended. This would be the first time we would also invite MAS high school students to share their testimonios of what they were learning and how MAS created intergenerational spaces of teaching/learning that stretched beyond the classroom.

In 2019, Dr. Miranda retired and asked that Dr. Gloria Gonzalez, a former doctoral student who knew the logistics and history of the academy, and I co-direct the academy. Even though Miranda had retired from UTSA, she worked with Gonzalez and me to submit a grant to Humanities Texas (we had worked on other grants but had not been funded despite positive reviews). This would be our first grant funded academy and would help fund at least half of the expenses. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we held the 2020 academy virtually over Zoom. Close to 60 teachers participated, many who were going to teach MAS for the first time in San Antonio, including six teachers from North East ISD who were going to teach MAS at every high school campus in the district. Many other teachers joined from Dallas/Fort Worth, Austin, the Rio Grande Valley, and El Paso.

As a co-director of the academy, I worked with Gloria Gonzalez, Aurelio Montemayor, Elizabeth Rivas, and MAS teachers—Anita Cisneros, Araceli Manriquez, and Lucero Saldaña (MAS activists and products of our undergraduate MAS program)—and MAS advocates like Josie Garcia, as well as Olga Estrada, who had been serving as the academy's Graduate Assistant—to continue building the academy into a community-powered space lead by MAS scholars, teachers, and community advocates. Many in the academy have been products of MAS in higher education (taught by professors who were activists in the Chicano Movement) and had been a part of the MAS movement in San Antonio and at the statewide level, working closely with NACCS Tejas Foco MAS Pre-K-12 Committee and Somos MAS. It was an intergenerational space that nurtured a MAS teacher identity and consciousness. One of the ideas that I have continuously stressed is that MAS is not only about introducing teachers to foundational content in the field. While MAS content is important given that a majority of MAS teachers have never had access to MAS in their undergraduate education, teacher education, or professional development, the academy is also committed to cultivating teachers' pedagogies of resistance—pedagogies rooted in the discipline's political, epistemological, ontological, and decolonial methodologies. In other words, the academy has cultivated a paradigm shift in what and how teachers teach/learn and engage with their communities of praxis. Teachers also come to understand that the academy is not a typical professional development space; it's a culturally rooted space of critical self-reflection, teacher identity development, and movement building

where solidarities are nurtured and decolonial epistemic work is sustained with and across our communities of praxis (See Figure 5).

Figure 5.

2021 MAS Teachers' Academy digital flyer



Digital flyer for the 2021 one-week MAS Teachers' Academy. Image created by Linda Monsivais.

Conclusion

As a Mexican American Studies scholar-activist rooted in my community's legacy of educational activism, I examine the various parts of the contemporary MAS K-12 movement in Texas, with attention to the interconnected parts of this epistemic justice movement. Drawing from Rodriguez's concept of creation/resistance, I examine the ways in which the MAS scholar community--with support of students, civil rights organizations, and community allies--came together to mobilize for MAS in K-12 public education and create new epistemic spaces in the process. Within the tradition of Xicana feminist methodologies, I weave my retrospective memory and embodied knowledge to narrate our challenges, victories, and lessons learned in a state that continues to inflict epistemic violence through racist policies like House Bill 3979 and Senate Bill 3.

With the exception of Angela Valenzuela's (2019) analysis of MAS and the historic struggles to decolonize official knowledge in Texas and Arizona, much of the history on the contemporary movement for MAS in Texas K-12 schools has yet to be documented. While schools now offer MAS and other ethnic studies courses, the Texas public education system faces new challenges like Senate Bill 3 (formerly House Bill 3979) which aims to silence any discussions about racial oppression, and the 1836 Project which aims to enforce a white-washed curricula rooted in Texas exceptionalism, myth making and white supremacy. I'm reminded that we must continue to fight against these reprehensible policies, but most importantly, we must continue to build new solidarities within and across our communities of praxis and create new spaces that will nurture our community's struggles for humanization and epistemic justice.

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