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Where Were the Mexicans? The Story is a Conversation

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Abstract

This essay explores the institutionalized master narrative of public institutions and how the mandated policies enacted by public institutions impact social studies teachers when they are delivering instruction to their students. A socio-transformative constructivist framework guides the essay in order to affirm that knowledge is socially constructed and mediated by cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Rodriguez, 1998; Rodriguez & Berryman, 2002). This essay also examines how educators can go beyond the teaching of their course curriculum to enact change at their campus and district. Also, this essay examines how district leaders can support teachers who want to be social justice change agents.

Keywords: Ethnic Studies, Mexican American studies, critical consciousness, integrated curriculum, socio-transformative constructivism

Introduction

You start with the love of the kids, not the love of your subject matter...and know that you're going to go to the wall for them to make sure that they're successful. Then, you better reek of ethnic studies. In history, you talk about the American Revolution, and you throw in Mexican or Spanish surnames: Bernardo Gálvez, the 9,000 Mexican troops that came up here, the money that Mexico donated to Washington for the revolution, the missions that were collecting money for the revolution. The kids knew I cared. They knew that I was there for them even if they had already graduated. They saw the love. So, they had respect for me...I started as a teacher, and they may have to drag me feet first out of the classroom as a teacher.

— Teaching Is a Fight: An Interview with Sal Castro (Ochoa. 2010)

I do not purport that my teaching experience is similar to that of Sal Castro (Ochoa, 2010). After all, Sal Castro is one of the Chicano Movement's best-known advocates. He was a champion for Chicano student rights and fought against unequal conditions in the Los Angeles Unified School District. He is mainly known for providing guidance to high school students in their fight against the discriminatory treatment they suffered in high school. As a result, these Chicano high school students organized blowouts, i.e., walking out of classrooms as a show of protest. These student protests were known as Chicano Blowouts. However, in my classroom, my middle-school students were made aware of the contributions made by Latinas/os and other people of color. I taught for twelve years, and I tried to "reek of ethnic studies" when I could. However, because I was beholden to the state-mandated curriculum, I had to find creative ways to teach ethnic studies and disrupt, when I could, that mandated curriculum. I would say that the main turning point for me took place during a discussion about the American Revolution with my 8th grade US History students. It was sparked by a student question. It was after this question was raised that I began giving serious thought about my own teaching practice and, ultimately, about my dissertation research study and what I wanted to learn about social studies teachers.

The impetus for my research began when a student of mine asked, "Ms., where were the Mexicans?" Before I could begin to formulate an answer, another student chimed in and said, "We were in the back selling *raspas* (snow cones)." The class was predominantly Latina/o,

more specifically, of Mexican descent. They all had a good laugh, as did I, but later I began to internalize this. While I was fully aware of the master narrative and the idea of American Exceptionalism, it had never occurred to me that my students were just as aware of it. They may not have known the term American Exceptionalism, but they knew that they are not represented in the story of the United States that they are taught.

This idea of American Exceptionalism has been part of the story of the United States since its beginning and it is used to describe the country as a distinctively free nation based on democratic ideals and personal liberty. Questions of the validity of this view aside, few of my students feel like they are a part of this democratic ideal because they are not visible in the school curriculum, and neither are their ancestors. The contributions of their Latino ancestors are simply a footnote in history, or their contributions have been trivialized by way of separate periodic events like Hispanic Heritage Month.¹ So, what to do? I began to examine my own positionality as a social studies teacher and concluded that I would not be part of the indoctrination process. Instead, I would do what I could to challenge and disrupt the master narrative and bring various points of view to my students. I would challenge them to ask questions and become critical thinkers. I would demand that they take a position on an issue and defend it with a sound rationale. We would not shy away from issues of race and representation in my class.

The examination of my own positionality led me to also examine the role that my gender plays in the delivery of instruction. It was clear that I also had to address the patriarchal narrative and empower my students to question this as well. The more I considered my positionality, the more I began to wonder how my female social studies colleagues delivered instruction. I began to think of questions like, “Are social studies teachers aware that they are perpetuating the master narrative? If they are aware, do they do something about it? How do women deal with the patriarchal narrative?” These and other questions continued. I narrowed my research focus to Latina social studies teachers because I, too, was a Latina social studies teacher and I wanted to know how other Latina social studies teachers deal or do not deal with the master narrative.

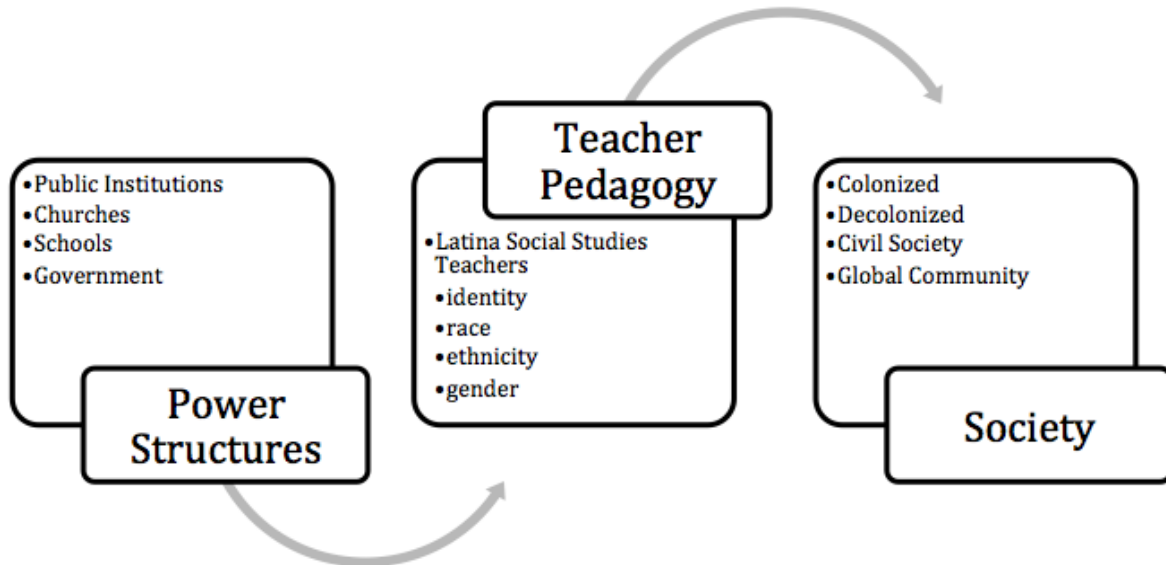
¹ National Hispanic Heritage Month takes place from September 15 to October 15. Its goal is to recognize the histories, cultures and contributions of American citizens whose ancestors came from Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean and Central and South America. However, most of the celebrations center on superficial contributions instead of political and economic contributions and furthers the marginalization of Latinas/os.

The examination and researching of Latina social studies teachers through the application of socio-transformative constructivist framework (sTc), “provided an orientation to teaching and learning that pays close attention to how issues of power, gender, and equity influence not only what subject matter is covered but also how it is taught and to whom” (Rodriguez & Berryman, 2002, p.1019). In addition, the socio-transformative constructivist framework (sTc) afforded me an opportunity to analyze how Latina social studies teachers disrupt the set parameters that have been established by local school districts, district board members, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas State Board of Education—all of which are societal public institutions and all of which are also directly influenced by political currents and the actions of political leaders. Another factor that was analyzed is the use of authentic instruction, i.e., the teacher instruction is meaningful to the student, resulting in student achievement beyond the classroom. Social studies teachers who practice authentic instruction use a variety of primary and secondary resources to give students opportunities to investigate history from various viewpoints, participating in critical interrogation of historical sources. By investigating how teachers connect the primary and secondary resources to real life, I was able to gain an understanding of how teachers create this space for their students.

I share this to give the reader a sense of all that is involved when examining teacher pedagogy. As the secondary social studies instructional coach in Harlandale Independent School District (Harlandale ISD), charged with working with secondary social studies teachers to impact student achievement, I encounter hypothetical concepts numerous times during different intersections related to my work. I often find myself having to “blur the lines” and “move out of my lane” to enact change. By applying the socio-transformative constructivist framework (sTc) to my work, I am able to examine the interconnectedness of power structures, teacher pedagogy, and society. To illustrate this, I have provided a visual representation of the interconnectedness of power structures, teacher pedagogy, and society (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Interconnectedness of Power Structures, Teacher Pedagogy, and Society



This diagram demonstrates how public institutions affect teacher pedagogy and how society, in general, is influenced by these structures. My lived experience as an educator intersects with how these interrelated factors impact the work I do as a social studies instructional coach. Because teachers' delivery and interpretation are contingent on the teachers' lived experiences, it is critical to understand the idea of change agents. To better understand change agents, a reference to the theory of constructivism is needed. Cobern (1993) posits that constructivism is a "model intended to describe learning. The model implies that an individual is always an active agent in the process of meaningful learning. Learning does not occur by transmission but by interpretation" (p.110). If what Cobern theorizes is correct, then one can make an argument that social studies teachers act as interpreters of social studies content. If most of the coursework and teaching instruction were to be delivered using the institutionalized master narrative, then the presupposed position would be that social studies teachers will present their material via the dominant cultural lens. However, if a teacher is an active agent, then one can infer that teachers can present the curriculum using their own personal lenses. This is the overall idea of Figure 1. Because social studies teachers have different lived experiences and use their personal frameworks, one conclusion that can be

drawn is that the interconnectedness of power structures, teacher pedagogy, and society are critical components that need to be analyzed to disrupt public institutions.

The reality is that teachers are forced to work within the mandated educational policies established by the state. Regrettably, educational policy decisions are enacted by people who often have little commonality with the communities that are most impacted by those policies. Most come from privileged backgrounds and adhere to the master narrative without considering how a person's identity, ethnicity, race, and gender impact the personal and professional trajectories of the community members that are marginalized. Additionally, many of those who make education policy are not professional educators and, in the case of social studies education, not historians. Social studies education, in particular, is frequently politicized to reinforce the master narrative, leading to situations such as a recent one in Texas where the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) is legislated against and signed into state law. Social studies teachers are prevented from discussing current events without giving equal time to both sides of issues, regardless of the issue. They also have limitations placed upon the discussion of the history of racism in the United States in their classrooms. These laws are made by policy makers who can't even define CRT. These educational policies impact students of color, which is one of the reasons why all teachers should act on behalf of their students. Moreover, teachers of color have an additional responsibility to act on behalf of their students of color. Responding to these policies is critical to disrupting the master narrative. The main question teachers, specifically teachers of social studies who are charged with teaching both the stories of history and the critical thinking skills of historical analysis, should ask themselves then becomes: How can they disrupt the master narrative?

Some social studies teachers may already feel overwhelmed simply keeping up with their own locally mandated rules. Consider the everyday issues that teachers deal with, i.e., student discipline, administrative demands, high stakes testing, etc. Now add the current layer of xenophobia in the United States and some social studies teachers may just want to bury their heads in the sand and wait for this to pass. Retribution against teachers who are perceived as advocating for social justice is a real fear for teachers who may not be willing to risk their livelihoods. Additionally, Covid-19 has added another layer of frustration and has further exposed the inequities found among marginalized communities. Because the institutionalized master narrative often nullifies the voices of people of color, it is imperative for teachers to

become active change agents. Because of their intersectionality status and because of their ready-made learning forum, i.e., environments that support and promote learning, Latina/o social studies teachers can facilitate these difficult discussions, as well as covertly teach the unwritten and unofficial histories concerning people of color.

Statement of Problem

The current political atmosphere in the United States is both volatile and fascinating. Issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration reform, national healthcare, and foreign policy should be topics where critical discourse should be taking place. In addition to discussions in political and communal spaces, the logical area where this discourse should occur is in schools; this is where young people can learn how to participate in critical discourse and both students and teachers can learn from participating. According to the Seven Themes found in the report *Educating for American Democracy* (2021), students should be taught to engage in civil disagreement regarding controversial topics. This is especially important in communities of color. According to Jones (2016) “In the African American and Latino communities, civic and social engagement is depended upon economics and social capital” (p.4). Language barriers, economics, and other factors limit civic participation by these communities, which leads to their not having a voice in creating the educational policies that impact their children.

Social studies teachers are in the best position when it comes to discussing current events. They have the opportunity to discuss issues such as immigration, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ rights, equal pay, gun liability, the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), Supreme Court decisions, COVID-19, etc. Theoretically, these issues have an impact on individuals because these types of policy decisions will directly impact the personal and professional trajectories of individuals. Interestingly, however, it appears that people of color and the historically marginalized are the ones that have a more tumultuous relationship with public institutions—one that either advances or inhibits their trajectory. One question to ponder is this: How do people who originate from colonized groups negotiate personal and structural conditions? Because a country’s history influences structural conditions, one has to consider how the United States was formed, i.e., via conquests, invasions, and settler colonization. Another question to consider is: How do descendants of colonized people, e.g., American Indians, African Americans, and Mexican Americans, overcome preconceived ideas about their

citizenry? One way of addressing these questions is to examine the role of teachers and how their pedagogy is used to either empower or hinder students who are members of historically marginalized groups.

Purpose of the Essay

Schools are a public institution, but they are often overlooked as power structures that need to be disrupted. Rarely are individuals cognizant enough to understand that the schools they attend are part of a system that is problematic. School is seen in its daily round of assignments, discipline, homework, extracurriculars, etc., rather than as an organized system with an agenda or set of agendas. For the purposes of this essay, schools are regarded as both public institutions and as power structures and are evaluated as such. Having stated that, I argue that teachers are at the epicenter of this ethnically and racially charged storm. In some classrooms across the United States, teachers have a cross-section of the United States' population. In other classrooms, the cross-section is far less diverse; usually, this cross-section is homogenous and based on economic status. This representative sample can be homogenous both ways: many members of the dominant group are together based on economic privilege, or many members of minority groups are together, based on economic disadvantages. Both representative samples are ethnically and racially divided. As race relations continue to deteriorate in society, teachers will be at the forefront of this situation. The teachers who are most responsible for the facilitation of a dialogue on ethnic and race issues are social studies teachers. Because the social studies classroom is the most appropriate stage on which to have these discussions and because these current event topics come up naturally through student questions about events that clearly tie into the historical narrative, social studies teachers will have to make a choice about whether to act and use these ethnic and race issues as teaching moments. A social studies teacher who discusses the history of slavery in the United States can expect students to ask questions about present-day race relations and even challenge the dominant narrative by asking the teacher questions like: Who built the United States? Which people held political, economic, and social power? Why have almost all the presidents been white? Teachers who are responsible for teaching Texas history and the Texas Revolution can expect to face questions from Latina/o students, and others, about who is a Texan, how borders change, and how immigrants should be perceived. So, too, will U.S. history teachers

who teach about immigration, nativist movements like the Know-Nothing Party, and migration within the U.S. be asked about current issues of immigration and xenophobic viewpoints. The teachers' responses, their words, and actions —whether active or inactive—will have an impact on the students and communities they serve in both the immediate and foreseeable future. Thus, the goal of my essay is to explain how the work I do in the Harlandale ISD addresses racially charged conflicts of the past and the present, and how the establishment of Mexican American Studies in the district will empower the students long after they graduate. Also, this essay will address how to go beyond ethnic studies and create a system that can change student trajectories.

Road to Mexican American Studies

Before delving into the initial steps taken to establish Mexican American Studies at Harlandale ISD, it is important to share some basic information about the district. Harlandale ISD has a unique cultural heritage that is inherent to the South Side of San Antonio. San José Mission was founded in 1720 by Padre Antonio Margil de Jesus. In 1793, the secularization of the five San Antonio missions was ordered. The lands that were surveyed were distributed to the local Indigenous peoples, ancestors to some of the residents of the Harlandale ISD community today. In 1888, the Granary at the San Jose Mission served as Harlandale ISD's first attended school. Eventually, the students were moved to the Saucedo House on the mission's plaza. The students were taught by individuals who descended from one of the original Spanish families that came from the Canary Islands to settle in San Antonio in 1731. While some may argue that Harlandale ISD's roots are entrenched in the colonizer's history, it is important to understand that this is the district's history and that it informs its present. One way to ensure that the history of the indigenous peoples is told is to apply the aforementioned socio-transformative constructivist framework (sTc). When applied by the district's social studies teachers, students will learn of the Jumanos, which includes peoples of the Southwest and South Plains. Students will get an understanding of this "other" history, which is just a small portion of the state-mandated curriculum. Students will learn that Jumanos were known for their language skills, the establishment of trade routes, and diplomatic relations with the Spanish and the French. Most importantly, they will learn of the local connections to the indigenous history of the area.

The telling of the “other” history is our goal at Harlandale ISD. Our journey to establishing Mexican American Studies (MAS) began in 2014. In 2014, the Texas State Board of Education (TSBOE) members voted in favor of including ethnic studies in Texas schools. One of the first proposed textbooks for Mexican American Studies in Texas was, *Mexican American Heritage* (Riddle & Angle, 2016) which resulted in controversy in the state. Reyes (2016) posits that the textbook “advances stereotypes [and] does not belong in the curriculum of any state” (p.1). For example, the textbook authors assert that some Mexican Americans “opposed Western civilization and wanted to destroy society [and links] Mexican Americans to the drug trade and illegal immigration and says that Mexican Americans are ambivalent about assimilating into the United States” (Reyes, 2016, p.2). In an article by Rogelio Sáenz (2016) published in June 2016 in the *San Antonio Express-News* Opinion, Sáenz provides background information on the textbook authors, Jaime Riddle and Valerie Angle, and on the publisher, Momentum Instruction. According to Sáenz, the authors are not “known as experts in Mexican American studies and lack the appropriate academic credentials.... [Momentum Instruction is] linked to Cynthia Dunbar, a far-right conservative who served on the Texas State Board of Education from 2007-2011” (Sáenz, 2016, p.3). In point of fact, Dunbar was the CEO of Momentum Instruction. Sáenz refers to basic factual errors found in the textbook and provides a summary of the number of images in the textbook, concluding that photos of white people disproportionately outnumber photos of Mexican Americans. He also notes that the book’s focus is more on other Latino groups instead of on Mexican Americans. The misrepresentation of the Mexican American experience in *Mexican American Heritage* ((Riddle & Angle, 2016) is a prime example of the actions taken by dominant members of society to further advance their agenda under a public institutional guise.

This textbook controversy marked the beginning of the journey to a Mexican American Studies course at Harlandale ISD. Because course catalog processes vary across districts, there is no established process in the state or even in the city. At Harlandale ISD, the initial step must come from a campus teacher who is interested in teaching a new course. Because of my role as district instructional leader, I cannot initiate this step. Doing so would have the appearance of it being sanctioned by the district. Fortunately, there are many social studies teachers who are also social justice activists and seek out opportunities to resist and disrupt the system. Such was the case for Harlandale ISD and the implementation of MAS courses. In this case, the teacher

that initiated this step is a former graduate school peer of mine who works in the district. When we heard of the textbook controversy, we both followed the story in the media and with colleagues in academia to see what would develop. After tracking what was occurring at the state level, Sarah Van Zant, a high social studies teacher, began this journey of a MAS course for Harlandale ISD.

Sarah Van Zant has been teaching for twelve years at Harlandale ISD. She earned a bachelor's degree and has a university-endorsed teaching certificate. Ms. Van Zant also holds a master's degree in bicultural-bilingual studies from the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). She began teaching MAS with actual students during the 2017-2018 academic school year at Harlandale High School. In the ideal world, the process would have been easy. However, the start of this journey was difficult.

In 2015, Harlandale ISD, more specifically, Harlandale High School, began offering Mexican Americans Studies as an elective. In order to get a better understanding of the district's rollout, I have provided a visual representation of the timeline (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Road to Mexican American Studies: Timeline



The road initially traveled was difficult mainly due to competing classes for upper-level students. In my discussions with Ms. Van Zant, I learned that most of the counseling staff, while supportive of MAS, were still suggesting other classes to students. At this point, Ms. Van Zant decided to advertise and recruit students herself. She informed interested students and instructed them to ask counselors to enroll them in the MAS course sections, telling them that they would need to be proactive to have this option. As word spread, more students began to register for the MAS course sections. Eventually, other high school history teachers began to show interest and attended summer workshops in preparation for future academic calendars. Ms. Van Zant blazed the trail. Eventually, McCollum High School would follow Harlandale High School's lead and would establish their own MAS course sections during the 2018-2019 academic calendar. Today, both Harlandale and McCollum High Schools offer MAS courses, as do our non-traditional high schools: STEM Early College High and Frank Tejada Academy. When I asked Ms. Van Zant why she wanted to establish MAS at her campus, she said,

Looking at my own background I wanted to use my masters [in Bicultural-Bilingual studies]. [I] decided to look if [TEA] had a course in Mexican American Studies (MAS) and saw they did and started the paperwork. I just want the kids to know Mexican American history because some of them think in the context of American history, but not outside of the box. Why are there only certain people being mentioned in the history [text]book? I want them [students] to be more aware of their culture and history. Have more information so they're able to make decisions...be able to contribute.

Van Zant, S. (2018, September 12).

The leadership demonstrated by Ms. Van Zant is critical in providing students with opportunities to enroll in ethnic studies courses like MAS. Also, teachers like her are actively providing students with opportunities to learn about the contributions of historically marginalized peoples who have been left out of the master narrative.

Current State of Mexican American Studies

The establishment of MAS at Harlandale ISD has evolved over the years. During the 2017-2018 academic calendar, Ms. Van Zant followed the U.S. history era timeline. This essentially resulted in a U.S. history course that highlighted Mexican American contributions.

During the summer of 2018 two McCollum High School teachers attended the Mexican American Studies (MAS) Teachers Academy offered by the University of Texas at San Antonio. Because of the work I do with the UTSA teachers academy, I was able to meet with these Harlandale ISD teachers and was able to work on a new timeline for the course. This timeline would be different from the one initially followed by Ms. Van Zant. However, because Ms. Van Zant is always thinking about how to enhance her instruction, I was not surprised to learn that she had taken her timeline to a different level. By reflecting on what worked and did not work during the 2017-2018 academic school year, Ms. Van Zant created themes from which her lessons would be created and used them in the 2018-2019 academic year. When the other campus teachers and I learned of this, we immediately thought it was a great idea! With the help of our district social studies coordinator, Rubina Pantoja, the teachers were able to meet during the summer of 2018 and were able to plan curriculum together. I supported the teachers by offering instructional strategies that could be applied to the lessons they developed. While there was still work needed on the district scope and sequence, a draft of the newly created thematic curriculum was used during the 2018-2019 academic calendar. I have provided a visual representation of the themes that guide MAS instruction at the district (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Harlandale MAS Themes

Harlandale MAS Themes		
1st Six Weeks	2nd Six Weeks	3rd Six Weeks
History Part 1	Mexican/Mexican American Literature	Mexican Culture
4th Six Weeks	5th Six Weeks	6th Six Weeks
Mexican/Mexican American Music/Art	History Part 2	Political Activism

This table lists the themes that are part of the district's unit and lesson planning process. The other vital part of the lesson planning process is the Ethnic Studies: Mexican American Studies Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies (TEKS).

Every year the MAS teachers continue to refine and adjust their instruction. To support them, I conduct an annual review of the scope and sequence used in their courses. An added element to the 2020-2021 scope and sequence was the addition of conceptual lenses. Essentially, the detailed topics and TEKS that are used to create lessons are presented via the application of these conceptual lenses, i.e., political, economic, geographic, and social (PEGS). The use and application of these lenses allow the students to be able to access and understand the unit lessons on a broader and "big idea" scale. I have provided a visual representation of a select unit from the district's MAS curriculum guide to illustrate this (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Select Unit: Harlandale MAS Curriculum Guide

1st Six Weeks Unit	Unit Big Idea		
<p>History Part I Mesoamerica - 1920s</p>	<p>This unit uses a conceptual lens of PEGS (Political, Economic, Geographic, and Social) to explore and understand the origins of Mexican American people which emerged as a result of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. In addition, this unit will also explore the foreign threats to the Spanish Empire, specifically the northern frontier and independence movements within the frontier.</p>		
<p>Political</p>	<p>Economic</p>	<p>Geographic</p>	<p>Social</p>
<p>2A, 2B, 3A, 3B • Colonial North America • Mission System • Wars and Treaties and the US/Mexico Border</p>	<p>7D • Relationship to early global economies, development of New Spain's/Mexico's</p>	<p>6A, 6B, 6C, 6D • Wars and Treaties and the US/Mexico Border</p>	<p>2A, 2B, 11A • Gender and power, resistance and emergence of Mexican identities</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borders and borderlands • Impact of Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo 	<p>northern frontier</p>		
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This table shows one unit of study: History Part I: Mesoamerica-1920s. The “big idea” centers on the origins of Mexican American people and foreign threats or colonization. The numbers with letters represent the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies (TEKS) that are associated with the conceptual lenses. For example, MAS standard 2A asks that students be able to explain the significance of events that are considered to be turning points relevant to Mexican American history, i.e., Aztec arrival in Mexico's central valley, the establishment of the Aztec Empire, Hernán Cortés's first encounter with the Aztecs, the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, creation of the New Laws, and Jesuit expulsion from the Americas. Note that in this unit there are eleven additional TEKS. Each TEKS is as specific as the 2A example. While there is not a state-mandated assessment for MAS, the TEKS serve as a guide in our unit and lesson planning process. In addition, the MAS teachers are free to expand beyond the MAS TEKS, but this must be done with a scholarly intent that is meant to add value and relevance to the curriculum.

Mexican American Studies: Collaboration

My pedagogical training, practical classroom teaching, and research interests have impacted how I see society. These factors have intersected seamlessly during my time at Harlandale ISD. One of my personal goals is to go beyond Mexican American studies in my district and empower as many teachers as I can so they can then, in turn, empower their students. The MAS curriculum will always be of paramount importance to me. It is so important that when I was afforded an opportunity to work with teachers beyond Harlandale ISD, I jumped at the chance. I am currently collaborating with the Mexican American Civil Rights Institute (MACRI). This institute is a national organization that is dedicated to chronicling and advancing the contributions of Mexican Americans to the civil rights effort in the United States.

In conjunction with Region 20, the Education Service Center (ESC) serving San Antonio and a large portion of South Texas, MACRI was able to offer four virtual workshops—two in

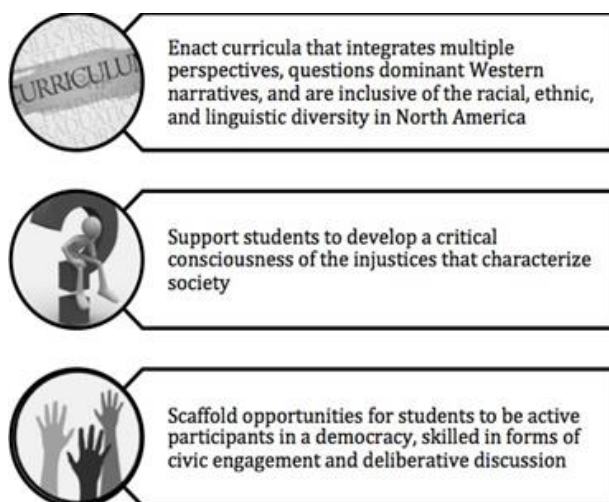
Fall 2020 and two in Spring 2021. The goal was to provide strategies that could be used to integrate MAS into the grade 4 and grade 7 curriculum. The work I do for MACRI has provided me with an opportunity to expand my reach and help teachers outside of my district find ways to resist, disrupt, and expand the mandated curriculum. The work I do with MACRI may also help in establishing an elementary and middle school pipeline to MAS at the high school level, perhaps even eventually establishing a MAS major pipeline to local universities. The opportunities seem to be very attainable and exciting. I look forward to seeing what develops from this work and future MACRI collaborations.

Critical Consciousness: Change Agents at Work

To enact meaningful change, teachers and anyone in the education field should be willing to engage in meaningful learning of the communities they serve. Cobern's (1993) change agent model centers on the idea that individuals are actively engaged in meaningful learning. When meaningful learning is a two-way street, then real change can take place. A change agent refers to a teacher who changes their practices, attitudes, and beliefs (Guskey, 2002). Building on Cobern's (1993) and Guskey's (2002) work is the research by Agarwal et al. (2010) which followed recent graduates and examined how these new inservice teachers enacted social justice curriculum into a viable pedagogy. The social justice principles outlined by Agarwal, et al (2010) are provided in a visual format (see Figure 5).

Figure 5.

Social Justice Principles. Adapted from Agarwal, et al (2010)



The application of these models allows teachers and those who work in the education field to contribute to the welfare of the community and the country by educating students and to engage in critical thinking at a personal and professional level. By evaluating their own personal values, teachers create a space in which they empower their students, encourage their students to be open-minded, and model and affirm ways for their students to be respectful of each other and of people from other groups. Together, teachers and their students learn about repressive actions that target and marginalize specific groups of people, e.g., institutionalized racial slavery and American Indian removal. By examining and learning about both the oppressors and oppressed, these educators work to foster critical thinking in their students, e.g., analyzing primary source documents for bias and point of view and supporting assertions with evidence. The end game is that the students will become active participants in their learning and their community and gain the skills needed by active and engaged citizenry navigating a world filled with contradictory and often biased messages.

Conclusion: Beyond Mexican American Studies

Building on Cobern's (1993) change agent model and the work by Agarwal, et al (2010), I would argue that change agents are also individuals who take steps to enact meaningful change that can impact their own and others' trajectory. That said, one of my personal goals is to go beyond Mexican American studies and support teachers who want to be agents of social justice for themselves and their students in their chosen areas of interest. The lessons I have learned in helping to implement a MAS program within the district have strengthened programs in related areas. With the support of the assistant superintendent and the district social studies coordinator, I have been able to work with teachers who support first-generation and immigrant students. I have had the privilege to veer from "my lane" and work with educators whose focus is working with students who fall under the Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals (DACA) category and are Development, Relief, and Education Alien Minors or DREAMers. Some of these educators include the Bilingual/English as a Second Language (ESL) Coordinator, ESL language specialists, and campus counselors. Collectively, our aim is to serve as social justice change agents. One of our long-term goals has included the establishment of a DREAM center in Harlandale ISD. As of this writing, this goal has been realized. Creating a safe space for our immigrant and first-generation students was important to us. The steps taken to get here

were deliberate and calculated. We took nothing for granted because we understood that “buy-in” was critical to realizing this goal. This first district DREAM center will be housed at McCollum High School and the grand opening will take place in Fall 2021.

As I reflect, I cannot help but think back to my 8th-grade students and that discussion we had about Mexican Americans and the American Revolution. The choices educators make are critical and have a long-lasting impact on students, just as the words of our students can have a lifelong impact on us. In the end, realizing that the choices educators make are critical is the first step to developing critical consciousness, which I hope leads educators to humanize their students and the communities they serve.

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