

Latino demographics, democratic individuality, and educational accountability: A pragmatist's view

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Latino Demographics, Democratic Individuality and Educational Accountability

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Abstract

In an era of heightened teacher and school accountability, what are the implications of standards-based reform for individual Latino children and their democratic self-realization? The educational demography of the fastest growing and largest ethnic group in the US suggests that the future of Latino self-realization is in jeopardy. This commentary posits that the true malfeasance of accountability policies is the loss of the individual and the erasure of individuality and that given the realities of Latino educational trajectory and population growth, the Latinization of America is effectively compromised.

A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth. Hence a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures.

John Dewey, 1916

As John Dewey critiqued early 20th century corporate capitalism's ill-effects on democratic ethics—that the authority given standardization in labor and production suppressed worker intelligence—I am concerned that our current demands for educational standardization and accountability similarly submerge individuality. Specifically, I am alarmed by the potential impact that current policies will have on Latino children, the fastest growing population of poor children. The jobs of the working classes of 1930's America could not tolerate worker idiosyncrasy and demanded worker uniformity in production and “compulsory repetition and a predictable end” (Author, 2001, p. 389). Current educational policy and practice makes no distinction between individual minds in much the same way that 1930's worker uniformity prevailed over worker particularity and distinctiveness in industrial America. By effectively “restricting workers' understanding of and control over their work and by limiting their decision making,” industrial practices deprived individuals of opportunities for development and perpetuated class distinctions (p.389).

Like the 1930's “new individualism” that privileged the moneyed classes over the immigrant poor and working classes, our current view and treatment of the individual in educational policies exposes an ideal that subordinates “the only creative individuality—

that of mind” (Dewey, 1931, p.86). Much of current educational policy directed by standards reform initiatives is ironic given that their stated aims are to attend to the individual child and yet they systematically disregard individuality of mind. Schooling policies that disregard the necessity for democracies to educate individual intelligences by privileging the standardization of educational production paradoxically create the mental poverty that has left many individualities and their democratic contributions in a state of immaturity.

Dewey correctly assessed that a society that structurally contains individuality would lose sight of democratic principles. Instead, democratic public policy should “denote effective regard for whatever is distinctive and unique” in each individual regardless of an individual’s social or economic position (Dewey, 1966/1916, p.151). Dewey understood that the “superior moral claims” of democracies (p. 144) should both motivate and give reason to public policy that provides equal opportunity for the advancement of individuality. Public policy should not exacerbate existing structural problems in society that hold back individuality, but rather supply the means for their amelioration. Thus, educational policy should be guided by democratic prerogative that implicitly requires that its construction and implementation keep in mind the context of individuals—e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class. In other words, democratic educational policy can not ignore nor disregard individual social context, particularly, socio-economic conditions that hinder individual democratic participation. When educational policy does disregard the conditions under which individualities develop, we invoke one of the paradoxes of American democracy: the belief and confidence in the individual and the coincident disregard for an individual’s reality. In

other words, America, through policy and culture, maintains the belief in the supreme value of the individual, her opportunity for equal participation in democracy and equal access to its goods, while simultaneously freeing her from poverty, racial discrimination, and unfettering her from the harms of modernity. Despite the qualifying facts of American life—for example that 35.7% of our children live in poverty and that 28% of those are Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003) our education policies imply that individual self-realization is not compromised by socio-economic structural conditions. The facts of American life, the conditions and circumstances of life in our society, are intangibles in education policy. Thus, the irony of our value of the abstract individual and his or her ascendance to self-realization is that we believe in the power of the individual but frequently do little to actuate the realization of all individualities. This, I argue, is the window dressing of a failing democracy: The value of the individual is theoretical, unapplied and imaginary. Our educational policy should resolve the paradox between our value of the individual and our disregard for the impact of the conditions of American life on the development of that individual. And in our contemporary Latinization of America¹, this is especially critical for the development of poor Latino children.

Educational Policy, the Individual and Social Disparity

Federal educational policy in the United States since Johnson's 1965 ESEA has evolved to include conditions for funding that appear to disregard the socio-economic context that it was once intended to resolve (ESEA, 1965). The language of ESEA put

¹ A term now in the public domain, it is used widely to refer to the rapidly growing Latino population in the U.S. and the influences of Latino cultures on Anglo-American cultures. The term was used in a speech and booklet by then Mayor of San Antonio, Texas, Henry A. Cisneros in which he asserts that a "theme of the next several decades might be called the 'Latinization of America'" (1989).

forth that its intention was to attend to “the special educational needs of low-income families” by “expand[ing] and improv[ing] their educational programs by various means... which contribute to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children” (Section 201, Elementary and Secondary School Act, 1965).

Johnson’s ESEA firmly tied federal aid to children’s poverty and its consequences for their future economic stability (Spring, 1993). Since 1965, however, education policy has retreated from the language (and thus intent) that context matters in the education of the individual and her socio-economic success. For example, the context-attendant ESEA of 1965 has been transformed into reform legislation that speaks more to the accountability of schools to government rather than the “special needs” of the individual borne of poverty. Despite the proposition that it serves as a means for improving academic achievement of disadvantaged children (“close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers”), the language of post-1965 policy shifts the focus away from the original emphasis on the effects of poverty on individuals to the operation and liability of schools to government (“stronger accountability for results”, “increased flexibility and local control”) (ESEA 2002; Spring 1993).

In theory the standards-based reform/school accountability policy that has grown out of the equity legislation of the 1960’s intends to bring educational equality to disenfranchised children by compelling educational content and performance standards to close the achievement gap among low-income, minority children and English Language Learners. In practice, however, this does not appear to be the case (e.g. Neill, Guisbond & Schaeffer, 2004; Meier & Wood, 2004; Public Education Network, 2006). The implementation of standards-based educational reform has assumed that educational

performance—an expression of the individual’s experience and thus developing individuality—can be void of the very conditions that help create that performance consequently contracting Latino individuality.

For example, standards-based reform and school accountability policy like *No Child Left Behind* has been applied in ways that suggest that the context of children’s lives—in particular the fact that Latino children are likely to be poor and live in communities in which housing, transportation and employment opportunities are compromised; that they are likely to attend high poverty schools in which positive peer influence is lacking; and are likely to be English Language Learners (Orfield & Lee, 2005)—all this is disallowed when accounting for their performance as individuals. For instance, the empirical data on the negative effects of NCLB on Latino children living in Texas and California (McNeil, 2005) suggest to me that policy like NCLB is pernicious, ironic policy that undermines their prospective individualities.

Living Proof: Our Latino Children

The Latino population in the United States has increased by more than 50 percent since the previous census and half of that population growth was experienced in just three states, California, Florida and Texas (U. S. Census 2000. Sixty percent of Latino children attend schools in California and Texas, with the next largest concentrations in New York, Chicago and Miami (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2000a). Though Latinos are concentrated in these states and cities, since 1990 Latino population growth has dispersed to include twenty-two other states (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003). The median age of Latinos is younger than the median age for any other racial or ethnic group. Latinos are relatively younger and have high birth rates, ensuring that Latino

children will constitute a larger share of the school-aged population (Chapa & de la Rosa, 2004, p.136). By 2020, we expect that more than 20% all children will be of Latino origin (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).

Latinos are more likely to live in poverty than non-Latinos and among Latinos, Mexican and Puerto Rican children experience much higher rates of poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Latino children constitute 28% of all children in poverty (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003) with Puerto Rican and Mexican children experiencing rates of 44% and 35%, respectively (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000; Hernandez, 1996). Overall, 8.9 million or 63% of all Latino children live in low-income families; in California, 2.6 million and in Texas, 2 million (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006a).

Most Latinos are in low-skill jobs and in low-paying agricultural production (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2002). Latinos trail other racial minorities in managerial and professional employment and because they are the youngest population group, will constitute the second largest segment of the workforce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Latinos are more likely to earn less than and much more likely to be unemployed than non-Hispanic whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Upward mobility of Latinos through employment lags behind the entire population largely due to levels of lower educational attainment lower (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1998; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

Educational performance data suggest that Latino children are less likely to receive early childhood development (e. g. Head Start). Fewer than half (45.3%) of Latino four-year olds are enrolled in pre-primary education, compared to 58% of whites

and 68% of African Americans. Latino children are more likely to repeat grades than whites. Though Latino nine to eleven year olds are as likely to be retained in grade as whites, among the older 12-14 year-olds 35.5% of Latino children are not promoted in grade. By the time Latino children are fifteen to seventeen years old, they have a 40% chance of being held back in grade. Only 6.4% of Latino children are placed in advanced or “gifted” programs. Whites, 17% of the K-12 population, account for 80% of gifted and talented students. Latinos typically attend large and disadvantaged public high schools (Frye 2005) and are less likely to pursue higher education and attain a college degree. Approximately 62% of Latinos ages 25-29 have completed high school; for 16-24 year-olds the drop out rate is more than twice that for African Americans (13%) and four times that for Whites (7.3%). Of all Latinos, Mexican children are the least likely to graduate from high school (U. S. Department of Education, 1997). Latino students are likely to experience many risk factors correlated with dropping out of high school. Latino students are very likely to have parents who did not complete high school, have low family income, and have siblings who did not complete high school (Swail, Cabrera & Lee, 2004).

Latino children are overwhelmingly of Mexican decent, with an ever-increasing number of children of Central and South American origin—primarily Guatemaltecos, Salvadores, Bolivianos and Argentinos—and are likely to attend predominantly minority schools (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2002). Since 1968, Latino enrollment in “intensely segregated” schools (99-100% minority enrollment) has steadily increased (Orfield, 1988). Today, 37% of Latino children attend segregated schools (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). The lack of academic success the consequence of school

segregation for Latino children is derivative of several concomitant predicaments. For example, cuts in bilingual education necessarily affect these schools. In 2000-01, for instance, 79% of Limited English Proficiency students were Spanish-speaking (Kindler, 2002). Latino students are likely to attend poor, large schools in districts with high student-teacher ratios, low per-student expenditure, less qualified teachers, high turnover of students and staff, and poor high school counseling (Gándara, 2001; Orfield, 1988). These schools typically spend \$1,000 less per pupil, on average, than predominantly white, affluent schools (Education Trust, 2001). For example, recent findings of the teacher spending gap in California—the state with the largest Latino enrollment and which has one third of all English Language Learners—disclose that spending gaps in teacher salaries strongly contribute to the “inequitable distribution of teacher talent” in California’s schools. Highly credentialed and experienced teachers in California, are concentrated in white, affluent schools (Education Trust-West, 2005). In California, under prepared teachers are five times more likely to be found in schools with large minority populations (Esch, Chang-Ross, Guha, Tiffany-Morales & Shields, 2004) and nationally, about two thirds of Latino eighth-grade math students have teachers without degrees in mathematics—only half of all white math students have un-credentialed mathematics teachers (Haycock, 1998).

As the fastest growing minority group in the U. S. (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000), we should be especially concerned with our ability to provide truly equal opportunities for Latino children to develop individual gifts, to develop their positive contributions to society. When we restrict their development through educational policies that pre-suppose their individualities, as talents or abilities free of

time, place, and the condition of communities, we resort to an undemocratic vision in which we betray a more fruitful and improved American future. In my view, our current attempts at educational accountability through standardization subvert individuality especially among our poorest and most disenfranchised students because such policy rejects or disallows the links between environment, learning and individuation. Latino children become ‘groups’ of performers free of the individual potentialities and consequential interactions with their environments. As groups, they are products or commodities of a system, not endowments of intelligence and talents of democratic citizenship.

We know that many Latino children will be “left behind” by current accountability policies and practices (e.g. Lee & Wong, 2004; Valenzuela, 2005), but even those who are not—those Latino children who attain proscribed competency—will become individualities educationally standardized. Thus, my anxiety over the knowledge that Latino children will be “left behind” and that Latino public school children—like all others, I will add—will be individualities compromised is pragmatically speaking, a distress over the inevitably diminished contributions of Latinos to our democratic human capital. In the name of educational accountability policies, I fear that we are short-changing the vitality of our American future in general and more explicitly, the strength and influence of America’s most demographically considerable individualities, Latinos.

To attend to the development of individuality, educational policy must regard as significant the conditions that instigate and bring individuality into being. The context of Latino children’s lives—for example, that they are likely to attend intensely segregated poor schools in metropolitan area districts (Orfield & Lee, 2005; U.S.Department of

Commerce, 2000b)—should induce educational policy because we know empirically that these environmental conditions matter for the schooling of individuals. As a pragmatist, I recognize these empirical claims as confirmation that we are biographies written by our unique interactions with our environment, by time and through consequences, and by our “peculiarities that are externally caused” (Dewey, 1998/1940). As a pragmatist, I interpret educational policy that ignores the context of children’s lives as inimical to the development of individuality. So, for our fastest growing group of poor children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), Latino children, how is context-free policy and its consequent peccadillo, uniformity, attending to their individuation and the consequent shaping the Latinization of America? Is the current and future educational demography of Latinos one of diminished individual vitality?

Latino Children and Accountability

For Latino children to improve performance, educational policy reasons that schools will provide children with (a) rigorous curricula designed to prepare students for standards-based testing, (b) teaching by well-prepared, experienced and qualified teachers, (c) effective parent involvement programs, and (d) appropriate testing (Gonzalez, 2002). As a case in point, what have been the effects of accountability reforms (such as NCLB) on Latino education?

Do Latino children have better access to more rigorous curricula, resources and instruction that would prepare them for standard-based content assessment? Latino children are less likely than whites to be placed in both gifted programs and in curricular tracks that most directly prepare them for improved performance on accountability assessments. Algebra, a known “gate-keeping” course, is likely to be taken by only 20%

of Latino eighth graders. Of those Latino students who do advance to high school mathematics, only 8% will take pre-calculus and calculus (NCES, 2000). In some states, the majority of Latino students are often enrolled in below-grade level math courses (Upshur & Vega, 2001). Latino students are likely to attend poor schools, and schools with larger proportions of Latino enrollment tend to spend less on education. In national data we see that though school funding did increase in poor schools from 1990-1998, districts with predominantly Latino students did not see an increase funding (Lee & Wong, 2004). New research is also suggesting that test-driven instruction has watered-down curriculum and altered instruction (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Researchers have identified that preparing for and rehearsing high-stakes tests is not uncommon in poor, high minority schools, and that teachers “focus only on those skills and subjects tested on the high-stakes test” (p.41).

Do Latino children have access to better parent involvement programs? Latino children are likely to attend schools in which the majority of parents believe that they are uninformed about their child’s schooling experiences. Though national polls show that Latino parents want more information in order to assess their child’s educational progress, the same polls show that only 38% of Latino parents believe that they are kept well informed by the schools (Council for Basic Education, 1998).

Do Latino children have access to well trained, experienced and qualified teachers? Most schools use 70 -80% of their Title I monies to pay the salaries of teachers and instructional aides. In the majority of high poverty schools (84%), these monies are used to employ un-credentialed teachers’ aids, 98% of whom taught or assisted in classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Spending gaps in teacher

salaries also compromise the achievement of Latino students, especially those enrolled in low-income minority school districts. A recent assessment of California's school funding practices revealed that California provides fewer dollars to low-income minority districts than it does to affluent districts, a consequence of which is lower spending by poor schools on teacher salaries (Education Trust-West, 2005). High teacher turnover is common in high-poverty schools; it is highest in public schools where over 50% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In California, highly segregated minority schools are five times more likely to be "taught" by an under-qualified teacher (out of subject area or "emergency" licensure) than students in schools with low minority enrollment (Esch, et al , 2004).

Finally, what are the effects of high-stakes testing on Latino children and is the test appropriate to close the achievement gaps?

We know that high-stakes testing is very costly to states, approximately seven billion dollars last year and that they are implemented more frequently in states with higher percentages of African American and Latino children. Specifically, 89% of states with Latino populations greater than the national average have implemented high-stakes testing—for whites the rate is only 42%. African American and Latino students are "subjected to high-stakes tests at higher rates than their white peers" (Amrein & Berliner, 2002, p. 8). The expense of these tests diverts dollars away from other school initiatives that have been proven to affect achievement in low-income schools (Karp, 2003). In general, high-stakes testing and its practices (teaching to the test, narrowing curricula, diminishing the effects of teachers and school professionals) has done very little to

improve the educational conditions of Latino children largely because high-stakes testing is not a measure of individual cognitive, developmental, or socio-cultural growth.

To gauge the impact of high-stakes assessment on Latino children, we can consider that in Texas, where 32% of the population is Latino and where 38% of public school students are Latino, data show that their graduation rates are dropping, that Limited English Language Learners are disaggregated from the reporting of Latino group scores artificially boosting achievement scores, and that overall, these students' performance is declining on national tests (McNeil, 2005). Data show that improvement on academic achievement as measured by high-stakes scores really only occurs in eighth grade math and more significantly, that instead of producing academic achievement, high-stakes tests "disproportionately [negatively] impact students from racial minority, language minority, and low socioeconomic backgrounds" (Amrein & Berliner, 2002, p. 10). And because Limited English Proficiency or English Language Learners comprise a substantial proportion of the Latino population, it is interesting to note that LEP students in Texas show much lower pass rates on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills exam (TAAS) than any other group of students (McNeil, 2005). In a state like California, the number of LEP students has risen 12% since 1994 and 300% since 1980; 79% of LEP students in California are Spanish-speaking; they represent 25% of the total public school population and that number is climbing; and in grades K-3 they represent over a third of all students. In the most recent California Language Census Summary Statistics (1999), over 1.6 million of its students were Spanish-speaking. In New York State's report card for the school year 2003-2004, we see the continuation of an achievement gap between white and racial minority students. For Latino students in New York a 30 percent point

performance gap exists on the English Regents exam (New York State Department of Education, 2005). New York has experienced an increase in the drop-out rate of immigrant youth since the high-stakes re-vamping of the Regents exam: 31% of immigrant youth dropped out in 2001, up from 17% in 1998. This is especially critical given that New York's immigrant student populations are primarily Latino and ELLs. New York's public school ELL population is 14% of the total school population and 65% of all LEP/ELL's are Spanish speaking (Office of Bilingual Education, 2004).

Whether it is by schools pushing out struggling or failing students to ensure better achievement scores, or by diverting money away from more pedagogically sound and developmentally appropriate initiatives like smaller classes, or by instigating the growing number of cheating scandals in schools, high-stakes testing like Massachusetts's MCAS or Texas' TAAS or Florida's HSCT or New Mexico's NMHSCE is an educational policy that ultimately disadvantages Latino children with great precision, reliability, and insincerity.

Latino children have become categories of production; they are cohorts of school success or failure but they are not individual minds, individualities with unique histories that mark us as human beings capable of development. Latino children are not, in the both the means and aims of accountability policy, potentialities—"a category of existence" (Dewey, 1998/1940, p. 223). In a democracy our educational policy should serve and enable educators to actualize the potentialities of individual children, to attend to the capacities and power of developing individualities. But these are not measures that can be standardized, nor can they be assessed by single-indicator accounting systems that ignore the individual in context. As a pragmatist, what I want accountability policy to

deliver is an assessment of how and why individual children develop. John Dewey was correct to believe that the power of democracy was its ability to value individuality because “it is the source of whatever is unpredictable in the world” (p. 224). Our current educational policy will not harness the power of uncertainty—the power of individual growth and development. It tells us little about the individual child and her potential democratic adulthood.

Unfortunately for our American future, education policy of the late 20th and early 21st century has done little to advance democratic aims—that each Latino child can effectively make truly individual claims on education. What I understand current education policy to do for Latino children is to make more systematic their educational *inequality*. To compel schools to provide education that discounts and disbelieves the centrality of the contextualized individual mind, of individuality, in learning—a context that must allow for the demonstrated and verifiable effects of poverty, the lack of health care, and crumbling infrastructure of Latino communities—is to disarm the power of public education in a democracy. We have known for decades that learning is directly related to structures of social and economic inequality (Rothstein, 2004) and yet we have developed and implemented schooling policy that dismisses these conditions. The irony in accountability policy is that we don’t account for the things that actually matter in learning, for those socio-economic conditions and the potentialities of individual children that would likely contract the expanding gap in achievement between Latino children and everybody else. As a society, we continue to narrow the prospects for equal educational opportunity for individual children, for individualities already compromised by the effects of poverty, immigration, and language acquisition with educational policy

concerned more with the business of education—the bottom line, so to speak, that is ultimately toxic for struggling and besieged populations of children.

The highly politicized claim of the Latinization of America does not appear to be one borne of educational equality; rather it is the creation of another large underclass of citizens restricted by educational and economic opportunity. With data suggesting that there is little difference between first and third generation immigrants' attainment of a college degree (Jensen, 2001), we are certain to have labor market outcomes that reflect these educational gaps. Demographic data tell us clearly that “the foreign born and minorities among the third generation are especially disadvantaged in their occupational attainment” and among the first generation, “the most disadvantaged workers in terms of occupational attainment include Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Laotian/Cambodians, Salvadorans, and Dominicans” (p. 41). In fact, data tell us that these groups are “consistently disadvantaged” in terms of labor status, poverty and health care (p. 51).

To improve the range of opportunities for Latino children to effectively self-realize and contribute a wider array of talents to democratic society, educational policy should first view them as individuals and then attend to them as individual learners. Pragmatically, we can begin to do so by using educational policy to tackle some structural conditions in public schooling. For example, recent data gathered by the Pew Hispanic Center supports the contention that changing at least some of the structural characteristics of Latino education—high enrollments and student-teacher ratios and low instructional resources—(Fry, 2005) can affect achievement, or in my view, better educate Latinos as individual learners. Educational policy makers have the power to change these structural conditions that markedly impact the self-realization of Latino

youth by shifting funding priorities in these schools to lower class sizes and recruit and retain experienced teachers. Fewer students receiving more experienced teaching will likely improve Latino achievement (Fry, 2005). Additionally, “authentic accountability” that emphasizes various forms of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, to appraise students in academic and non-academic matters and that includes out-of-school factors such as health care, housing, and nutrition as predictive indicators, would attend to Latino achievement much more fruitfully (Neill, Guisbond, & Schaeffer, (2004). Such change transforms the school from an impersonal learning environment to one more conducive to increased and improved individual attention and consequently, individual growth.

The role of theory is to both inform and comment on policy and it is my hope that my use of pragmatic theory here, especially John Dewey’s, can inform our view of current accountability policy in order to better serve the nation’s fastest growing population. As Dewey noted, the role of philosophers is to critique “the influential beliefs that underlie culture” in order to reconstruct existing social structures to better serve individuals and a society (1998/1931, p. 215). The realities of Latino children in America necessarily need to be taken into account in our education policies—if we really mean for these policies to better the educational experiences of children so that they can improve their own circumstances and in doing so, richly contribute to the growth of our society. Educational accountability in a democratic society should endeavor to provide teachers and school administrators with the means to intelligently and honestly provide equal opportunity for each child as an individual to develop *fully*. This is the true goal of educational accountability in a pluralistic democracy; it is in Dewey’s words, our “our democratic faith in human equality” and “our belief that every human being, independent

of the quality or range of his personal endowment, has the right to equal opportunity with every other person for development of whatever gifts he has” (Dewey, 1998/1939, p. 341). The nation’s Latino children have not and will not be equally served by current education policy and as a consequence, their future as contributory individualities is in jeopardy.

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