



The Other Struggle for Equal Schools: Mexican Americans during the Civil Rights Era. Rubén Donato. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. 210 pp.

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In *The Other Struggle for Equal Schools: Mexican Americans during the Civil Rights Era*, Rubén Donato provides an account of the efforts made by a Mexican American community to improve its children's educational opportunities. The goal was to find ways to ensure that the children would have access to the same kinds of schooling experience enjoyed by others. It is an account that promotes a much needed understanding of how local politics crucially affects minority children's educational opportunities. The frequently ignored local historical perspective used for this account is especially necessary and fruitful for making sense of that still largely misunderstood aspect of Mexican American educational experience having to do with family and community participation.

The book reveals the local political struggle between the Mexican American and white communities in a central California school district (Brownfield) by describing "a dialogue of ideologies and educational reform proposals" (p. 8). The import of this dialogue can be fully appreciated only by reference to educational policy at both the national and state levels and within a historical context that takes into account the particularities of the economic, social, and political situation of Mexican Americans at national, regional, and local levels. Donato provides all of this contextualization in an informative, effective way so that, while following events and the actions of individual participants, a reader's understanding is never confined only to their most immediate relevance.

Donato begins with an overview of Mexican American schooling experiences in the Southwest in general, and in California in particular, during the approximately thirty years before the civil rights era of the 1960s. He describes the social, political, and economic trends that tended to promote school segregation and a general disenfranchising of the Mexican American population. He then focuses on the evolution of the Brownfield schools during that time until their consolidation in 1964 to form the rural suburban Brownfield Unified School District. This sets the stage for the description of later struggles concerning desegregation and equal educational opportunity: "the plight of the Mexican Americans began to emerge ... class



differentiation became obvious. Privilege characterized the white student experience, while most Mexican American students led a ‘third-class’ existence” (p. 8).

With this social context clearly established and documented, the book goes on to provide a carefully detailed description of the emergence of grassroots activism within the Brownfield Mexican American community during an approximately fifteen-year period, from the mid-1960s through 1979. One can consider the movement’s effectiveness in promoting alternative schooling programs for children and in generating innovations that allowed for more communication with school authorities. These efforts and the kinds of resistance they encountered are described in regard to a number of issues that were part of the national and state educational discourse during that time period, issues that were being faced in many other school districts around the country. First is the movement toward year-round education, second the implementation of bilingual education, and finally the issue of school segregation. It is easy to get caught up in the descriptions of unfolding events which include parts of interviews with educational authorities, teachers, and community members who were active in the campaign, as well as letters written to the local newspaper by individuals from the district’s various social and ethnic groupings. The intricate complexities of the issues and concerns become apparent, and the emotional and personal involvement of the participants palpable. One can recognize familiar personalities and positions.

The subject matter as well as the high-quality scholarship exhibited in this book make it appropriate reading for educational historians. Yet it is perhaps of even greater interest and usefulness to a more widespread population of students, policymakers, and the general public. In the context of the current debate and recent vote in California against bilingual education, this book can do much to further our understanding of some of the processes and issues involved. A number of common understandings come to be seen as misconceptions or distorted simplifications. Most importantly, Mexican Americans are shown to be deeply concerned and active about promoting and defending their children’s right to a quality education, despite strong resistance and a relative lack of power: “Contrary to determinist notions that viewed Mexican Americans as passive victims of dominant institutional and ideological structures, they demonstrated the capacity of a powerless minority group to organize and mount a serious campaign for educational justice” (p. 85). Also, it becomes clear to the reader that questions of bilingual policies and their implementation cannot be adequately understood solely in linguistic or learning terms; they can never be reduced to problems of second-language acquisition. Rather, the complexity of any given historical, social, and economic context must be considered when devising and implementing linguistic educational policy. Donato shows us that whereas bilingual programs in many cases lead to more effective learning for Mexican American



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children, they can in other cases be counterproductive by allowing for “linguistic segregation” (p. 128). Given the current state of our knowledge in these areas, *The Other Struggle for Equal Schools* is an extremely timely and important contribution, a tremendous source of information and insight.

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