'Nosotros Venceremos'; Accommodations and Inclusion for Hispanic Immigrants in the Lower West Side’s Chicago Public Schools, 1960-1980

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Abstract

Today Chicago is known as a sanctuary city, in part because of the city’s accommodations for diversity in public schools. Beginning with various waves of European immigrants in the late 1700s, Americans sought to assimilate newcomers through institutions like public school. During this time, most schools implemented a “sink or swim” method for integrating immigrant and migrant students; they were put into all-English classes with often no aid from their teachers or other students. As the main source of immigration became Latin America and the number of immigrants surged in the late 1960s, there was greater demand for more inclusive language programs and a shift towards cultural appreciation from the parents and leaders of the Hispanic community. Many libraries and community centers in the Lower West Side, like Casa Aztlán and the Pilsen branch Chicago Public Library, offered English classes and tutoring for children and adults alike.

I have predicted that the wave of accommodations for Hispanic immigrant, as well as the incorporation of cultural diversity came about due to pressure from immigrant parents and community programs that provided the additional aid needed for English Language Learners and other struggling learners. The city’s cultural and bilingual programs may have begun in response to a huge wave of Hispanic immigrants into the city. I also predicted that those leading the demand for inclusion faced opposition from native-born political and educational leaders who thought that the children of Hispanic immigrants would be to difficult to educate.

Figure 1: Map illustrating the Spanish-speaking population in the metropolitan area (1970) from a report funded by the City of Chicago Department of Development and Planning entitled, Chicago’s Spanish-Speaking Population: Selected Statistics

“Some local activists worked in social service agencies, formed community-based organizations, and began building coalitions with other groups across the city. Others had more strident critiques of American society and envisioned radical social changes that struck at the root of inequality.” – Fernandez, From the near West Side to 18th Street: Mexican Community Formation and Activism in Mid-Twentieth Century Chicago

Figure 2: Members of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council and other parents rallied to ensure high caliber education that incorporates cultural needs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to dismantle the stereotype of the passive Hispanic Spanish-speaker and bring to light the community leaders and parents that fought to improve their children’s education. The conflict shaped Hispanic culture in Chicago, and defined the neighborhoods on the Lower West Side, such as Pilsen.

My research will be focused solely on Hispanic immigrants, mainly Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. The lower West side of Chicago, and schools like Benito Juarez Community Academy, will be the area that I will be researching because most Hispanic immigrants tended to gather together there. I will be looking at Chicago Public School records from the 1960s onward, as well as local publications from the neighborhoods. The primary sources that I will be using will be in both English and Spanish.

Figure 3: Benito Juarez Community Academy was the first Chicago high school to serve the Pilsen neighborhood specifically.