

Book Review

Learning from Latino Teachers

by Gilda L. Ochoa

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007

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As a former assistant superintendent and currently as an administrator in a university's teacher preparation program who interviews each candidate seeking admission, I attempt to discern not only a candidate's potential for becoming an effective teacher, but also the extent to which the candidate's values, perspectives, and goals are congruent with those of the institution. In other words, I try to determine, is there a fit? Significant criteria for admitting candidates to my institution's teacher preparation program are their understanding of social justice as well as their potential for effectively teaching a diverse student population. For California and the Southwest, a major segment of the diverse student population is comprised of Latinos, many of whom are English learners.

It is the nature of Latinos' cultural and political histories that have drawn the attention of author Gilda Ochoa, an associate professor of sociology and Chicano studies at Pomona College in Southern California. *Learning from Latino Teachers* is a careful examination of the challenges many Latino students face in schools. According to Ochoa, one's understanding of the challenges Latino students encounter is an important first step toward the attainment of her ambitious goal to accelerate the movement "toward a radical restructuring of schools and society" (p. xiii).

Ochoa indicates her writing has been influenced by her role as a Latina feminist and by research that not only has a social justice orien-

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tation, but also values experience as a form of knowledge, yet she does not allude to a specific conceptual framework in which her research is grounded. Identifying Ochoa's specific conceptual framework should not be inconsequential to K-12 educators who face the daily challenges of educating children, because her lens of Latino/Latina critical theory helps the reader understand how the history, culture, language, and experiences of Latinos have been devalued and omitted from the public school curriculum (Bernal, 2002).

Learning from Latino Teachers is organized in three major sections: "Background," "Family and School," and "Improving Outcomes for Latina/o Students." Each section consists of three or four chapters. The first section, "Background," provides the historical and socio-political context for Ochoa's research and findings. In "Background," Ochoa describes how the educational system has exacerbated the marginalization of Latinos by perpetuating stereotypes and minimally reflecting their history and culture. Also in this section Ochoa reviews relevant statistical information concerning Latino students; as an illustration, only 14 percent of the California teacher workforce is comprised of Latinos and only 60 percent of Latinos graduate from California high schools. The statistical information complements a prominent theme that runs throughout the fabric of the book that deals with the cultural and linguistic deficiencies of Latinos: "students who do not perform well in school are to blame: they are lazy, they lack the intellectual ability, or their parents do not value education" (p. 27).

Also in the initial section of the book, Ochoa describes the nature of the research that led to the writing of *Learning from Latino Teachers*. That is, the book's content is based on data primarily generated by interviews she conducted with 18 elementary and secondary Latino teachers, yet her findings are supplemented by information acquired through additional interviews of family members, students, and school officials. The teachers who were interviewed included five elementary teachers, eight middle school teachers, five high school teachers, and a single teacher with experience in elementary and secondary schools. The mean of teaching experience was 11.1 years, which ranged from one year to forty-one. Fifteen of the teachers were second generation Latinos, while the remaining three were first, fourth, and sixth generation. Fifteen were female. The interviews, "insightful stories" and "powerful visions," not only dealt with the interviewees' teaching experiences, but also their struggles as working class and immigrant Latino students who successfully navigated elementary and secondary school as well as college teacher training programs. The interviewees' stories and visions serve a valuable purpose because they

[P]rovide important strategies on how [Latino] students might better resist the barriers they encounter throughout the educational pipeline . . . They provide a vision of how we can all work together for schools and communities that are premised on love and justice over competition and inequality. (pp. 19-20)

In the second section, “Family and School,” Ochoa provides an insightful examination of the nature of the Latino family and how Latino parents strive to maintain cultural values as they deal with schools such as those in the *Williams* case that failed to provide students with equal access to instructional materials, appropriate facilities, and qualified instructors (CA Department of Education, 2008). Ochoa indicates the shortcomings of the educational system—the second rate facilities as well as the unsatisfactory resources and curriculum—may exert a negative influence not only on a child’s self-esteem and achievement, but also on her familial and communal relationships. Ochoa feels the nature of contemporary schooling may be *subtractive* of what Latino students know when they enter the system and could stifle significant learning opportunities and the development of essential relationships with fellow students and teachers. The subtractive nature of schooling is exemplified in the dilemma Latino parents frequently encounter while striving to ensure a successful school experience for their children. Latino parents may realize success may be dependent on their child’s ability to ignore or reject traditional and essential family values such as *familismo*, an important cultural value that encompasses the notions of family support, family honor, and the subjugation of self for family (Delgado, 2007).

In “Family and School,” Ochoa attempts to dispel the myth that Latino parents do not value education by describing the actual manner in which Latino parents do support their children in school. In general, Latino parents foster and bolster their children’s educational efforts through “non traditional forms of encouragement and modeling” (p.82). As do most parents, Latino parents traditionally raise their children to be ethical, well mannered, and obedient, but they also expect the teacher and the educational program to supplement a child’s moral and ethical development, i.e., the *whole* person (Prado-Olmos & Marquez, 2001).

Ochoa also provides advice to school leaders and administrators regarding the improvement of the educational system. She indicates school officials should not only create inclusive campuses in which families feel respected, but also should become familiar with the students’ language and culture. According to Ochoa, by providing culturally responsive pedagogy for Latino students, teachers and administrators would have a broad context for understanding Latino experiences, which, in turn, could lead to a reduction in bias and exclusionary practices.

“Improving Outcomes for Latina/o Students” is the third section of the book, and in this part Ochoa examines issues pertaining to curriculum tracking of Latino students, the meritocracy myth, exclusionary ideologies, racist and discriminatory practices, the effects of high stakes testing, Latino students’ lack of preparation for college as well as teachers’ and administrators’ low expectations. Ochoa suggests that educators’ low expectations of Latinos may stem from a comprehensive belief system that is essentially an amalgam of racist ideologies including the duplicitous meritocratic nature of the United States, the notion of white supremacy, and the perceived biological and cultural deficiencies of people of color, all of which are consistent with Latino/Latina critical theory. That is, the discrimination of Latino students persists in the classroom as well as at the institutional level and, according to Ochoa, it is no wonder many Latino students are inadequately prepared to enter college.

Ochoa indicates racist and classist assumptions regarding the *deficiencies* of Latino students frequently lead to their placement in classes that are characterized by rote memorization, drill, and practice as opposed to college preparatory and honors courses in which students are encouraged to think critically, solve problems, evaluate information, and draw conclusions. According to Ochoa, racist and classist assumptions emerged from the cultural deficiency or assimilation theories of the 1920s and 1930s, school desegregation, the 1970s backlash against civil rights progress, the perception that bilingualism is an obstacle to acculturation, as well as white hegemony, all of which persist despite significant judicial and policy decisions. In general, students in the college prep and honors classes are treated differently from others; they are regarded as more intelligent and, therefore, are given access to “unequal knowledge,” which may affect motivation and self-esteem. For Ochoa, the practice of placing some students in honors classes in which they receive a great deal of attention and support while other students, usually students of color, are tracked into less academically demanding classes, is not merely an educational matter, but a significant civil rights issue.

In addition to tracking, the current emphasis and importance placed on standardized and high stakes testing does not bode well for Latino students. Many Latino students are second language learners for whom many assessment scenarios are fundamentally racist because the tests generally fail to evaluate understanding of the subject matter independently of language proficiency (Garcia, 2009). Furthermore, according to Ochoa, Latino students who are not second language learners could be precluded from entering or exiting teacher preparation programs because the “growing use of standardized tests . . . is having a negative impact on the percentage of teachers of color in the profession because of test biases” (p. 189).

In the final section of *Learning from Latino Teachers*, the reader finds the author's recommendations for improving the education system for Latinos. In the final section, Ochoa also offers her perspective regarding the effects of inadequate educational practices, racist attitudes, and standardized testing on students of color, which are practices and conditions that are characteristic of research framed within a context of Latino/Latina critical theory. As stated in the beginning of the book, Ochoa's aim is not to provide a prescription, a step-by-step guide for school improvement and reform, but a description and analysis of the challenges Latino students face to shift the debate toward a "restructuring of schools and society" (p. xiii).

What should teachers and school officials do? As a first step, Ochoa recommends an expansion of the curriculum that would include multicultural materials and culturally relevant pedagogy indicative of students' histories and experiences. Furthermore, the curriculum should address the development of the *whole* person, a notion akin to the Latino notion of *bien educado*, a Latino value that deals not only with education in a formal sense, but one's behavior, respect, and manners (Damon, Lerner & Eisenberg, 2006) as well.

Ochoa feels schools must become institutions in which diversity is evident in the structure, practices, policies, and personnel. A truly diverse staff would include people of color in teaching and administration, a circumstance that transcends common definitions of diversity that often are based on the simple number of racial and ethnic minority instructional assistants, custodians, and food service workers. Although school policy, curriculum, and culture have been resistant to change, as more Latino educators assume administrative and teaching roles, school structures and policies should not prevent them from presenting their funds of knowledge and approaches to teaching and learning. Yet merely increasing the number of Latino administrators and teachers may have a minimal effect on the restructuring of school policy, curriculum, and culture. According to Ochoa, it is only through a transformation of school practices and through a change in the public's perception of public education that would facilitate the development and employment of Latino educators. Schools should develop inclusive environments in which different learning styles are accommodated, where the classrooms are student centered, and where there is evidence of active instruction replete with collaborative learning opportunities.

Learning from Latino Teachers would appeal to a broad audience of educators. For example, administrators and instructors in university level teacher preparation programs would find Ochoa's findings and recommendations pertinent to the development of prospective educators who will

be entering a public school system whose student population of children of color, especially Latinos, is growing. Teachers, administrators, and board members of K-12 districts also would benefit from a reading of Ochoa's book. It is essential K-12 teachers and administrators not only become aware of the language, culture, and academic needs of the Latino students, but also become able to facilitate the organizational and curricular changes that are needed to facilitate the development and implementation of an effective, meaningful educational program, a "restructuring" as Ochoa might say.

Learning from Latino Teachers enables the reader to view Latina and Latino experiences in the educational system through the eyes of a Latina scholar and educator, which for many could be a unique experience. Ochoa is calling for profound change in educational practices that have disenfranchised the Latino student. It is a call for social justice, which can only be accomplished through the support and participation of all educators, irrespective of cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic, and socio-economic distinction. A reading of *Learning from Latino Teachers* enables the reader to walk in the shoes of a Latina educator, thereby providing a new context and a different paradigm for a reexamination of school curriculum and educational practices as they pertain to the cultural and linguistic needs of Latino children. In matters of social justice and civil rights, progress has been made not only because of the efforts of the group who has been treated unjustly, but also because of the support that was generated by a large segment of the general population. In this case, improving educational policy and practice for Latino students will not be realized solely through the efforts of Latinos, but with the understanding and cooperation of the great majority of leaders, educators, and policy makers, irrespective of their race, gender, and ethnicity.

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