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Louie Rodríguez, (2015) associate professor of educational leadership at California State University—San Bernardino, provides an asset-framed actionable plan with examples for local educators, leaders, and community members to create intentional excellence via “excellence campaigns” in his book Intentional Excellence: The Pedagogy, Power and Politics of Excellence in Latina/o Schools and Communities. As a critical response to the accountability reform movement that often results in deficit discourse and test-taking pedagogy in our urban schools, excellence campaigns are a way to promote localized leadership while recognizing community models of excellence from which members of the community can learn. He argues that the current accountability movement has resulted in the “excellence paradox,” which denies the successes and excellence that are evident in schools. Rodríguez (2015) states that the excellence paradox is most prevalent in urban schools. Within the excellence paradox, blaming and shaming educators and public education are commonplace as a way to support the privatization of education. As a matter of social justice and responsibility, Rodríguez proposes that schools and communities need to embrace the pedagogy of excellence by creating their own excellence campaigns. Rodríguez (2015) proposes hope, purpose, possibility, and viability for a pedagogy of excellence in this book.

Excellence campaigns are especially important in urban schools that serve students of color because too often, these schools and students are framed in the deficit discourse of the achievement gap (Valencia & Solarzano, 1997), and the students in these schools often are not presented with local or culturally relevant examples of excellence. Because of the excellence paradox, which results in schools denying their successes, Rodríguez (2015) argues that it is a social responsibility to share models of success from one’s own context. Without local models of excellence that one can culturally identify with, students might believe that success is not available to them. Rodríguez (2015) uses the theoretical grounding of the “Obama effect” in
which researchers sought to study stereotype threat (Steele, 1995) by examining the GRE scores of African Americans during four different periods leading up to the election of President Obama, and they found that the test score gap between Black and White test-takers was diminished during this time period (Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009). This study provides evidence in the power of culturally relevant models of success to inspire more success. Rodriguez (2015) contends that excellence campaigns are important to help counteract stereotype threat. In addition, excellence campaigns espouse additive frames, such as Luis Moll’s (1992) funds of knowledge and Tara Yosso’s (1995) community cultural wealth. By focusing on the community wealth of examples of excellence, students and community members recognize that excellence is occurring and possible within their schools and communities, and they can learn from those examples to achieve success.

The pedagogy of excellence includes several key elements of excellence: organizing for, defining, recognizing, learning from, and sustaining (Rodríguez, 2015). There are several steps to create an excellence campaign. First, a leader who is process-outcome oriented, committed, and purposeful must lead the charge. This leader should reflect the demographics of his or her institution. If administrators are unable to serve as a committed leader due to conflicting roles and obligations, an “excellence engineer” should be appointed to take the leadership role. To organize for excellence, a diversity of stakeholders (leaders, teachers, students, parents, paraprofessionals, and community members) must be established to facilitate the excellence campaign, and they should reflect the demographics of the community and be from the community. Next, the team should obtain community input from diverse members of the institution they represent to define criteria of excellence. It is important to create the definition of excellence locally instead of relying on existing definitions that exist in broader policy. Next, excellence must be recognized by nominations from the school and/or community. When sharing examples of success, it is important to avoid simply highlighting success stories. Instead, the stories serve as counter-narratives that should exemplify adversity and the concrete steps implemented to overcome these challenges with mentorship and community support. Finally, excellence must be sustained or it will run the risk of becoming another short-lived policy.

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1 Stereotype threat refers to the phenomena of being stereotyped negatively about one of your identities (e.g., race, gender, or age) and being treated accordingly. As one cares about what he/she is doing, this stereotype threat can be upsetting and distracting, ultimately interfering with one’s functioning in a given situation (Gates, 2009).
initiative that comes and goes, resulting in less buy-in from teachers. Rodríguez (2015) shares his experience with excellence campaigns in elementary, middle, and high schools to provide examples and models to the reader. He also provides a clear framework for how excellence campaigns can be extended to a community at large.

In the last chapter of the book, Rodríguez makes explicit the evolving dimensions and non-negotiables of excellence in Latina/o education. With his vast experience in urban schools that primarily serve students of color in various regions of the country and his extensive scholarship, Rodríguez powerfully moves readers toward a pedagogy of excellence in Latina/o education. While acknowledging that the excellence paradox in Latina/o communities is not accidental because of the accountability reforms, the testing movement, stacked inequity in communities of color, and a political anti-public school movement, Rodríguez (2015) states, “the power and pedagogy of excellence is meant to bring people together, stimulate local dialogues about excellence, and trigger additive and purposeful action for educational equity and excellence in our most marginalized schools and communities” (p. 132). He asserts that excellence involves six evolving dimensions. Excellence is: contagious, inherently additive, politically viable, a responsibility, a curricular and pedagogical tool, and excellence is about equity and social justice (Rodríguez, 2015, p. 127 – 128). Additionally, Rodríguez (2015) shares four non-negotiable levers for facilitating excellence campaigns that were evidenced in his work with many schools and communities: leadership, community engagement, contextual mindfulness, and a process-outcome orientation.

This book is an excellent resource for teachers, leaders, staff, and community members who want to move toward a pedagogy of excellence in Latina/o education because it inspires and offers clear and manageable steps to create one’s own excellence campaign. Although Rodríguez mentions the educational experiences of Latinas/os throughout the book, the last chapter is when he most deliberately articulates the difference in Latina/o educational experiences and pedagogical needs compared to other communities of color. Despite the challenging political context of education, Rodríguez (2015) maintains that urban schools and community members need to localize leadership to change the culture of schools, and they cannot depend on policymakers to make the meaningful changes that are needed. Moving toward a pedagogy of excellence promotes a real cultural change in schools, which can result in lasting results.
References


