

Introduction

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Latino/a students have been educated in U.S. schools for centuries, and still more will be arriving at our schools tomorrow. This reality is but one indication of the multiplicity of experiences that define the long, complex, and troubled history of Latinos/as in U.S. schools. Although they are more visible today than at any other time in our history, the fact remains that the sociocultural, political, economic, and historical context of Latino/a education is hardly known outside the university offices of academics who study it, or of teachers and administrators who teach Latino/a students. Given both the growing number of U.S.-born Latinos/as as well as the dramatically increasing number of newcomers, the need to confront the serious shortcomings of the education of Latinos/as has never been more urgent. In their comprehensive analysis of the education of Latinos/as in the U.S., Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras (2009) put it bluntly: “Today,” they write, “the most urgent challenge for the American educational system has a Latino face” (p. 1).

Nevertheless, there is not just one Latino/a reality. The Latino community in the U.S. is incredibly diverse in terms of national origin, race, time in the U.S., political orientation, English and Spanish language ability and usage (among other home languages), and many other differences. Latinos/as in the U.S. include Mexican Americans, some of whom have been “here” before there was a “here,” that is, before the Southwest was annexed by the U.S. through the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848. Puerto Ricans began immigrating in large numbers in the late 1940s, although a Puerto Rican community existed in New York and Tampa as early as the 1860s, as did a small Cuban community. The large influx of Cubans began in the 1960s, and they were joined by large numbers of Dominicans, Salvadorans, and other Central and South Americans in the following decades. Thus, to claim that there is just one “Latino perspective” or “Latino experience” is to miss the multiplicity and complexity of our communities.

The work of addressing the challenge of the education of Latinos/as has begun through, among other efforts, the National Latino/a Education Research and Policy Project, or NLERAP. Beginning in 2000 as a national initiative of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College, NLERAP’s goal has been to add multiple Latino/a perspectives to the type of educational research needed to meet the needs of our communities throughout the U.S. After hosting a series of regional meetings around the country that invited educators, community activists, university scholars, and others within the broader Latino/a community to comment on the pressing educational needs of Latinos/as, the NLERAP National Advisory Board developed and published a research agenda (NLERAP, 2003). The Agenda articulated a framework for using participatory and collaborative research results to influence the outcomes of schooling for Latino/a youth. In addition to the Agenda document, the project also produced an academic volume (Pedraza & Rivera, 2005) with chapters written by leading scholars that substantiated the need for a community approach to the investigation of schooling issues for Latinos/as. In conjunction with the release of the volume, a press conference was held in Washington, D.C. to introduce the concerns it addressed (Viadero, 2005). From 2004 to 2009, NLERAP conducted its first local research project, with funding from the Ford Foundation, focused on the theme of arts in education at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in New York City (Rivera, Medellín-Paz, Pedraza et al., 2010).

Although the work of NLERAP has been important in making the issues of Latino/a education more

visible to the general public through national conferences, publications, and press releases, in 2007, the National Board met to discuss further actions that could promote the agenda even more vigorously. The Board decided that what was needed was a critical review of the literature in one of the four research areas suggested in the NLERAP Agenda document (2003). After a lengthy discussion, consensus emerged among board members that the *Sociocultural, Political, Economic, and Historical Context of Latino/a Education* was the most useful area to develop further because it could serve as a foundation for the others (Assessment and Accountability; Teacher Education and Professional Development; and Arts in Education).

This document is the result of those deliberations. In it, we address the context of education for Latino/as on the three levels enunciated in the Agenda documents (i.e., *interpersonal, instructional, and institutional*). We envision the review as a critical synthesis of the literature, intended for both professional and scholarly audiences. We expect that it will be used in teacher and administrative professional preparation courses as well as for developing proposals for research studies on the education of Latinos/as around the nation. The intent is not to define or limit *a priori* the parameters of any such research, but rather to provide a useful tool for researchers, practitioners, advocates, and administrators undertaking studies relating to the improvement of education for Latino/a students in their local areas. A major purpose is to contextualize the framework and approaches that have been used previously by others to analyze schooling problems found in different Latino/a communities around the country. Although we include all Latinos/as in this document, we are especially mindful of new immigrants, particularly those in geographic areas where Latino/a families had not traditionally settled until recently, most notably the Southeast and Northwest (Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002). Although most data are not disaggregated according to gender, we also want to caution readers that the current available information makes it quite clear that in most areas of schooling (academic achievement, high school graduation rates, college-going rates, and so forth), females outperform males even more so than in the general population. For example, Gary Orfield documented that in 2000, nearly 59 percent of Latinas graduated from high school compared with only 48 percent of Latinos/as (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). This is a trend worth heeding as policymakers, administrators, and teachers think about potential programs and policies that will benefit male students. More recently, Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras (2009) reviewed data that corroborated this trend, not only in terms of high school graduation rates but also in achievement in reading, math, and other content areas.

It is our hope that this review will help guide researchers and others willing to initiate efforts to address the complex problems faced by Latinos/as in school systems both in regions of the country in which they have traditionally settled as well as in regions that are not accustomed to their presence.

The document begins with a description of the NLERAP approach to research on the education of Latinos/as in the U.S. with a focus on sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts, and a description of Participatory Action Research, or PAR, an approach to pedagogy and research that shows great promise in both promoting achievement and encouraging civic engagement. This is followed by a brief general overview of the education of Latinos/as, including both historical and demographic data and an articulation of some of the foremost challenges concerning educational attainment among the various Latino/a communities. The majority of the review addresses three specific contexts: *interpersonal, instructional, and institutional*. The interpersonal context describes the significance of relationships among students, teachers, and families, and also details how using a *funds of knowledge* approach (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 2005) can promote the educational achievement of Latinos/as. The instructional context reviews some of the approaches, both helpful and detrimental, that have been used with Latino/a students, and what can be learned from this history. In the institutional context section, issues such as school climate, high-stakes testing, tracking, and the quality of teachers are addressed. We need to emphasize that, although we separate the paper into three disparate sections, the sections are connected and overlapping. Moreover, each of these sections addresses political issues that affect the education of Latinos/as in myriad ways. For instance, issues of inequitable school financing, privatization, surveillance of undocumented families and raids on immigrants, teacher turnover, the high-stakes nature of testing, and English Only policies are particularly relevant in the institutional section, although they are also implicated in the instructional and interpersonal sections. Scholars, for example, have found that the teacher turnover rate in some schools in California is higher than 50 percent. Clearly, such turnover will have dramatic effects on

the lives and educational outcomes of young people, particularly for those relying on public schools as a site for growth, support, and stability.

Throughout all three sections, a number of vignettes and case studies, focusing mainly on immigrant and English language learners, will be used to illuminate the issues. The paper ends with a brief set of recommendations for charting a new course for the education of Latinos/as.