



# Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

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**Growing Critically Conscious Teachers: A Social Justice Curriculum for Educators of Latino/a Youth. Valenzuela, Angela. (2016). New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 186 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8077-5683-6 (paper). \$26.83 (Paperback).**

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I highly recommend this book for use in teacher education development programs, as it will be an instrument to help both faculty and administrators in K-12 environments and postsecondary institutions navigate the dismal and disheartening educational paths of Latina/o, Mexican, and Native American youth in the United States. Grow Your Own (GWO) initiative is the foundation for this book with an emphasis on the recruitment of Latina/o and Mexicano teachers who live in poor communities. Educational scholar, Sonia Nieto, wrote the forward and was inspired by the various strategies, methodologies, and proven resources to help teachers, educators, and policymakers co-create equitable learning spaces and practices to increase high-school and university degrees for these demographics. This program, GWO, weaves in tightly the teachings, the cultural practices, and historical underpinnings of Latinas/os, Mexicana/os and Native Americans in the United States.

Teacher development is at the core of this work, especially the recruitment of Latinas/os and Mexicans in marginalized communities, serving as an act of resistance. Resistance here refers to, not accepting the traditional ways in which brown children have been neglected in their educational attainment. Valenzuela (2016) discusses discriminatory and racist policies of the American education system that has created and sustained generations of inequitable learning opportunities for children in poor communities. Grow Your Own's philosophy of recruiting Latina/o and Mexican teachers, provides a sense of pride for children who may identify with role models that may look like them, may be bilingual in English and Spanish, and more importantly, understand their culture and *ways of life*. However, it is not a requirement to be Latina/o or Mexican from the same community, because teachers and faculty from all backgrounds can benefit from this program, as long as they are committed to having a positive attitude, and passion to teach in poor communities amidst all the social and emotional challenges that may occur.

Furthermore, GWO supports creating strong and productive relationships for teacher preparation with university instructors and the curriculum development of teacher education. This is necessary for equitable learning and teaching environments for marginalized children and youth. University leaders of color must leverage shared power of policy and practices of teacher preparation with leaders in Latina/o communities. A weakness of this program is the number of students currently participating, which is forty, but the potential to grow from the community into the university environments is strong, as the Latina/o demographic continues to rise.

Finally, Grow Your Own embodies a cultural metaphor of, *the Tree*, called *El Arbol*, a Spanish term, with various meanings in indigenous cosmology; the Mayans' say *yaxche-baalche*, which means "trees and humans," a powerful symbol of life (Valenzuela, 2016). The Lakota Nation people have an ancient practice, called *Wiwanyag Wachapi*, the Sundance Ceremony. This most *wakan* (sacred) rite of Sundance connects "trees and humans" for the annual renewal of *life force* for their children and family through the suffering of the Sundancers, as they *dance around the tree, looking up at the sun, in the heat of a summer ceremony* (Brown, 1989, p. 67-68).

The roots of trees are connected to strength, which is present in the philosophy of the social-justice education strategies of GWO. The social-justice work of transforming the demographics of the teaching profession, by increasing Latino/o teacher's presence in school and university classrooms fits this approach. Gándara and Contreras (2009) noted that, "The single most critical resource in any school is the teacher. We all know that well-prepared and experienced teachers for Latino students are in short supply in the schools that they attend" (p. 319). GWO calls for compassionate, non-biased teachers, with good attitudes, to teach in poor communities to support this new bicultural, bilingual landscape that promotes literacies that empower Latinas/os and promotes critical thinking. In the *Journal of Hispanic Education*, Zerquera and Gross (2017), advance the importance for faculty of color at post-secondary environments, "Greater proportions of faculty of color on campus were positively related to greater levels of baccalaureate degree attainment for all students. For Latina/o students, this effect was greatest. This supports efforts for strategic hiring and fostering opportunities within the higher education structure for faculty of color" (p. 224).

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