

BOOK REVIEW

Voces: Latino Students on Life in the United States. (2015).

Maria Carreira and Tom Beeman. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers. 183 pp.

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It is relatively rare for a trade book to be reviewed in an academic journal. María Carreira and Tom Beeman's *Voces: Latino Students on Life in the United States* merits such a review because its poignant anecdotes, insightful analyses, and carefully culled information should form part of the knowledge base of educators across the U.S., where Latinos form one out of every four youth. In this collection, "hundreds" of Latino college graduates, mostly from southern California, were asked to relate a key experience from their childhoods and what they would want teachers and others in leadership positions to know about U.S. Latinos; the authors' stance was one of "respectful curiosity." The anecdotes are divided into four main sections: school, language, culture, and family, with an additional chapter profiling three families in greater depth.

The narratives are honest, humble, and totally accessible as readings for students ranging from eighth grade through the postsecondary level. Some stories are heartwarming, others induce knowing chuckles, but unfortunately too many inspire anger at the treatment of Latino youth by those entrusted with educating them, including stories of academic profiling, linguistic discrimination, and outright racism from classmates and teachers alike. Imagine being prevented from taking college preparatory coursework because of your classification as an ESL student; being punished for speaking your home language at school (yes, this still happens); or a 5th grader losing a student body president election and overhearing a schoolmate say, "I didn't want a Mexican girl to be our president" followed by a teacher telling her to brush it off. Such circumstances are nothing less than what the authors call an "emotionally bruising school environment." Too many teachers, administrators, and school staff who work with language minority children lack adequate training in areas such as bilingualism and language acquisition, such that a climate of "neglect, insensitivity, and hostility" undermines the social and academic development of this vulnerable population.

Carefully woven throughout the anecdotes is relevant data that simultaneously adds depth and ties the quotes together as part of a larger picture. This data includes reports on shift from Spanish to English among U.S. Latinos; quotes by the late great Gloria Anzaldúa and by immigration sociologist Ruben Rumbaut; and Census data about Latino households. All of the *voces* in the book are from college students, arguably a group that has "made it" educationally; one shudders to think about how many bright young people have fallen through the chasms of the system. Fortunately, some lucky individuals in this volume describe teachers who were supportive, and the positive influence such teachers have on students' lives cannot be overestimated.

The chapter about language is the most relevant to educators involved in heritage language education. One of the stated goals of the chapter is to "bring the insights of history, linguistic

science, and Latino youth to bear on discussions surrounding the place of Spanish in American society and in the lives of U.S. Latinos,” and it succeeds in spades. Subheadings in this chapter include “The burden of never being good enough in Spanish,” “The burden of falling in-between languages,” and “The burden of being linguistic mestizos,” experiences that are common around the U.S. Anecdotes include those of students who felt that, as they used Spanish less and less in their relentless pursuit of English mastery, “I realized I was losing a part of me.” This has deeply negative consequences for family dynamics. The double-edged sword of translating for family members – empowering yet sometimes terrifying – is another important theme in this chapter. Anyone who has wondered why Latino communities shift from Spanish to English within two to three generations will find poignant explanations here. Overall, the chapter makes an excellent reading for a heritage language teaching methods course, as well as for students themselves enrolled in Spanish as a heritage language courses.

The chapters about family are both the most positive and the most painful. Up to 80% of immigrant Latino children are separated from their parents at some point during their childhood as a result of immigration, such as when one or both parents stay behind in the country of origin. This causes isolation and sadness among the children. In addition, for many the fear of deportation looms ominously (also evident in the riveting book of anecdotes collected by Anderson & Solis, 2014). The poverty afflicting Latino families compromises their medical care, housing security, sense of self-worth and position among peers, and numerous other issues that have an important impact on how they do in school. Several stories of gender discrimination suffered by girls and young women are unfortunately quite common. Overall, in their new country that is the U.S., immigrant families must “navigat[e] without a map of experience.” But even children of U.S.-raised Latinos experience discrimination and stereotyping, not only from the majority Anglo population but sadly from other Latinos as well; the authors cite a national survey in which 47% of Latinos stated that “Latino on Latino” discrimination is a major problem.

The situation for U.S. Latino youth is nothing short of dire, and in two important ways the authors go beyond simply sharing students’ anecdotes. First, they insist that we contemplate students’ resilience, which they define as cross-cultural communication skills, empathy, problem solving, autonomy, and hope. Both in the chapter conclusions and the discussion questions, they ask readers to interpret students’ anecdotes through the lenses of resourcefulness and promise (for example, “Choose one or two narratives and analyze how resilience is manifested”). Other excellent end-of chapter questions include reflecting on how Latinos and their families are depicted in movies and on television and comparing this with the anecdotes just presented. Online resources and links to effective programs for Latinos are also listed. The second important choice made by the authors is that the book embodies the tenet “Don’t complain without proposing a solution.” Throughout the book they offer concrete ways in which teachers can create an additive school environment for Latino youth. Indeed, the book represents a potent tool of activism.

I will mention here four qualms, mostly minor, that the authors may wish to take into consideration when preparing a second edition (and I sincerely hope this volume sees subsequent editions):

- The anecdotes frequently mention the concept of speaking Spanish “improperly.” I respect that these were students’ words verbatim, but the authors should challenge this idea and defend U.S. Spanish as a valid variety. Similarly, the use of the word “Spanglish” should be unpacked and examined (for example, see Otheguy & Zentella, 2009).
- Throughout the book, the authors collate a “recipe for additive schooling” that includes cultural sensitivity, assessing writing proficiency with appropriate measures, and helping students become fully competent in both Spanish and English. Yet they do not mention the promise of dual language education programs, a form of bilingual education in which students are taught literacy and content in two languages from kindergarten through fifth or eighth grade. Well-executed dual language education programs have been shown to have many of the ingredients in the “recipe” proposed by the authors. They have been shown to result in the highest English proficiency, Spanish proficiency, and academic achievement for Latino children compared to all other educational program types (Lindholm Leary, 2013) and thus they very likely contribute to closing the Latino education gap. The authors do mention that use of the home language in educational settings can expedite English acquisition and content learning, but this fact, as well as dual language programs, should be promoted loudly and widely.
- The U.S. is listed as having 35.5 million Spanish speakers over the age of 5. However, if we add the approximately 11 million undocumented Latin Americans in the country (Pew Hispanic Center, 2013) and the 2.8 million non-Latinos who report using Spanish in the home (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013), the total rises to 49.3 million Spanish speakers, putting the U.S. in the second position in the world. It can be empowering for Latino youth to contemplate this.
- The authors mention that many individuals can have a strong command of English grammar and vocabulary but still have a “foreign accent.” While this is certainly true, it would be illustrative to discuss Latino English (Fought, 2003) so that readers come away with a clear understanding of the difference between a second language accent and a native English variety that has traits that may sound “foreign.”

Overall, this is a groundbreaking volume that can and should be used in courses about Spanish as a heritage language, in Latin@ Studies, and in K-12 education courses of all stripes, where it shares company with Oberg de la Garza and Lavinge’s excellent *Salsa Dancing in Gym Shoes: Exploring Cross-Cultural Missteps with Latinos in the Classroom* (2015) but delivers a stronger personal punch. The book’s combination of compassion, research-driven suggestions, and cultural sensitivity is not surprising given the participation of co-author María Carreira, whose professional trajectory is among the most impactful of any scholar in heritage language education in the last three decades and whose peer-reviewed research, language textbooks, and online teacher preparation modules are indispensable staples in the field. Given that the future of the United States is inextricably bound to that of Latino children, the information in this book is crucial for educators as well as potentially therapeutic for Latino student readers themselves.

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