
Foreword

America's growing diverse society has an increasing need for educators who appreciate the nation's cultural heritages. The nation's minorities in aggregate have become the majority population in our public schools, and as they grow up the United States will become a minority majority nation. If we are to meet these, our students' needs, it is imperative that we acknowledge and capitalize on the assets of their rich cultural heritages.

In this book, Carmella Franco, Maria Ott, and Darline Robles share the experiences that molded them into successful school superintendents. They share their inspirational stories of braving discrimination, of incorporating their cultural values into the profession, and—without forgetting the classroom child—of maximizing each opportunity to be the best candidate for the next job.

With authentic voices they reveal their personal experiences as leaders in a system that still has not fully opened its doors of opportunity to all students. The authors speak frankly about the problems they faced as educational leaders of color, and as women in charge of male-dominated institutions. Structuring their contributions as personal journals, the authors discuss how they dealt successfully with intransigent school district trustees, unsupportive supervisors and co-workers, and all the other obstacles that our discriminatory society set in their way.

Equally important, they vigorously affirm that their home cultures have enriched them as individuals and contributed to their professional success. They drew on deep wells of community support, effectively tackled ingrained institutional problems with culturally guided strategies, and lent their strong voices to students and families who previously had no one in a position of power to speak for them.

These three women tore down public educational barriers, creating effective programs to address student needs to bring greater acceptance of different cultures to classrooms, thereby enlarging the experiences of all their students.

As a Latina who has also served as an urban school district superintendent and in a national leadership position, I recognize first hand the challenges that these authors faced. I also can personally vouch for the challenges that so many Latino and other language minority children continue to experience in our public schools. Their stories are real; they are achingly honest.

While each woman speaks about her unique experience as a successful educational professional, the theme of home culture weaves through each narrative. At one time, this nation blatantly repressed its cultural and gender differences. Now our somewhat wiser country more readily acknowledges that these differences will not fragment us, but will make us a stronger and more enlightened people. By embracing our differences, we can face the challenges of the 21st century with more confidence.

The authors acknowledge the mentors who helped them navigate their career paths at a time when there were no Latina role models. Now, they mentor a new generation of aspiring superintendents. I too have asked advice of each of these wise women at one time or another. I can confirm that they speak authoritatively about the assets that a strong Latina leader can bring to public education.

Our culture helps to define our identity. To understand one's home culture is an essential for a self-examined life. This book may compel you to examine your own core values. Like the authors themselves, their book can be a change agent: as it retraces each author's life path, it poses core questions that all of us should address.

The book will ask you to consider your personal relationship to your own culture. How has your own family culture affected your outlook and fundamental beliefs? What aspects of your home culture do you still live by, and what have you left behind? How do you reconcile home values and majoritarian values? How do you respond to societal change? How well do you embrace the values of other cultures? And how do you—as a public sector professional—cope with individuals and organizations that subtly or deliberately denigrate certain groups of children, or their parents and communities?

Their book can prompt you to consider your own life narrative, and to acknowledge the cultures around you and those of your own heritage. As you read the chapters detailing the steps each of these remarkable women took to build her career, you will be asked to

respond to the same questions they addressed at crucial points in their career, and to take a deeper look into yourself.

This book is more than a trilogy of memoirs, a career-building guide, or a much-needed look into the impact of culture and education. It is a thought-provoking exercise that we all can carry out to better understand ourselves, our nation's cultures, and the importance of keeping an open heart and mind to the differences that children bring to the public schoolhouse door. Their narratives can help us give proper perspective to the children's cultural treasures, which in turn can help us sustain our nation's preeminence in the new century.

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