

A Few Words Before Starting

My father was fond of classic cars. In his lifetime he acquired a 1939 Ford pickup, a 1940 Ford coupe, a Model A, a 1955 Chevy Bellaire hardtop, and 1956 Ford pickup. I never gave much thought to his hobby of refurbishing and collecting old cars. But one early spring morning, I made an interesting observation that would lead me to write this book. I had traveled from Chicago to visit home (in San Antonio, Texas) when my father asked me to join him on a run to Pick-n-Pull. For readers who are unfamiliar with Pick-n-Pull, it is known as a self-service auto and truck dismantler. Basically, it is a salvage yard of vehicles where customers purchase and disassemble used parts from cars. In other words, a customer locates the part he needs among hundreds of cars and trucks that are neatly organized within a multi-acre compound. The customer then makes his way to the vehicle to disassemble the part. Using one's own labor makes the part far more economical than buying it new, which is why some people choose this route rather than purchasing auto parts from a store. My father needed my help that morning to remove the steering column from a 1978 Chevy van, which as it turns out, can be used in a Model A.

What I noticed that fateful day was that there were so many Latino men with the same goal in mind: to save money fixing their cars. They might not have thought much about the task at hand, but I noted their incredible strength and talent. After all, they were fixing their cars themselves with parts they found themselves; they had disassembled the parts themselves; and they were going to reassemble the parts in their own cars themselves. Not one man—including my father—had a manual on hand to guide him through the process; they were all using their mechanical instincts.

This observation got me thinking about the talent that rests in the pool of Latino men I know: they are diesel truck mechanics, long-haul truckers who maneuver 60-foot tractor-trailers with ease in the tightest predicament, welders who make artistic-like iron fences for wealthy clients, carpenters who build residential homes and commercial buildings, and so forth, and all of them are jacks-of-all-trades in their respective homes. Of course, I know Latino men who are executives, CPAs, attorneys, doctors, teachers, and the like, but my attention that day was focused on the Latino men who I believe did not excel at school (since

they did not graduate from high school, go to college, and earn a degree), because they are rarely recognized or honored for their abilities.

I began to think about their school experiences and wondered how many Latino men had school leaders and teachers who appraised them from a deficit point of view and deemed them untalented, unmotivated, deficient, unworthy, and so forth. I pondered what effect this might have had on their outlook on school and their future, and how different their lives might be if they had been regarded with an asset frame of reference. If their school teachers and school leaders *had* approached them with their strengths and talents in mind, would their lives be much different (and better) today? I easily recognize that many of those men could have become engineers, broadcast journalists, scientists, and so forth because they have inherent talents; they just needed better educational opportunities.

I altered my train of thought that morning and began to contemplate Latino boys who are in school today. I wondered whether some school personnel still make appraisals about them from a deficit perspective. And, if so, why? Then it dawned on me: Latino boys are often appraised from a deficit perspective because school leaders and teachers appraise students of color using the middle-class, dominant-culture frame of reference, which often fails to recognize students' circumstances, cultural background, and the unique strengths they bring to the classroom. I don't think that school professionals are aware that they are appraising Latino boys in such a fashion because all teachers have the best intentions for their students, care deeply about their success, and want to help them achieve. But such appraisals materialize because their own cultural heritage and lifetime experiences have shaped the assumptions, expectations, and values they have about schooling and they expect Latino boys to have similar ones as well. We all have beliefs, including biases and prejudices, about how students should approach school. Yet, quite often, students of color have a very different understanding of school than we do (Grant, 2009).

To illustrate this point a little further, try this simple exercise, which is found in the book *Common Bonds: Anti-Bias Teaching in a Diverse Society* (Byrnes & Kiger, 2005). Take a moment to think about the ideal boy student. Write a list of the qualities he has and contemplate: How does that ideal student approach learning in the classroom? How does he approach learning at home? How does he behave in the classroom? How involved is he at school? If you use adjectives such as *polite*, *respectful*, and the like, define these further.

After a few minutes, reflect on how many of the qualities this ideal student has that are similar to your own. Most of the qualities on your list likely reflect the middle-class, dominant-culture frame of reference, and these are likely the very qualities you expect students to have. Of course, there are standards that students are expected to meet, and being

civil is a universal quality, but if you described your ideal student with terms like these—“He is quiet in class,” “He sits in his seat,” “He raises his hand,” “He does homework,” “He does class work,” and “He never talks back to me”—these are middle-class, dominant-culture values, and many students may not fully understand the nuances of your classroom expectations because these are *defined* by the middle-class, dominant culture (Fenning & Rose, 2007). When you appraise a student from this frame of reference and he falls short of meeting those expectations, there is a great chance that he will be appraised in the deficit.

You have to exercise due caution not to perceive a student as having all sorts of inadequacies because your perceptions will influence your attitudes and behaviors toward that student. Pedro Noguera (2003, 2008) and Angela Valenzuela (1999), who have individually studied the performance of Latino and African American students in schools, propose that school cultures have to transform the standard way in which teachers and leadership teams appraise students of color. That transformation involves recognizing that when school personnel emphasize middle-class, dominant-culture values, there are bound to be cultural clashes at school. Efforts have to be made to bridge the gap that exists between students’ cultures and that of the school. I focus on Latino boys because I was one, I work with them, I think I know—to some extent—their way of life, and I have grown increasingly concerned about their academic achievement. However, any student of color is deeply affected by an appraisal made from such a frame of reference.

Below are some teachers’ comments about specific Latino boys, followed by an interpretation of the appraisal and the explanation for the boy’s underperformance. As you read, take a moment to reflect on how each teacher’s behavior toward the student might affect his performance:

- The comment: “He doesn’t ‘get it’ in my class.”
The appraisal: Something is cognitively wrong with him. There is nothing wrong with my teaching.
The explanation: He needs explicit academic English instruction in the specific content area so that he can “get it.”
- The comment: “He’s lazy.”
The appraisal: He’s not motivated to succeed. He doesn’t want to get ahead in life.
The explanation: He has grown dissatisfied in class because his teacher’s instruction is focused on remediation. None of the lessons are engaging or meaningful.

- The comment: “He doesn’t care about school.”
 The appraisal: Students who care about school participate in class, do their work, get involved in extracurricular activities, and the like.
 The explanation: He does not have a sense of belonging at school because he feels excluded.
- The comment: “He’s always touching me. He’s so needy.”
 The appraisal: By adolescence, students should be independent and should not seek out a teacher’s affection.
 The explanation: He has a closer personal space and is in the habit of touching adults when he talks to them. He is demonstrating the cultural value *personalismo*.
- The comment: “He was giving his friends the answers to the test! Can you believe that? How wretched can you get?”
 The appraisal: Shameful. What cheaters!
 The explanation: He was demonstrating the cultural value *familismo* and wanted others to succeed with him.

These examples illustrate how some teachers do not consider the Latino boys’ point of view and how their appraisal of the boys is from a middle-class, dominant-culture perspective. In these instances, the teachers had the belief that *only* the student’s actions influence his academic outcomes; however, the school culture (which includes how teachers relate to students, their instructional practices, the physical environment, routines, and activities that result in socializing, to name a few) can play a significant role in a student’s outcomes. On the one hand, certain characteristics of the Latino boy’s life (for example, parents with no formal schooling, speaking little English at home, having siblings who have dropped out) can put him “at risk” for inferior academic performance, but on the other hand, characteristics of the school can place him “at risk,” too.

In fact, many Latino boys are disillusioned with school because they are being forced to conform their ways to fit into the middle-class, dominant-culture way of life with little or no consideration for who they are, what they bring to the classroom, how they solve problems (academically and socially), and how they perceive the world. Many Latino boys feel disenfranchised because

- learning is not meaningful to them (instruction is focused largely on remediation rather than being relevant to their lives);
- they have a poor sense of belonging (they think they are not essential at school and that they do not matter to teachers, students, and leaders);

- they have a history of poor performance, which affects the expectations their teachers have of them; and
- their school culture seems too restrictive (their environments seem so controlled that they have absolutely no freedom).

One way to avoid contributing to a Latino boy's disengagement from his schooling is to reflect regularly, "How do I, others at school, and the school culture contribute to his becoming dissatisfied with school?" Another way is to adapt instructional practices so that they harmonize with the students' language, culture, and funds of knowledge. This book aims to help you understand the Latino culture and the circumstances that influence Latino boys so that you can do just that. The overarching goal is to help you more effectively (1) build connections between your students' backgrounds and experiences and your academic goals, and (2) plan for activities that build on what your students know and can do outside of school (Guzman, 2007).

The driving force behind this book is my desire to help school and youth-serving personnel better understand the sociocultural context of the Latino boys they serve and, in turn, be able to reach out to them, support their learning, increase their competencies and efficacy, and thereby increase their success in school. I want readers to always appraise Latino boys in a positive, favorable light (with their assets and strengths in mind) and to believe that, as a critical agent in their students' lives, they can support Latino boys to engender a future that is desirable.

To that end, this book is structured in eight chapters divided into four parts:

- Part I, *Framing the Scope and Purpose of the Book*, explains why Latino boys need our attention;
- Part II, *Circumstances of Contemporary Latino Boys*, discusses trends associated with Latino boys and provides an orientation to their cultural background;
- Part III, *Social Forces That Affect Latino Boys' School Performance*, explains the role that capital, stresses, and schools play in the fate of their achievement and education; and
- Part IV, *Teachers and Schools Can Enhance Latino Boys' Success*, offers some strategies for the classroom and school, and presents general information about some programs that serve Latino youth.

Educating Latino Boys is a little different from other books that I have written in that it is intended for readers who want to reflect on their circumstances and explore solutions that can help their unique population

of Latino boy students. A series of questions are embedded in the text (“Making Connections”) that guide readers to do so. Much of the book offers background material to strengthen readers’ understanding of why some Latino boys behave the way they do. Cases and vignettes spanning prekindergarten through twelfth grade give readers a context for what some Latino boys experience. Some readers might find these cases extreme or implausible, but many of them originate from the real experiences of Latinos I know; only their names have been changed. If you were to ask Latino boys about their schooling and lived experiences, you may very well find that they have had similar experiences. Finally, the strategies embedded in this book are associated with quality instruction and can benefit students at all grade levels across the content areas. However, the key here is to use the strategies effectively, given your newly gained understanding of Latino boys. There are no quick, easy, magical solutions for all Latino boys, because such wide variation exists among them. Instead, the best way to meet Latino boys’ needs rests with you, through genuine introspection, because solutions quite often come into sight through deep understanding of our own challenges.

I appreciate that you are taking this journey to better serve Latino boys, and my hope is that you make a long-lasting difference in their lives.