

BOOK REVIEW

Harriett D. Romo & Toni Falbo. *Latino High School Graduation: Defying the Odds*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996, 324 pages. \$17.95 paperback, ISBN 0-292-72495-0.

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Latino High School Graduation: Defying the Odds offers a special perspective on the loss of a homeland by focusing on the experience of Latino youth. It illustrates the personal meaning of cultural and economic marginality for Mexican origin students within the U.S. educational system that extends well beyond the immigrant generation. By listening to the stories of young high school students and their families, the authors reveal how the culture of Mexican youth interacts with a school system that fails to integrate them, emphasizing for them the experience of being strangers, permanent outsiders in U.S. society.

The book fills an important gap in our understanding of the social context of Latino/a educational integration. This ethnographic study of 100 Mexican children, identified as at risk of dropping out of school, and their families uncovers the dynamics that influence the likelihood of high school completion. Based on in-depth interviews roughly across the four-year period of the youth's high school years, the authors observe that certain factors play an important part in school failure: academic tracking, inadequate school retention policies, gang involvement, teen pregnancy, lack of attention to immigration and subsequent generational

transitions, the misuse of the GED, and barriers associated with the educational system. The authors dedicate a chapter to each one of these problems and conclude with specific recommendations for administrators, teachers, and social services staff.

This book makes an excellent contribution to the literature in the broader area of Latino/a social and economic incorporation in U.S. society. The authors' focus on high school graduation as the nexus to future attainment and life chances is well-founded. The placement in low-paying occupations and the consequently high poverty rates among Latinos/as are directly related to their low educational levels. According to 1992 demographic data, 28 percent of all Latinos/as fell below the poverty level in comparison to 11 percent of non-Latinos/as. At the same time, only 51 percent of Latinos/as over 25 had completed high school in comparison to 80 percent of non-Latinos/as (Valencia & Chapa, 1993). High drop-out rates are considered a major cause of Latino/a low educational attainment.

What the authors bring that has been lacking is the voice of Latino/a youth and their families concerning their struggle to function within an educational system that does

not adequately respond to their needs. Past studies based on close-ended survey data have found, for example, that social psychological and socialization characteristics, such as personal occupational aspirations and parental expectations, have an effect on how well they do in school (Padilla, 1996). The case studies based on open-ended interviews in this book reveal a richer and more coherent picture of the stories of Latino/a marginalization in American education.

Robert's case study shows that Latino/a students and parents often incorrectly assume that they are on a college track. In this case, Robert's story illustrates that tracking also results in school failure via messages Latino/a students receive from their teachers. According to his father,

The teacher said he couldn't take Algebra because of his grade he made in seventh or sixth grade. He wanted to take Algebra and they told him because of his scores in the seventh grade, he did not have the aptitude for Algebra....So that's the only problem I had, when the teacher said to him [Robert], 'Well, you're not college material.' (p. 21)

Linda depicts the failure of schools to meet the needs of children of immigrants. In response to why she had not consulted with her school counselor about what courses to take to prepare for college, she said,

They were always too busy. I never went and asked them anything, and I don't think they would have told me. I never really went to them. (p. 125)

The authors' concluding analysis of the overall themes that run throughout their data illuminates the complexity of familiar explanations for the school problems of Latino/a students, such as cultural clashes between the home, the school system, and the students; lack of family resources; and limited parental involvement in their children's education.

One significant area that is de-emphasized in this book is the role of economic resources in shaping the educational outcomes of Latino/a youth. Although the effect of the lack of family resources is addressed, the literature strongly suggests that the structural economic conditions of the community and the school are also powerful predictors of school achievement. Latino/a children in poor families tend to lack basic resources and live in overcrowded housing often located within inner-city neighborhoods, areas characterized by concentrated poverty and related social problems. Thus, they are also more likely to attend ethnically segregated schools supported by a low tax base (Valencia & Chapa, 1993). These conditions affect the quality of education available to Latino/a students and result in an environment that makes them even more vulnerable to academic failure. Because the study exclusively follows Mexican students living in an inner-city high-poverty Mexican neighborhood, it is not possible to discern how the patterns differ for Mexican students living in higher income areas and attending better schools or

for non-Hispanic students who live in disadvantaged circumstances similar to those in the current sample. Such an analysis would provide a clearer idea of how poverty and ethnicity interact with the other factors disclosed in this book.

All told, this book is strongly recommended for social workers and other human service professionals who work with Latino/a youth and their families, particularly Mexican-Americans within the educational system. The in-depth conversations with Latino/a families also make it a valuable resource for providers in any field of service who wish to expand their knowledge of Latino/a family life and values. At the same time, it provides insights into the problems Latino/a families face in their interactions with social institutions in general. □

References

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