

BOOK REVIEW

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Latina Teachers: Creating Careers and Guarding Culture

Glenda M. Flores

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We enter, perhaps even center, our reading of Glenda Flores' exemplary text through our own reflections and recollections of influential Latina teachers. Given that Flores' own understanding is influenced not only by her work as a public education teacher and academic researcher, but also by her observations that university colleagues saw Latinx cultural knowledge as a deficit, rather than an asset, we begin this review with our own *testimonios*.

Leslie, a current teaching credential student and high school math teacher shares: *I was first introduced to this book while taking one of my credential classes with Dr. Monreal. We read*

a section from the book discussing how math could be taught in many ways, that it is not a “universal language.” This contradicted what I was taught throughout my math education, but the text shares different examples of the Mexico and United States methods of solving long division and multiplication. I was amazed by the different teaching methods. I asked my parents, who both took grade school in Mexico, to solve a multiplication and long division problem while also having them explain how they were taught to solve these problems. Each used different methods but got the same results. This made me realize the need for equity in the classroom and the importance of valuing the Latinx community, our ways of knowing and schooling, and other minoritized peoples in our education system.

Adriana, a lecturer of teacher education and coordinator of a teacher residency program recalls an early schooling experience from kindergarten that has remained etched vividly in her memory to this day: *In reading this book, I was taken back in time to my Kindergarten year, when I met Mrs. Alcantara, the bilingual instructional aid from the Migrant Education Program who would be my cultural guardian throughout my entire first year of schooling. Mrs. Alcantara would also be the only person I would meet who could communicate with and who understood me in her native language. Without her, I felt completely lost at school. Kindergarten was a long time past, yet this has left an impressionable memory etched vividly to this day. This memory was brought back to life while I read this book.*

Tim, a current professor of teacher education, remembers a college summer session in Mexico: *Two Latina professors took our group on trips around central Mexico, taught Chicana Studies and Sociology courses, and introduced me to Chicana feminist thought. Perhaps more than anything, these two profesoras showed me that who I was, mattered. For the first time in my entire education, I had two teachers who explicitly called upon, and centered, the knowledges, songs, and people, los consejos y cuentos, of my family and region. For example, throughout my life, I knew my grandmother was brilliant, but they said it. Although this experience changed my life, I wondered why this had been my first time with Latina teachers.*

Even as Latina teachers impacted our own educational trajectories, and there has been a sharp numerical rise of Latinx, especially Latina, teachers in certain parts of the United States, there remains a wide gap between the number of Latinx teachers and Latinx students. This representation gap continues to balloon because the Latinx population is expanding, young, and entering schools in higher numbers (Boser, 2011, 2014; Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; Putman et al., 2016). Thus, to make a large(r) dent in such trends, examine the academic and professional benefits of a larger Latina teacher workforce, and interrogate the structural forces that constrain Latina teacher advocacy and effectiveness, there is a need for deep study into the day-to-day lives of Latina teachers and their reasons for choosing (to stay in) the profession. Taking such a context as a charge for academic research, Flores’ text draws upon her own in-depth interviews and ethnographic engagement with Latina teachers who work in two scholastically underperforming multiracial school districts in the greater Los Angeles area. Her book, *Latina Teachers*, is thus the product and reflection of “the nuanced stories of how the intersection of race, gender, class, and immigration shapes their [Latina teachers] workplace experiences in a feminized white-collar job” (p. 24).

Latina Teachers consists of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. Flores situates the book within the strengths Latina teachers bring to their spaces of employment (schools), the structures that shape (their own and others’) education (in)opportunities and professional

employment prospects, and the tension between the two. Thus, Flores begins Chapter One by referencing a grandmother's fear of losing communication with her granddaughter within a school system that promotes English speaking. This sets the stage for the rest of the chapter: a look at the often-deleterious education Latinx youth receive in U.S. schools, and the inequities and disenfranchisement Latinas face across a variety of professional workplaces. Chapter One offers a broad look into deficit-based educational perspectives that linger and "influence the measures Latina teachers take once in their workplaces" (p. 31).

Chapter Two explains the idea of "class ceilings"--how Latina teachers describe "falling into" teaching, despite dreams of law, medicine, or business careers, due to external factors such as providing for family, financial stability, and social linkages that steer them into the education field. Flores goes on to explain that *after* Latina teachers secure employment and gain experience, they realize they can impact their community, help the next generation attain higher education, and follow career dreams that they, themselves, could not achieve.

Chapter Three develops a central concept of the book--becoming cultural guardians. "Cultural guardian" is Flores' endearing term to illustrate the ways Latinas employ strategies to nurture and protect Latino children in hostile schooling contexts that (too) many Latinx immigrant families experience. Flores asserts that Latinas typically don't come into the profession with this sense of social responsibility, but rather they develop it as their careers progress. Noted in this chapter are also the socio-political constraints that Latinas encounter across the state, district, and school levels. Having experienced their own (schooling) marginalizations and the slowness of structural change, Latina educators use cultural guardianship to help Latinx children (and their families) navigate through the education system.

In Chapter Four, Flores explores how Latina teachers navigate the racialized perception of differing schools and school sites. Thinking through the racialized images of physical and symbolic geographic locations, what she calls "controlling images," helps us understand to whom and where Latina teachers perform cultural guardianship. As such, teacher perceptions of racialized space build understanding of localized racial hierarchies, their position within them at school sites, and how they might direct their (teaching) efforts towards undocumented Latinx who are often positioned as the least advantaged.

In Chapters Five and Six, Flores discusses the tensions Latina teachers face using their cultural guardianship and Chicana/Latina cultural pedagogies within the structuring forces of a school system that limits or even (re)appropriates their agency. As one such example, Flores contrasts cultural guardians' attempts to leverage the strengths of Latinx culture against the heroic, folkloric, performative, and symbolic varieties of culture emphasized by schools. The latter demonstrate ambiguous if not empty, notions of tolerance and diversity, which Flores calls "Heroic Folkloric Latino Culture." Another example is how Latina teachers, knowing the importance of standardized tests, write and translate "testing letters" about the importance of health during testing week. Latina educators implored students to try their best on "un exámen importante." In this way, teachers must negotiate structural impediments like standardized testing that limit their advocacy, shape their practice, and exert productive pressure toward an instrumental and rational subject position. Even within such structures (of racialized inequality), Flores once again emphasizes the creative and resilient acts of *cariño* by Latina teachers that might be a model that other teachers can incorporate within their own pedagogies to reach other minoritized students.

In the conclusion, Flores sketches the policy implications of her research, including the need to highlight the assets of Latina teachers, while also providing adequate resources to all racialized and minoritized students. She also dreams and hopes for a future, no doubt influenced

by current Latina teachers, when “the [Latinx] origin population will no longer be negatively stigmatized as a whole” (p.194). Taken together *Latina Teachers* makes a significant interdisciplinary contribution across the disciplines of sociology of education, educational studies, and teacher education. As current teachers and teacher educators, we highlight those that resonate most for our own teaching, learning, and research.

Most notably, Flores’ conceptualization of cultural guardians extends a long line of academic scholarship that asserts the necessity of asset-based frames in the education of Latinx youth (Moll et al., 1992; González et al., 2005; Yosso, 2005). While this work is important in itself, Flores’ gender-specific focus adds nuance to our understanding of such frames while also providing practical examples for classroom teachers. As such, this builds on previous work that focuses on Latinx teachers more broadly (Ochoa, 2007) and ties significant research on Latina/Chicana (feminist) pedagogies (Calderón et al., 2012; Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2001; Villenas, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001) more explicitly to classroom praxis. From our opening testimonios, it is clear that such a move impacted how Leslie will approach her own teaching in the future. Relatedly, Flores’ study of Latina teachers’ views and experiences of teaching as a profession holds significant contributions for larger discussions of teacher representation. For there is certainly tension in her idea of class ceilings as these gendered pathways and filial obligations help produce more teachers but also steer Latina graduates away from other careers. Toward this point, it is important to understand that the realization of and drive toward cultural guardianship develops *after* teachers choose the profession. This a crucial reminder that, as a whole, simply adding more Latinx teachers or giving them a “fair chance” might not actually automatically or quickly “change the underlying truth regimes which simultaneously hail Latinx presence, but preclude their potential” (Monreal, 2020, p. 346). Finally, and to link together many of these insights, Flores’ work is an urgent reminder that the (micro)relations(hips) and networks within schools matter greatly to the impact and retention of Teachers (of Color), and correspondingly their long-term influence on students (Bristol, 2018; Bristol & Shirrell, 2019; Flores, 2011, 2015; Monreal 2020, 2021; Ortiz & Telles, 2012; Sun 2018).

In closing, we think of the risks of cultural guardianship, something that Flores explicitly mentions in the introduction but rather implicitly refers to in the rest of the text. How can Latina teachers work to change the structural demands like accountability regimes that restrict their agency? What are the limits of micro-activism? Being cultural guardians can come at a cost in spaces where advocacy and activism are not encouraged or welcomed. This is an important element for Latinas to be aware of when choosing to speak up and work on behalf of the Latinx children and families they serve. Latinas who take risks and lean into difficult conversations to address language and action that is othering, deleterious, and racist (subtractive language, deficit-oriented language) towards Latinx communities might bring alienation and professional repercussions. When Latinas highlight the injustices within school systems that continue to disenfranchise and view Latinx students through deficit lenses, they may encounter barriers to career mobility and upward advancement. To be sure, while Flores offers perspectives that Latina educators and other stakeholders can and should learn from, future teachers must also understand the racialized and racist realities that remain entrenched in systems of white supremacy. Importantly, *Latina Teachers* can also help educational leaders, administrators, and colleagues support Latina teachers, promote their advocacy and cultural guardianship, and work collaboratively towards a better understanding of how disenfranchised groups must be served in schools today. If and when teacher leaders, policy makers, and those in leadership roles choose to listen to Latina teachers, we can work collaboratively towards more socially just and

transformative school systems, all the while mentoring and supporting incoming teachers like Leslie. This book centers such efforts and is an important step towards acknowledging the need for, the brilliance of, and the brighter future made possible by Latina teachers like Mrs. Alcantara.

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