

Book Review

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Reyes, P., Scribner, J. D., & Paredes Scribner, A. (Eds.). (1999). *Lessons from high-performing Hispanic schools: Creating learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.

The successful education of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students is a complex endeavor that involves many factors in addition to the acquisition of English. Schools that explicitly deny the cultural deprivation argument and incorporate students' interests and experiences, the funds of knowledge they bring with them into the learning situation, believe that all children can learn and will succeed regardless of cultural or language background (Flores, Cousin, & Diaz, 1991; Freeman, 1998; Reyes, 1992; Bartolome, 1994; Valencia, 1997). These schools recognize students' needs and provide the necessary leadership and support in planning, implementation, and evaluation of quality instructional programs that will address those needs. Unfortunately, many of our institutions of learning perpetuate deficit discourse and the negative stereotypes associated with it, thereby continuing to fail CLD students. Hispanic students, in particular Mexican Americans, are the fastest growing CLD student group. As such, they are our most vulnerable.

In *Lessons From High-Performing Hispanic Schools: Creating Learning Communities*, Pedro Reyes, Jay D. Scribner, and Alicia Paredes Scribner present exciting and much welcome evidence that current conditions of education for Hispanic students need not exist. The book presents findings of a three-phase research and development initiative that began in 1993 at the University of Texas at Austin, and involved the Region One Education Service Center, the Texas Education Agency, and researchers from UT Austin, UT Pan American, and Southwest Texas State University. Individual case studies of three elementary, three middle, and two high schools provide insight into the external, internal, and criterion performance conditions that maximize student learning in these high-performing Hispanic schools along the Texas-Mexico border.

Although the research findings presented in *Lessons* sometimes seem to echo those of previous studies on effective schools (Carter & Chatfield, 1986; García, 1994; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990), the uniqueness of the work lies in the outcomes-based criteria used to select the schools, the student population within these schools, and the depth of the research design. The students in the high-performing Hispanic schools are predominantly Mexican-American from low socio-economic backgrounds; many are recent immigrants or migrants. Yet, these students consistently score well-above-average on standardized tests (i.e., Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS) and have earned their schools numerous state and national awards for their outstanding achievements. The high-performing Hispanic schools are characterized as “learning communities” that “extend throughout and beyond the traditional schoolhouse” to integrate the school district, school administrators, local businesses, social service agencies, universities, family members, teachers, and students in the learning, teaching, and educational reform process (p. 4). Given the high drop out rates and early disengagement of Mexican-American students in our schools, *Lessons* offers a different portrait of this historically underachieving student population.

As an edited volume, *Lessons* brings together the expertise of several researchers in the fields of educational policy, assessment, action research, urban educational reform, literacy development, organizational change and behavior, and professional development. The authors’ varied backgrounds and experiences are a major strength of the book, as each presents the complexity and diversity of factors that impact the educational success of Mexican-American students in the high-performing border schools in relation to their area of expertise. Further, as co-researchers in the original study, the contributors provide a comprehensive and cohesive, although sometimes repetitive, portrait of each high-performing school throughout the book. Cross-case analyses within each chapter synthesize the similarities in processes and outcomes occurring across the eight cases.

An introductory chapter provides the rationale, context, and history of the project; case study methodology; interpretation of findings; and conceptualization of overall purposes. This first chapter also introduces the reader to subsequent chapter contents, based on the four dimensions of collaborative governance and leadership, community and family involvement, culturally responsive pedagogy, and advocacy-oriented assessment. The following six chapters present findings related to governance, leadership, and administrative support patterns; parental involvement; development of school-community relationships; mathematics instruction; reading instruction; and assessment practices, respectively. The concluding chapter presents a conceptual framework for creating successful learning communities such as the high-performing Hispanic border schools.

Consistent with the research on effective schools, administrators in the high-performing Hispanic schools establish and maintain a collaborative, communicative, and open work environment; share a clear mission of success with staff and students; provide autonomy, necessary resources, and opportunities for professional development to staff; accept primary responsibility for student achievement; and encourage innovative practices that improve learning conditions (Carter & Chatfield, 1986; Faltis & Hudelson, 1998; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Mace-Matluck, 1990). Site-based management is seen as a way to gain collective ownership of decisions influencing all stakeholders.

The high-performing Hispanic schools show a deep understanding of the challenges that may prevent CLD parents from participating in formal school activities. The best practices found throughout the schools represent five important aspects related to Mexican-American culture, including: building on cultural values of the Hispanic family and culture; stressing personal contact; fostering communication; creating a warm and welcoming environment for parents; and facilitating structural accommodations for parental involvement at the schools. Instead of trying to change the parents' concepts of involvement, these schools work to align their practices with their students' cultural values in order to maximize achievement.

Within this second dimension, the authors describe different relationships that have evolved between the high-performing Hispanic schools and their surrounding communities. Collaborations with health and social service agencies, community based organizations, businesses and institutions of higher education bring together multiple support systems for CLD families (Lucas, 1997). Through these relationships, the high performing Hispanic schools have moved beyond the traditional role of the school to provide such a network of institutions and organizations for the surrounding communities.

A "culturally responsive pedagogy" permeates all eight high-performing Hispanic schools and includes: cross-curricular thematic units of study; respect for ethnic diversity; use of students' funds of knowledge and languages as bases of instructional strategies; bilingual/bicultural teachers and staff; involvement of parents and the community; systematic assessment of student progress; after school and weekend programs for students and parents; and academic teaming that includes teachers, administrators, parents, and other relevant community members. Many of these instructional practices have been found to be critical factors of successful bilingual education programs serving student populations similar to those represented in the high-performing Hispanic schools (Brisk, 1998; Cazden, 1984; Faltis & Hudelson, 1998; Freeman, 1998; Freeman & Freeman, 1994; García, 1988; 1991; 1994; Johnson, 1994; Lucas, 1997; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; McLeod, 1996; Nelson, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Most are representative of good teaching in general.

The high-performing Hispanic schools were found to take an advocacy-oriented approach to assessment. Advocacy-oriented assessment systems consider the entire learning context, the effectiveness of instruction, students' first and second language skills and cultural background, teachers,' parents,' and students' expectations, and outcomes of systematic classroom observations. Throughout the eight learning communities, the authors found a school-wide focus on facilitating individual student success by building on students' bilingualism and biculturalism.

The closing chapter of *Lessons* provides a conceptual framework for bringing about change in the learning conditions of CLD students in particular, and the larger student population in general. This framework is based on Senge's (1990) descriptions of successful private-sector organizations. The proposed model delineates categories requisite to developing capacity within a learning community for student success. As is echoed throughout the book, the authors again discourage others from directly adopting the best practices found within the schools without a serious re-conceptualization and clear understanding of the particular needs of individual communities and their students.

Although *Lessons* succeeds in describing instructional practices that foster student success in these high-performing schools, two weaknesses stand out. Throughout the book, the terms bilingual, linguistically diverse, Spanish-speakers, non-English, not [English] proficient, and ESL appear to refer to Spanish-dominant students who receive academic English support (i.e., ESL classes), but this is never clearly stated. Ill-defined terms become especially problematic when referring to student populations that are predominantly bilingual, such as those described here.

Lessons From High-Performing Hispanic Schools captures the complexity of the factors involved in the successful education of culturally and linguistically diverse students of low socioeconomic backgrounds and predominantly Mexican-American descent. The book's strength in describing how each school's effectiveness was determined by processes, rather than structures or attributes, leads to a second weakness. The focus on current conditions within the high-performing Hispanic schools unfortunately is not accompanied by a historical discussion of each school's process of change, that is, a description of the actual processes that led to the schools' current state of success. This would further help the authors accomplish their stated goal of providing school administrators and teachers with a deeper understanding of how to transform their schools into high-performing learning communities. But overall, the authors present a well-organized and detailed, research-based portrait of communities of learning in which CLD students, families, teachers, staff, and administrators are empowered to become enthusiastic and responsible for their own learning.

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