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Introduction

Examining the Education of Latino Boys Is Important

I have wanted to write about Latino boys for some time, especially whenever I encounter data on their achievement, dropout rates, college enrollment numbers, and so forth. I cannot help but ponder how reports of these measurements—albeit helpful to some—cast the Latino boy. I dread that the impression given is an unfavorable one, with descriptors such as *inadequate, defective,* and *insufficient* coming to mind. These words frame the Latino boy as a problem (that needs fixing) or as a nuisance (to contend with); they are constructs that influence how Latino boys are appraised, treated, and served. Policy makers, school personnel, and community leaders do Latino boys a grave disservice whenever they regard these boys in this deficit-focused fashion. Indeed, Latino boys are different from the boys of the dominant culture, but they are not deficient.

Many youth-serving decision makers could easily focus on the "deficits" of my culture, family, and schooling and assume that I, too, was "at risk" for being a failure and a user—not a contributor—in society. They may have believed that I was "at risk" for having low academic achievement because I was born Latino, I was raised in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, and my parents were migrant farm workers. The decision makers could have predicted that I was "at risk" for repeating a grade because my parents were teens when they started their family and because they provided very modestly for their three sons. These decision makers could have grown more concerned—if not alarmed—given that my parents did not graduate from high school and because we spoke Spanish at home. As expected, I attended low-income elementary and middle schools where I had a nexus of friends who were largely

Latino and living in situations similar to mine, which further reinforced assumptions of my status of being "at risk" for the most noteworthy outcome of all: dropping out of school. In the eyes of many who held the power to assess my cohorts and I, and to pass broad policies that affected my schooling, I was surviving in circumstances organically arranged for me to fail in this nation's education system.

Decision makers, then and now, may have good intentions to help Latino boys, but few considerations typically are made to honor the essence of a Latino boy's culture, family, and community in his schooling. Instead, his very core—and the chassis that sustains him—lead to his being deemed "at risk." The time has come to fully recognize who Latino boys are and to acknowledge them for far more than the "at-risk" label they are often assigned.

In preparation for a university commencement address I gave in December 2010, which I loosely titled "What I Know for Sure" (I thought I was the first to come upon this notion, but Oprah has that honor), I reflected on the dynamics of my early life and my schooling. The tenor I raised was that factors such as the aforementioned—where a child is born and raised, his ethnicity, his parents' socioeconomic status, and so forth—do not define every child's capability, potential, or drive, nor do they predict the child's outcomes with certainty. Although I find this notion to be true, there is more to it that I did not tell the audience that December day: capability, potential, and drive—which, of course, affect outcomes—are internal characteristics that are molded largely by the degree of cultural, family, school, and community support that a youth has. The stronger the support across these systems, the more favorable the outcomes. This implies that school personnel can significantly alter how a boy perceives his capability, potential, and drive when other systems cannot or do not. Although it *can* take only one person to help a Latino boy recognize his capability, potential, and drive, it takes additional authentic stakeholders to fully understand his circumstances and stimulate him to excel in school.

The reality is that youth-serving decision makers today fail Latino boys nationwide because

1. they do not know enough about Latino boys' lives and circumstances to spearhead policies, programs, and initiatives that duly act in response to the core of who Latino boys are;
2. they make assumptions about Latino boys that affect their attitudes about and demeanor toward them; or
3. they do not know how to best serve them. Even with the finest intention to help them, they often do not know how best to convey—by

way of counsel, instruction, plans of action, and so forth—what is valuable and paramount in school and throughout life.

As you will soon read, an unfavorable pattern has emerged over a number of years among Latino boys. Some observers have said that Latino boys' school achievement levels have reached crisis proportions because they drop out of high school at alarming rates and their rate of college degree attainment is low. What this means for our society is that we will continue to have a population of Latino boys (and young men) who do not fully reach their potential and capacity unless school professionals transform their teaching practices and other youth-serving professionals devote effort to minimizing the factors that hinder Latinos' educational development. Latino youth may face a number of challenges, but school should not be one of them.

The topic of Latino boys is particularly important because they can be very different from boys of other cultures, and that which sets them apart from others is often overlooked in attempts to understand their behaviors, the choices they make, and the course they take into adulthood. Learning how Latino boys are unique is crucial to helping them make strides in their lives. A glimpse into their lives, which Chapter 3 addresses more extensively, indicates three aspects worth mentioning at this point:

1. *Latinos are the nation's largest minority group.* The population of Latinos in the United States is growing so fast that some sources have labeled Latinos the fastest growing minority group in the country. The Latino population is projected to increase to 59 million by 2025 (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002) and to 132.8 million, or 30 percent of the U.S. population, by 2050 (Cisneros, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009b). Even without regard to concerns about educational or societal implications, these numbers alone render a notable image: Latinos have a significant presence in American society and their population will only multiply in due time. Consequently, they have a large stake in the architecture of this nation's future, much of which depends on how Latino youth progress in schools.

2. *Many Latino boys face wearying challenges.* The lives of many Latino boys are considerably harder than those of boys from the dominant culture, such that they do not make the favorable strides into adulthood that we hope for. The social disparities they encounter in daily life often work counter to their becoming well-educated, critical thinkers who participate readily in our democracy and have the professional (and technical) skills to be gainfully employed. Some of these challenges stem from, and are exacerbated by, living in households that have a relatively poor

income, living in harsh conditions, and experiencing discrimination that emanates from their minority status in society (Crosnoe, 2006).

3. *News on their academic performance is discouraging*. Data on academic achievement suggest that Latino youth are not performing as well as their white counterparts. Indeed, the achievement gap that exists between Latinos and their white peers becomes readily apparent when high school dropout rates are examined: Latinos have higher dropout rates than any other ethnic group in the United States. Additionally, Latino youth are more likely to perform below grade level, to be retained one or more times, and to be enrolled in remedial classes, which puts them at a disadvantage in terms of postsecondary schooling options (West Virginia University, 2005). Only a third of all Latinos advance to college, compared to 39 percent of African Americans and 46 percent of whites (Lindholm-Leary & Block, 2010).

To sum up, there are going to be more Latino boys in classrooms nationwide, and for many of them, harsh realities hamper their academic achievement. Educating Latino boys may be a challenge especially when they appear bored in class, hostile toward teachers and peers, apathetic about their futures, and withdrawn from instruction. But their success in school depends largely on your commitment to doing the right thing and to behaving in ways that influence them positively, for example, by seeing them as assets, recognizing their potential, motivating them to learn, encouraging them to be successful, setting suitable goals for them, using effective instructional strategies that help them learn, praising them when they deserve it, celebrating their successes, seeking support from parents and caregivers, exploring their interests and making connections to their lives, making strong and healthy relationships with them, and so forth. If it feels at times like you are at the end of your rope in reaching out to them, remember that *you are the rope*—the very lifeline they desperately need and deserve to experience success in their lives (Breaux, 2003).

Making Connections

What are the demographics for Latinos in your learning community?

What are some of the obstacles your Latino students face?

How do the challenges in your Latino boys' lives affect their academic achievement?

Latino Boys Have Assets

The presentation of alarming statistics early in this discussion may make it seem like the tone of this book is a negative one. However, these statistics are presented here (and in Chapter 3) to draw attention to the notion that more needs to be done for Latino boys. Instead of letting these statistics shape a negative image of Latino boys, consider these statistics as the reason to reach out to them. Because Latino boys represent such a diverse group, it can be difficult to ascribe attributes and circumstances to them, but these discussions are helpful nonetheless in understanding their commonalities and tendencies.

A focus on grim statistics often sets in motion the belief that Latino boys are disadvantaged, that they are inferior, need fixing, and so forth (Bahruth, 2007; Trueba, 1999). School personnel who approach, consider, and behave toward Latino boys from this deficit frame of reference often believe that the boys have little potential to succeed. From this perspective, Latino boys' underachievement is attributed to defects in their families, in the culture, and in the boys themselves (Arzubiaga, 2007). In other words, nothing is wrong with the school system or its personnel (Trueba, 1999). Deficit-viewing persons often fail to acknowledge that the Latino culture has strengths, that the native language is valuable, and that boys and their parents have accumulated knowledge and social networks (L. Reyes, 2007). As a result, egregious assumptions are made about Latino boys' academic potential (Velasco, 2007).

Thus, let's set the tone for the rest of the book with the notion that Latino boys come to school willingly and ready to learn (Flores, 2005) and that they enter the classroom with great potential (Jones & Fuller, 2003). Many of their assets are described in Chapter 4, but for now consider what some research has found about many Latino youth:

- They are bicultural. This means they have their own Latino cultural customs, linguistic behaviors, and learning styles, but they also learn to live and function in the dominant culture (Ybarra & Lopez, 2004). Latino boys learn to balance and shift (that is, code-switch) between two cultures sometimes with difficulty, sometimes with ease, and sometimes with inadequacy. In time, though, they become flexible enough to apply appropriate behaviors to the respective social cultural context (Trueba, 1999).

- They have strong self-regulating behaviors and strong social and classroom skills. Many Latino boys, especially immigrants, are considered to be better able to control themselves and know how to act at school without being told how. They are often well behaved, tend to have good relationships with their peers, and can forge relationships with their teachers (Crosnoe, 2006; Po, 2010).
- They tend to conform to adult authority and respect their parents and peers (Livas-Dlott et al., 2010).
- They can speak Spanish. Among many Latino youth, their home language is just as good as English, which will allow them to better compete in a global economy (Valverde, 2006).
- They start school with a lot of enthusiasm (Po, 2010).
- They grow up in warm and supportive households that often nurture their social skills (West Virginia University, 2005).
- Their parents give teachers incredible respect and perceive them as wise and all-knowing (Gaitan, 2004).
- Their parents have a positive attitude toward education and value education (Garcia & Scribner, 2009).
- They are resilient. Many Latino youth are able to thrive, are mature, and have increased competence even though they grow up in adverse circumstances and with challenges (for example, having weak academic and language skills, living in households of low socioeconomic status) (West Virginia University). In effect, they use all of their resources to navigate the dominant culture and overcome the obstacles they face.

Indeed, many Latino boys are very successful in school. They have high grade point averages that gain them entrance into prestigious undergraduate programs; they earn graduate degrees; they shape careers for themselves; and they lead companies, federal agencies, communities, and the like. A January 2012 issue of *PODER Hispanic* listed the 100 most influential Hispanics in the nation and many of the Latino men were CEOs and presidents of companies, executive directors, governors, university chancellors, columnists, mayors, senators, and so forth. This is living proof that Latino boys can become successful Latino men who are an exceptional value to this country. All of these men were once boys who had talent, strengths, and a desire to make a better life for themselves (Jones & Fuller, 2003). Indeed, they had assets like many Latino boys do today.

Why *Latino* Is Used Rather Than *Hispanic*

Latino is used in the title and throughout the text instead of *Hispanic* to recognize the population of boys whose ethnic origin or descent is from Latin America. *Latino* and *Hispanic* are commonly used interchangeably, in professional literature and by the media and average persons alike, to refer to individuals who self-identify as members of this U.S. ethnic population (Sorlie et al., 2010), but the terms are distinct. It is important to know that individuals will self-identify based on their lived experiences and attitudes, among other social identity factors.

Hispanic was first used in the 1970 Census to define U.S. citizens who had Spanish surnames and those who were born in Spanish-speaking countries (Duignan & Gann, 1998; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). The term later broadened to include Spanish speakers without regard to where they were born. By 1978 a federal order by the Office of Management and Budget made *Hispanic* the official term used to identify persons born in this country who descended from Spanish-speaking people (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002; Sullivan, 2006). At that time, the intention was to create a neutral term to categorize this group of people (Sullivan, 2006).

Hispanic is the term the U.S. Census Bureau officially uses to include and count persons of Spanish origin or descent who designate themselves as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and so forth (and who are U.S. citizens at birth) as well as those who self-identify as Mexican American, Cuban American, and the like (Spradlin & Parsons, 2008). The U.S. Census Bureau (2010b) explains, "Over the last 40 years the question on Hispanic origin has undergone numerous changes and modifications, all with the aim of improving the quality of Hispanic origin data in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Island Areas" (p. 2). Government agencies continue to use *Hispanic* in national policies to label such groups of people living in the United States who were born or immigrated here. In fact, in 2001, an executive order signed by President George H. W. Bush established an advisory board known as the White House Initiative on Education Excellence for Hispanics. Executive orders by subsequent presidents William J. Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have maintained the initiative, which is governed by the Presidential Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans.

Hispanic has been rejected by some. Rivera-Barnes (2007) elaborates:

> A Hispanic comes from España, and those ties were severed long ago. It also comes from espanol [sic], what was once, for some the language of the enemy . . . the warped word *Hispanic*

> was adopted by gray, naïve bureaucrats whose only concern was counting Hispanics. It also became a label, "the preferred one in Madison Avenue boardrooms, Capitol Hill press conferences, and newsrooms across the nation" (Gomez, 1995, p. 665). A well-received Latina writer, Sandra Cisneros, even refuses to let her work appear in anthologies that use the H word because she considers it to be a "repulsive slave name" (Novas, 1998, p. 4). (p. 281)

Others have noted that *Hispanic* is a bureaucratic term that

- excludes people who do not share the cultural heritage because they are the indigenous of Latin America and their respective ancestors may have come from Africa, Asia, or Europe (Crockett & Zamboanga, 2009);
- does not include persons from some Latin American countries (particularly Brazil, Suriname, and Guyana) because they speak a language other than Spanish (that is, Portuguese, Dutch, or other dialects) or they speak an indigenous language;
- coarsely lumps the diverse groups together under one commonality—the Spanish language—without regard to country of origin (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002);
- was created for the purposes of statistics and rhetoric (Sullivan, 2006);
- is too broad and leads others to perceive the diverse groups as one (Sullivan, 2006); and
- refers to the diverse groups in the sole context of the European legacy (P. Vasquez, 1999).

Because *Hispanic* seems much like a term of convenience that evolved at the hands of the U.S. government and lacking the advice of such persons, many people see the term as having little personal significance and relevance (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002), and prefer to define themselves by the specific country of their origin, such as Mexican, Cuban, Salvadoran, and so forth. Although no data are available to confirm the frequency of usage of *Hispanic* over *Latino* or vice versa, *Hispanic* tends to be used more in the West and the Southwest and *Latino* in the Midwest and on the East Coast (Jones & Fuller, 2003).

Some people have come to regard *Latino* as best capturing the varied ethnicities that share Latin American roots. Many people

prefer using that term because it supports the following line of thinking:

> The dominant culture or the U.S. government does not define me. I am in the line from descendants of Latin America. My ancestors have deep-seated roots in the United States because it was once part of Latin America; so I too have a rightful claim on this country.

Teachers and leadership teams alike might raise the question, "What difference does it make if I call my students *Hispanic* or *Latino?*" But for many students, their families, and their communities, *Latino* is a positive and potent self-identifier that expresses a history and legacy (P. Vasquez, 1999), an ethnic pride (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002), and the shared experiences of colonization and immigration (Torres, 2007). For these reasons, *Latino* is used throughout this text except when original sources use *Hispanic.*

The best advice for any youth-serving professional is to use the terms that the students and their families use. Most students will respond positively to *Hispanic* or *Latino* or by their country of origin anchored with "American" as long as it is used with respect (Jones & Fuller, 2003). Veteran teachers already know that some students may want to be called solely "American" because that is who and what they are and they take offense to any ethnic label, fearing that they will be categorized and judged on assumptions associated with it. One study found that 52 percent of Latinos between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five showed a strong preference to identify themselves using their country of origin (for example, "I am Mexican" or "I'm Honduran"), followed by American, and *Hispanic* or *Latino* (Pew Research Center, 2009c).

Finally, neither term refers to one of the biological races. People who consider themselves *Latino* or *Hispanic* can have, among other ethnicities, an African, an Asian, or a European heritage.

Making Connections

What terms do your students use to self-identify their origins?

What terms do your school leaders and teachers use to describe students' origins?

What reactions have you noticed in your students or learning community when they have been identified as either *Hispanic* or *Latino?*

Summary

The education of Latino boys is an important topic because their population is expected to increase, and they face a number of challenges that keep them from finishing high school or pursuing postsecondary schooling at the rate expected. Although statistics about their performance in school render a negative image of them, it is imperative to steer away from a deficit frame of reference and acknowledge the unique talents and strengths they bring to the classroom. The time has come to think differently about Latino boys. The education achievement gap for Latinos has existed for too long now. Twenty years after the original executive order that established the White House Initiative on Education Excellence for Hispanics to close the educational achievement gap, many Latino youth still lag behind their peers. As later chapters reveal, schools will have to be the change agents that brings forth a better way of life for them.