

**INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL EDITION ON LATINA/O/X PREK-12
EDUCATION**

**Listening to Latina/o/x Voices: Maximizing Opportunities and Minimizing Obstacles in
Distinct Educational Contexts**

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The wrath of extreme racism, nativism, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia in today's America is evident, particularly in PreK–12 schools and higher education institutions. Moreover, these interrelated structures of inequality have become even more palpable during these unprecedented times of the COVID-19 global pandemic where antiBlackness, racial injustice, xenophobia, homophobia, and overall political malaise have been heightened.

Yet it is these most heartrending experiences that can also empower the populace to maintain hope, resist inequality, and access resources to succeed academically. At the center of today's turbulent America are Latina/o/x students and communities, who, with the support of institutional resources, challenge inequity head-on and succeed despite systemic barriers. *Listening to Latina/o/x Voices* is a product of that pain and a pathway to propelling social justice in education forward.

The special edition on Latina/o/x education is a fortuitous labor of love between the Latinx Research Center at Santa Clara University, the Center for Leadership, Equity and Research (CLEAR), and the Pennsylvania State (Penn State) University with additional contributions from faculty affiliated with Penn State's Center for the Study of Higher Education and University of Maryland's College of Education. This collaborative vision between Sabrina Zirkel, Dean of the School of Education and Counseling Psychology at Santa Clara University; Ken Magdaleno, Executive Director of CLEAR; and Gilberto Q. Conchas, Wayne K. and Anita Woolfolk Hoy Endowed Professor of Educational Leadership at Penn State, reflects a platform to give voice to the voiceless through core research in educational equity and social justice. This special issue also represents a process of intergenerational mentorship and extends this notion of providing Latina/o/x voice to the manuscript authors included in this special issue as it was with intentionality to support early and mid-career scholars working to give voice to Latinas/os/xs.

Listening to Latina/o/x Voices embraces the overwhelming fact that Latinas/os/xs constitute an important and growing share of the U.S. school-age population (Contreras, 2011; Rodriguez & Oseguera, 2015; Rodriguez, 2017; Rodriguez, 2021). According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the number of Latina/o/x students in the nation's public schools nearly doubled from 1990 to 2006, accounting for 60% of the total growth in public school enrollment over that period (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). In 2016, approximately 17.8 million Latina/o/x students were enrolled in U.S. public schools, comprising about one in four public school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The growth in the Latina/o/x student population is expected to continue, increasing 166 percent by 2050 (Fry & Gonzales, 2008); by 2050 there will be more school-age Latina/o/x children in U.S. schools than non-Latino white students.

Nevertheless, Latina/o/x students in the United States face a number of challenges. The persistent lack of access to resources for Latina/o/x students in public schools (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020) contributes to on-going limitations on college and career preparation, including college-level curriculum and college choices (Conchas, 2006; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Oseguera & Del Pilar, 2018). The problem of limited academic resources in schools that serve Latinas/os/xs extends to the availability of counseling services and, nationwide, the schools with the highest concentrations of Students of Color maintain, on average, ratios of one counselor to 1,056 and higher (McDonough, 2005). However, even with access to a counselor, counselors often track Latina/o students into non-college preparation courses (Oakes, 2008; Rodriguez & Oseguera, 2015).

Thus, it is no surprise that four in ten Latina/o/x students drop out by high school (Conchas & Vigil, 2012). Despite maintaining the lowest high school completion rates, about seven in ten Latinx students who complete high school enroll in U.S. colleges (Fry & Taylor, 2013). The 3.6 million Latinx students enrolled in U.S. colleges comprise 20 percent of all undergraduate students (Gramlich, 2017). Despite an increase in college enrollment rates, Latina/o students maintain the lowest four-year completion rates (Conchas, 2016; Fry & Taylor, 2013; Gramlich, 2017).

Although a considerable body of research demonstrates the mediating role of structural factors such as socioeconomic status, education, racism, social capital, and tracking in school success, there remains a tendency—in the private and public perception—to problematize the issue of school failure in terms of “cultural” factors such as beliefs and values (Conchas & Acevedo 2020). For instance, some suggest that Asian students achieve success in school because they work hard and are influenced by home cultures that stress and value education, while Black and Latina/o/x families transmit cultural norms that inhibit success (Conchas, 2006). This special issue on Latina/o/x education develops a more comprehensive understanding of school achievement by exploring *sociocultural* circumstances leading to the potential for the realization of social mobility among Latina/o/x students across the PreK-12 educational pipeline.

There are two aspects of this work that make it a significant contribution to understanding of this topic in the field. First, the articles in the special issue deal with Latina/o/x educational issues across PreK-12 educational contexts inside and outside of schools. Although most educational research has shown that students’ educational experiences are interconnected in key ways throughout the schooling years, most scholarship tends to focus solely on one time period—early childhood, elementary, middle school, or high school. Yet, to understand the challenges faced by Latina/o/x students generally, we must look at the issues holistically, starting in early childhood and examining both in-school and out-of-school processes. This special issue will combine a broad wealth of information across the Latina/o/x educational experience as it includes perspectives from

the young people themselves, the adults who seek to teach them, and school leaders working with Latina/o/x communities.

Second, this work will contextualize that experience within the historical, political, and contextual processes that have influenced and continue to play a role in the educational opportunity structures that Latina/o/x folks experience. Often, educational research tends to look at “what is” without significant consideration of the policy processes and decisions that have led to the status quo. This work includes this level of policy analysis and theoretical sophistication in order to understand not only “what is” but also how we got here. It is our contention that only by understanding the politics and rhetoric underlying the educational system’s institutional structures can we begin to address the inequalities that exist within the system.

This special edition on Latina/o/x PreK-12 education brings together diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives, including empirical qualitative and quantitative manuscripts centering Latina/o/x voices, and concludes with a book review confronting everyday racism. Beginning with the theoretical contributions, **Gamez and Monreal** explore the educational implications of the different ways in which *Latinidad* is constructed in the New Latinx South using Latinx and Black geographies scholarship to analyze their own autoethnographic experiences. Paying particular attention to the academic success of Latino boys and concluding this section on theoretical perspectives, **Davila** proposes a fundamental interrogation and reimagination of educational structures using critical social theory and critical discourse studies.

Transitioning to the empirically driven research articles across the PreK-12 sector, **Bravo and Rodriguez-Mojica's** multiple-case study explores bilingual secondary pre-service teacher practices and the ways in which teachers are able to meet the needs of their Latina/o/x emergent bilingual high school students by delivering content area instruction in Spanish. Using statewide databases, **Balloffet and Téllez** conducted a quantitative study in order to analyze how Latina/o/x students fare in elementary Spanish/English programs offered by California charter schools. **Urrieta and colleagues** center Latina/o/x youth voices as they focus on virtual Latina/o/x youth empowerment, leadership, and activism using qualitative data from a study of Latina/o/x youth who participated in a Texas-based summer youth program. Drawing from a three-year case study at a public high school, **Villavicencio** interrogates the important role of school leadership in applying an advocacy approach and aspects of critical care to better serve Latina/o/x and immigrant students. **Arriaga and Rodriguez's** qualitative case study highlights the voices of undocumented youth with DACA in North Carolina, exploring how they navigate their identity, belonging, and decision-making in the context of community activism.

Finally, this special edition ends with **Velez's** review of Solórzano and Pérez Huber's *Racial Microaggressions: Using Critical Race Theory to Respond to Everyday Racism* which further unpacks the theme of voice in this volume.

Listening to Latina/o/x Voices will appeal to university-based scholars, students, and policy analysts at social research organizations. It is also intended for a broader audience, including those interested in social justice and education, such as school leaders and teachers. Advocates for low-income and minoritized groups will also find the research valuable, since the special issue will focus on the racial equity dimensions of schools and communities. Interest from different organizations and stakeholders underscores the potentially broad appeal of the research presented in the special edition.

We hope this special issue contributes to the much-needed change in education research to give voice to the most marginalized in communities and educational institutions and advance social justice approaches.

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