

Part I

Background

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Listening to Latina/o Teachers

For much of US history, Chicanas have not existed outside of our communities. Our stories have not been included in literary anthologies, our books have not been found in mainstream bookstores, and our perspectives have not been included in college classrooms.

L. A. Flores (2000)

Despite important struggles and movements to include multiple histories, experiences, and perspectives, the voices of Latinas/os remain marginalized in education. In the curriculum, the structure of the classroom, and the expectations of traditional social science research, this subjugation is multileveled and has significant ramifications.

Within the course curriculum, if scholarship on and by Latinas/os is not outright excluded, it is often tokenized: added on at the end of the semester, not fully analyzed, or only included in ways that do not disrupt traditional theories or frameworks. As a result, students are often provided with incomplete histories, experiences, and perspectives of the United States. This incomplete and even inaccurate knowledge may perpetuate stereotyped assumptions and reduce the possibilities for becoming informed citizens who can implement effective policy changes. In addition, students' relationships to schools may be hindered when they do not see themselves or their families reflected in the course curriculum. They may perceive school or certain academic subjects as irrelevant to their lives.

Although Latinas/os may be absent in the curriculum, Latina/o students may stick out within the classroom, especially when they

are underrepresented in four-year colleges and universities (Madrid, 1995). Within classrooms lacking adequate curriculum, teachers and students may call on Latina/o students to become “native informants” because they are assumed to be experts on their presumed racial/ethnic groups and asked to share the history, experience, and perspective of Latinas/os (see hooks, 1994). Since Latina/o students may have been schooled in the same narrow curriculum as their peers, there is no guarantee that they are familiar with the heterogeneous histories and backgrounds of the millions of Latinas/os in the United States. In these situations, such pressure to represent Latinas/os and to educate their classmates and teachers can be daunting, leading some students to withdraw.

Being invisible or tokenized in the course curriculum often combines with the structure of traditional classrooms to reinforce another form of marginalization—one that privileges individualism, competition, and speaking standard English over collaboration, community building, and multiple ways of communicating. For students who enter school speaking a language other than English and who come from collectivist households where working together is the norm, traditional classrooms, which emphasize individualism and competition, may be antithetical to what they have learned in their family. Such classrooms may be uncomfortable environments at best. When teachers do not permit or support diverse ways of communicating, the classroom can be a hostile place. Too many Latina/o college students have shared with me that in school, they were punished for speaking Spanish, ridiculed for their supposed accents, reprimanded for assisting their peers, or ignored by their instructors. Over time, some stopped participating in class; they withheld their voices.

The traditional pedagogy in many U.S. classrooms is referred to as the banking model: students are treated as empty receptacles in which knowledge is deposited (Freire, 1970). When this happens, what students’ know and experience are typically devalued and disregarded. Personal experiences may be trivialized as irrelevant to the course material, while theory and “facts” are perceived as more

rigorous and important (Torres, 2003). The focus on other people's theories and histories as disconnected from students' lives may also limit student engagement in the classroom.

Finally, just as individual Latinas/os may be excluded and silenced because of course curriculum and classroom pedagogy, the structures of academia have fostered a system that favors the perspectives of the dominant classes at the expense of subjugated groups. Since women, members of the working class, and groups of color have a history of exclusion from institutions of higher education, their voices, theories, and perspectives are largely absent from the disciplinary canons that frame contemporary scholarship and academic debates. And university positions where new ideas and theories are constructed and review boards that determine which research is funded and published remain skewed in favor of whites, the upper-middle class, and men (Baca Zinn, Weber Cannon, Higginbotham, and Thornton Dill, 1990; Kennelly, Misra, and Karides, 1999).

The exclusionary practices within academia are far reaching and include publication hierarchies that shape whose voices and perspectives are heard. When the normative expectation for tenure is publishing in what are regarded as top academic journals and academic presses, individuals who are committed to community involvement, action-oriented research, and accessible writing may find that their work and contributions are undervalued.

Furthermore, the domination of positivist research methodologies over feminist, Marxist, and other critical approaches has limited new perspectives, voices, and theories. Positivist research methodologies tend to position researchers as "experts," assert that scholars maintain distance from the people being studied, advocate that researchers adopt a value-free stance from their topics, and employ large sample sizes because they are believed to enhance the reliability and generalizability of studies (Guba and Lincoln, 2004). Acceptance of these approaches—over collaboration, reciprocity, dialogical, social justice, and life history research that are common

among critical theorists—fosters a hierarchy of importance and validity within the academy, where large-scale surveys are perceived to present unbiased facts while community-oriented research and individual stories are devalued. There are many examples of positivist researchers who have entered working class neighborhoods and communities of color with their own unnamed biases and have completed research that misrepresents these communities and reproduces power hierarchies by race/ethnicity, class, and college community. Although such researchers may have advanced their careers, it has often been at the price of faulty representations of communities.

Fortunately, there are models of scholarship in sociology, women's studies, ethnic studies, and education that critique patterns of marginalization that ignore, silence, and subjugate multiple voices. This burgeoning body of scholarship (1) centers personal experiences as forms of knowledge, (2) believes in the importance of dialogue and storytelling where participants have the opportunity to frame the issues that concern them, (3) encourages the use of emotions as a way to validate what we know, (4) emphasizes writing in accessible ways for a wide audience, and (5) advocates for research that is social justice oriented (Collins, 1991; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Flores, 2000). These models of research, along with my identity as a Latina feminist, daughter of public school teachers, and qualitative researcher, have influenced my approach to writing this book. By centering the voices and perspectives of Latina/o teachers, this book offers a unique and overlooked view into the educational system and provides recommendations for educational improvements applicable to all students and teachers.

Expanding What We Know About Latina/o Teachers

There are nearly three million K–12 public school teachers in the United States; most love teaching and are committed to contributing to society by helping others (Nieto, 2005).

They give of themselves in spite of their fifty-hour workweeks, thirty-two-minute lunches, and less profitable salaries than professionals with similar credentials (Nieto, 2005). Although an extensive literature documents the commitments, passions, and experiences of white teachers (see Paley, 1978; McIntyre, 1997; Howard, 1999; Michie, 1999) and there is a burgeoning amount of scholarship on black teachers (see Ladson-Billings, 1994; Foster, 1997), there is much less material written on Latina/o teachers.

What we do know is that although Latinas/os constitute a growing percentage of the K–12 student population, they are significantly underrepresented as teachers. This underrepresentation is a national phenomenon that stems from historical and institutional factors that continue to skew who has access to critical thinking courses, higher-level learning, college attendance, and careers in teaching. Today, 40 percent of public school students are of color, but 90 percent of teachers are white. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there is not a single teacher of color in nearly 40 percent of U.S. public schools (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004). Within California's K–12 public schools, Latinas/os account for only 14 percent of teachers, although nearly half of all students are Latina/o. In Los Angeles County public schools, Latinas/os make up 60 percent of the student body but less than a quarter of the teachers (Education Data Partnership, 2004c). As the number of students of color increases at rates faster than those of teachers of color, these gaps are expected to grow (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004; Grant and Murray, 1999).

Current research highlights the importance of increasing teacher diversity. The National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force suggests that teachers of color often have high expectations for students of their same racial/ethnic background. They may be role models for all students who enhance educational experiences, raise student self-esteem, and decrease absenteeism and disciplinary referrals for students of color (National Collaborative

on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004). These benefits help to explain some research indicating that Latina/o and African American students prefer teachers of their race/ethnicity and that regardless of their own bilinguality, students have positive attitudes toward bilingual teachers (Galguera, 1998).

Expanding what we know about Latina/o teachers is an important step in increasing the diversity of our teaching force, recognizing the contributions of Latina/o educators, and allowing others to learn from their approaches to schooling, students, learning, and education. Listening to these teachers sharpens our understanding of how some Latinas/os have navigated through a K–12 system where as many as 40 percent of Latinas/os are not completing high school. At a time when work is needed to improve the educational opportunities of Latinas/os, yet public discourse on education often ignores or blames Latinas/os, the Latina/o teachers featured in this book offer their perspectives to teachers, students, families, communities, and politicians.

Centering the Narratives of Latinas/os

I hope that you don't take this the wrong way, but I wanted to talk to you because I felt like you were blaming teachers. The teachers at this school are so dedicated. We are here way before and after school. We give our all to these students. To be honest, I was not happy with your talk; I felt like you were blaming us, but I didn't say anything then because you're Latina and I didn't think it was right to question you in front of the group. Most of the people that lead in-services are White. We never hear from Latinas [Field notes, December 2004].

Hours after I wrote these comments in my notebook, I still thought that elementary school teacher Angelica Vasquez had

misunderstood me. That day in 2004, while speaking to a group of fifty school officials about Latinas/os and education, I never meant to blame teachers. On the contrary, having been raised by two public school teachers myself, I consciously tried to avoid casting judgment or sounding as if I was the expert on Latina/o students. However, I had been invited by a school principal to talk about diversity and how teachers could work with students better. But this microscopic focus on teachers' attitudes and interactions left the many larger factors that teachers are encountering in schools—standardized testing, bureaucracy, and limited resources—underexplored. Despite my intentions, Angelica Vasquez saw me as an outsider who, like so many others in our society, was ready to blame teachers for all of the problems in schools. However, she was reluctant to critique me in front of her colleagues because she identified with me as a Latina, and as she stated, “We never hear from Latinas.” Within today's climate where everyone supposedly knows how to improve schools and is quick to blame teachers, no wonder Angelica thought that I was reproducing this pattern.

Angelica was right: we never hear from Latinas/os, especially when it comes to education. Yet although Angelica was pleased to hear from someone she identified with as a Latina, she was not satisfied with my approach or perspective. Her critical response to my talk captures the complexities posed in centering the narratives of Latinas/os. Diverse perspectives on education are needed, and we must hear from Latinas/os, especially given their marginalization in education. However, no one perspective or narrative speaks for or to all Latinas/os.

Bearing in mind Angelica Vasquez's response to me, this book aims not to homogenize or essentialize the experiences of Latinas/os or present only my perspective. Instead, I have relied extensively on Latina/o teachers' stories and comments to create a collaborative project that captures a diversity of experiences and perspectives and fosters reflection, dialogue, and learning for the betterment of teachers, students, and communities.

Teachers and Other School Officials

Over the past fifteen years, Latina/o school personnel, families, and students have graciously invited me into their classrooms, offices, and homes. I have attended classes and school events as both a guest speaker and an observer, participated in the organizing activities of Latina/o parent groups, and worked with students in seventh through twelfth grades in various educational programs. These experiences have shaped my perspectives and helped me to better understand Latinas/os in education and the narratives of the public school teachers who are centered in this book.

This book draws primarily from eighteen interviews that I completed with Latina/o teachers (Table 1.1). In meetings ranging from one to six hours and spanning one to several days, these teachers generously shared their stories and thoughts on their schooling experiences, family expectations, decisions to teach, school practices, and the state of education. Although most encouraged me to use their names in this book, not all were comfortable with administrators at their school knowing their perspectives. Some new teachers did not have tenure and worried about the ramifications of their comments. Thus, to respect these teachers' confidentiality, I have changed the names of all individuals, schools, and districts. Though actual names are excluded, their stories are not easily forgotten.

At the time of our initial meetings, these teachers had been in the classroom from one to forty-one years. Two were retired, and eight were in their first five years of teaching. On average they had been teaching for ten years and were thirty-seven years old. Most are women, the children of Mexican immigrants, first-generation college students, and Spanish-English bilingual.

All live in Los Angeles County, and most have taught in the same school district—one whose size, location, and racial/ethnic demographics make it a microcosm of school districts throughout the county. Its campuses have twelve hundred teachers and more than twenty-five thousand kindergarten through twelfth-grade students

Table 1.1. Description of Latina/o Teachers

Name	Age	Generation in the United States	Years Teaching	Level Taught
Angelica Vasquez	36	Second	Nine	Elementary
Ana Camacho	29	Second	Four	High school
Cristina Martinez	25	Sixth	Three	Middle school
David Galvez	27	Second	Four	Middle school
Diana Cortez	65	Second	Thirty-four	Middle school (retired)
Emily Saldana	31	Second	Five	High school
Erica Burg	24	Second	Two	Middle school
Gabriela Muñoz	30	Second	Eight	Elementary
Gerardo Romero	23	Second	One	High school
Ilene Gómez	55	Second	Twenty	K–16
Joan Young	59	Second	Thirty	High school
Lisa Perez	35	Second	Ten	Middle school
Manuel Cadena	26	Second	Four	High school
Margarita Villa	29	Second	Ten	Middle school
Marie Marquez	32	Second	Five	Middle school
Marta Escobar	77	Second	Forty-one	Elementary (retired)
Miguel Elias	34	First	Seven	Elementary
Vivian Sosa	25	Fourth	Four	Middle school

(Education Data Partnership, 2004a, 2004c). It serves neighborhoods that have established Mexican Americans and a growing percentage of Mexicans, Central Americans, and Asian Americans. Similar to the larger Los Angeles County, Latina/o students predominate in this district at 71 percent, but Latinas/os are less than a quarter of the teachers (Education Data Partnership, 2004b).

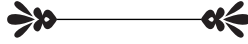
I combined what I learned from these teachers with the information that Latina/o parents, over twenty additional Latina/o, white, and Asian American school officials, and many K–16 students have shared with me over the years. Table 1.2 lists some of these individuals whose experiences, perspectives, and activities are explicitly included in this book.

I sent most of these teachers, principals, counselors, and instructional aides written transcripts of our taped meetings, and I maintained e-mail and telephone contact with the eight teachers whose stories form the bulk of this book. In 2006, six of these teachers came to my home for an informal discussion on Latinas/os and

Table 1.2. Description of Additional Selected School Officials and Latina/o Parents

Name	Age	Generation in the United States	Occupation
Denise Villarreal	46	Third	Elementary school principal
Erica Handel	62	Third	Elementary instructional aide
Gloria Dominguez	65	Second	Retired elementary instructional aide
Jane Hanson	55	Third	Elementary instructional aide
Lourdes Fernandez	41	Third	Elementary school principal
Raquel Heinrich	40	First	Union representative
Roberta Zavala	47	Third	Elementary school principal

education. This additional meeting provided a space for the teachers to meet one another and discuss shared concerns that form the crux of this book; the meeting also allowed me to reflect on what I had learned from the teachers.



After arranging the sofa and dining room chairs in a circle, I take a step back to survey the room and breathe deeply. The recorders, tapes, and interview guide are neatly arranged on the coffee table. As I scan the room one last time, the doorbell rings at 3:50. I rush to open it to see Diana Cortez smiling. Just seven months earlier she had been to my home for a one-on-one interview, and today she returned for a discussion on Latinas/os and education with five other teachers.

Of all of the teachers I interviewed, Diana is one of the most experienced. Born in 1940, she attended school in Pasadena, California, during a period of de jure segregation when Mexican Americans and Asian Americans in her community attended separate schools from whites. Although she has fond memories of her early school years, such blatant discrimination significantly limited the educational pursuits of many of her Mexican American classmates. As the first member of her family to graduate from college (Pasadena City College and La Sierra College), Diana attributes her desire to teach and her love of learning to her mother, an avid reader. She also credits her Seventh Day Adventist Church for encouraging education.

Diana began teaching in 1963, and she enjoyed the thirty-four years that she spent teaching language arts to seventh graders in a predominantly working-class Mexican American community. For her, teaching was rewarding and kept her young, and her colleagues, she said, were “some of the greatest people in the world.” Now she is trying to understand why the current generation of students seems more lackadaisical about learning, and with the tremendous amount of paperwork now required of teachers, she is glad that she has retired.

Before Diana and I make our way to the family room, there is a knock at the door. This time, it is Marie Marquez at the doorstep, and Miguel Elias is coming up the walk. It has been a year since I interviewed each of them in their middle and elementary school classrooms.

During our initial meeting, thirty-two-year-old Marie Marquez shared with me her schooling experiences in Orange County, California. She was a quiet student who completed her homework, received good grades, and stayed out of trouble. However, with the exception of one high school counselor who took a special interest in her because she knew her four older siblings, Marie went through school unrecognized. She was not encouraged to enroll in honors classes until tenth grade, and as the child of Mexican immigrants, she was unfamiliar with college grants and scholarships. However, with support from her parents and inspiration from a high school English teacher, Marie completed college at California State University, Fullerton, and became a language arts teacher at a middle school that serves primarily working-class Latina/o students. Having taught for the past five years, Marie believes that education is a business where there is little value placed on teachers and the needs of students. Instead, she believes, policies are passed and implemented by politicians, superintendents, and principals who are detached from schools. Despite her criticisms of the educational system, Marie sees herself as a leader pulling students through the educational pipeline. She hopes that people thinking about becoming teachers will enter the profession only if “they really want to be there for kids.”

In a profession where women predominate, thirty-four-year-old Miguel Elias is one of only four Latino teachers whom I interviewed, and he is the only male teaching elementary school. During our first interview, we sat talking in his first-grade classroom, squeezed into the students' small chairs and desks. Miguel's stories transported me to his childhood, marked by several trips across the U.S.-Mexico border. With each move, he adjusted to a new school and community. Born in Mexico, he first came to the United States at the age of

three. Just two years later, his father died, and his family returned to Mexico. When Miguel was eight, his family moved permanently to the Los Angeles area. As an undocumented Mexican immigrant, he faced constant ridicule by his classmates and several teachers. But he fought back against his peers' attacks, and several influential teachers and friends introduced him to the possibilities of teaching. Now, as a teacher for the past seven years, Miguel aims to be a role model in a profession where there are few Latinos, and he hopes to inspire students who also come from single-parent families.

The next teacher to arrive at my home is twenty-five-year-old Vivian Sosa. A math and science teacher, Vivian first invited me to her middle school classroom in December 2004, where after the school day had ended, students returned to her room seeking advice on their science projects. A fourth-generation Mexican American woman, Vivian teaches not just at her alma mater in the Los Angeles area but also in the same school district where her mother, a pregnant teenager, was ridiculed, humiliated, and finally excluded. Despite her mother's hostile school experiences, she loved learning and was determined that Vivian and her other four children attend college. She raised strong children and inspired them by sharing stories of her life. As a teacher for the past four years, Vivian exhibits her mother's strength and has adopted her method of telling stories to build students' self-esteem.

With two teachers scheduled to arrive late because of meetings and coaching responsibilities, we begin our group conversation. We are just starting to talk about plans for this book when Erica Burg and Gabriela Muñoz arrive.

I had known Erica when she was a college student, and she was one of the first teachers to agree to share her experiences. She met me for our one-on-one interview in my office at Pomona College. Born in El Paso, Texas, to a Mexican mother and a German father, twenty-four-year-old Erica Burg has been teaching for two years at a middle school that serves over one thousand mostly working-class Latina/o students. During our meeting, she contrasted her

experiences teaching at this large school with her fond memories as a student in a small family-like Catholic school. Erica is drawing on her own schooling experiences, trying to recreate a similar loving and caring atmosphere in her classroom. Although the impermanent administrators, budget cuts, large class sizes, malfunctioning equipment, and poor school grounds intensify her workload and push her patience, Erica is flexible; she is asking others for help and trying everything she can to help her students.

I first met thirty-year-old Gabriela Muñoz while I was interviewing another teacher. After listening to the nearly two-hour interview, Gabriela graciously volunteered to share her experiences. Born and raised in East Los Angeles to Mexican immigrant parents, she has been teaching elementary school students for eight years. She describes her first few years of teaching as a “battlefield.” Administrators yelled at and fought with teachers; teachers disrespected students, and students did not seem to care about school. Gabriela endured administrators who threatened her own child, but she loved teaching too much to allow such abuse to persuade her to leave the profession. Instead, she looked for a different district and has found a school with a loving environment for the working-class Latina/o community.

I was sorry that Cristina Martinez and Angelica Vasquez, two of the other teachers whose contributions are critical to this book, were unable to attend this gathering. During our individual meeting, twenty-five-year-old Cristina Martinez invited me into her classroom. It was the end of a busy week of teaching middle schoolers and meeting with their parents in individual conferences. However, Cristina spoke passionately about her family and schooling. Her parents sacrificed to help her become one of the few members of her New Mexican extended family to graduate from college and the only one to earn a master's degree. Her path to becoming a teacher was not easy. She explained that she has forsaken traditional aspects of her background and laments living away from her family. Hoping that her middle school students will also challenge themselves, Cristina pushes them and shares her own stories of struggle. Nevertheless, as a third-year

teacher, the emphasis on testing in schools is taking a toll on her, the students, and the learning process. The demands of testing were so high that shortly after our initial interview, Cristina left the classroom.

It was at our first meeting that thirty-six-year-old Angelica Vasquez expressed her reservations about my perspective and her reactions to the talk I had given to school officials. Challenging what she considered a harsh critique of teachers, she explained her views on Latinas/os and education by focusing on the role of families. Angelica's emphasis on families stems from her own experiences, and during our meeting, she recounted how her immigrant mother turned off her alarm clock to keep her home from school, her older brothers worried that an educated Latina would have difficulty finding a husband, and school officials rattled off statistics about the small percentage of Latinas/os who graduate from college. Rather than heed these negative messages, Angelica transformed them into motivating factors to earn a master's degree, and today they influence her teaching philosophy. For the past nine years, Angelica has been introducing the primarily working-class Latina/o students in her classrooms to the opportunities outside their community so that they do not feel limited by others' expectations.

By the time that the six teachers and I finally sit down together, we only have ninety minutes for discussion. Luckily, they need little prompting to share their experiences and thoughts. I ask a few questions, and they expand on the issues that they had raised during our individual interviews. Their stories include experiences of navigating through the educational pipeline from kindergarten through college. They share their enlarged views of education that involve helping students to feel loved and cared for, and they reflect on ways that the educational system could be improved with multicultural curriculum, less bureaucracy, and a reduced emphasis on standardized testing. Laughter fills the family room, and the teachers affirm each other's many thoughts and experiences by sharing similar stories and suggestions. I am pleased with the way our conversation is unfolding. The camaraderie is transparent.

As the conversation comes to an end, the following dialogue ensues about the revealing lack of opportunities to have open discussions about education even within a school environment:

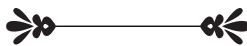
MIGUEL ELIAS: I have learned a lot today.

GILDA OCHOA: Just out of curiosity, do you have chances as teachers to sit down and talk about what it is that you do and how you feel about education?

MARIE MARQUEZ: The only time that we ever say anything is when we're at lunch. . . . We don't get a chance at our staff meetings because we need to do data analysis. We need to get into groups and discuss what we did wrong. Why are the students not doing well on the tests? . . . It's just work, work, work, work. Fill out the sheet. Make sure that everyone's name is on it.

ERICA BURG: That's why I miss graduate school. Getting my master's in education, I was in small classrooms where I could actually talk about stuff.

VIVIAN SOSA: I want to go back. I miss school. . . . We had fifteen people in our classes in graduate school. So we were able to talk to the teachers. We were able to communicate by e-mail what ideas we had. These were current ideas. There's research that we could access. . . . I miss being around an environment of positive people that really want to do something.



Long after the teachers left my home that night, I replayed their conversation on this apparent contradiction. How can a nation allow its students and teachers to spend so many hours in spaces that are not positive, learning environments? What is happening in schools and classrooms that is leading these teachers to crave a return to graduate school? Shouldn't K-12 public education

also be characterized by learning, dialogue, and support? While it is no surprise that teachers are negatively affected by the speed-up of our fast-paced society, what may be less obvious are the detrimental impacts that teachers encounter in our system of schooling where standardized testing drives education and top-down policies often limit teacher autonomy. The results of this shift in schooling are felt by teachers such as Vivian Sosa and Erica Burg who long for a positive, supportive space. Since they do not see such places in their schools, they yearn to return to graduate school. It is disconcerting to think of schools as places filled with teachers such as these who have so much energy, desire, and creativity but because they are constantly working and kept focused on testing, they have little time for dialogue and reflection.

Dynamic exchanges such as these shaped this book and my decision to focus on Latina/o K–12 teachers. As these teachers offered their stories, I realized that I must be willing to tell my own story—not to decenter or counter their narratives but to make more personal how our stories are interconnected and the ways that school practices continue to result in unequal opportunities.

Telling Stories: Weaving Together Educational Biographies to Understand Self and Society

When I theorize, I tell a story, and by this I try to understand, try to make sense of, my universe. This is my theorizing, my storytelling. This is the place and the movement where I was born, and where I grew. It is also my place and my movement in relation to my family, my community, and my society [Martínez 1996, p. 117].

By sharing how they navigated through at least sixteen years of formal education, Latina/o teachers' stories of their families and schooling provide important strategies on how students might

better resist the barriers they encounter throughout the educational pipeline from kindergarten through graduate school. Also, their reflections on contending with current school policies as teachers provide insiders' recommendations on improving schools and the roles that policymakers, school officials, and families can play in this endeavor. They provide a vision of how we can all work together for schools and communities that are premised on love and justice over competition and inequality. But too few are listening to the individuals intimately involved in Latina/o education: Latina/o teachers. In listening to their stories, we can learn much about our selves, schools, and societies.

As a Latina, a professor, and the daughter of two middle school teachers, the topic of Latinas/os and education is both intimately personal and political. When I think about education, I recall the stories of my parents, remember my schooling, and hear today's students' experiences. Most salient in these stories and my memories are the struggles of coming to voice by acquiring the English language, speaking in the classroom, and challenging exclusionary comments and practices. It is this process of coming to one's voice that makes telling stories so critical to the structure of this book.

As first-generation college students and English-language learners, my parents faced various struggles. My mother entered kindergarten in the New York City public school system speaking Italian. She is the oldest child of Sicilian immigrants and remembers crying her first week of school while her mother sat outside her classroom door trying to console her. My mother made her way through school and was the only member of her nuclear family to complete college. My father was fifteen years old when he and his parents left Nicaragua for Los Angeles. For his first seventeen years in the United States, he struggled to learn English and earn a college degree. Like my mother, he attended community college and then transferred to California State University, Los Angeles. With their passion for social justice, my parents used their education for the good of society: they became middle school teachers.

My parents' struggles and their knowledge of the educational system assisted me in my schooling. Although I spoke English, I rarely spoke in the classroom. My quietness in the classroom intensified as I progressed through school, and by the end of my first year of college, one of my professor's comments on a final paper exemplified this silence: "honors work from an almost invisible student." Among my memories of school was how my classroom personality contrasted with my interactions outside the classroom—ones characterized by laughter and loudness. Thus, I understand the difficulties of coming to voice within an academic setting.

Finally, I hear the voices of today's Latina/o students. There are the college students who describe their own difficulties within school: being silenced in undemocratic classrooms, experiencing a chilly or even hostile climate on campus, and feeling that schooling has separated them from their families and communities. Despite these difficulties, many students remain optimistic about their futures and aspire to become agents of change. They want justice for their communities and are concerned about their younger brothers and sisters. Then there are the high school and middle school students. Some worry about their futures and are looking for an education that empowers them, but others express defeat. They say that they do not care about school, but their actions or emotions convey other messages. They do care, and they wonder why their teachers have repudiated them. These stories of rejection and neglect are haunting.

Such stories, experiences, and memories influenced how I heard the narratives told to me by Latina/o teachers. Our own lives are brought to bear when we listen and learn from the lives of others. Thus, although the lives of the eighteen Latina/o K–12 teachers are centered in this book, I have not suppressed my own voice, experiences, and emotions. I hope that the stories that unfold throughout this book will inspire others to reflect on the opportunities, struggles, and forms of resistance that characterize their educational

biographies. As we think about our own stories and learn from others, it is harder to rationalize or individualize the persisting gaps in opportunities. Certainly each story is unique and cannot be generalized, yet patterns emerge that are part of larger systems of power and inequality. I hope that readers combine the stories of these teachers with other stories to construct creative approaches in the struggle for social justice for past, present, and future generations of students.