BOOK REVIEW

Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society
by Carola Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova, Harvard University Press, 2008, 426 pp.

Review by Zaynab Baalbaki, University of Pennsylvania

According to the U.S Census, by the year 2040 one third of the U.S. population will be comprised of immigrants. Currently, twenty percent of children come from immigrant households (Rong and Preissle, 1998). Understanding the experiences of immigrant students is vital because of these projected demographic changes. Schools will need to be institutions that can promote positive academic and social experiences for all students. In the book, *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society*, Carola Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova paint beautiful portraits of the experiences of young immigrant students based on their interdisciplinary studies. As such, they extend their field of research by offering explanations regarding why academic differences occur among immigrant youth. Suarez-Orozco et al. make sense of these differences and provide possible solutions. The three researchers bring expertise in psychological anthropology, cultural psychology, and cultural health psychology to complete an illustrious longitudinal ethnographic study. The research uses a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods, taking a multifaceted approach that enables a more thorough understanding of the early academic experience of immigrant youth. The authors make their arguments by first laying out their research methods and following up with their theories about the participants' learning trajectories.

To respond to the gap in research on immigrant students, Suarez-Orozco et al. engaged in a five year long study simultaneously in two cities, Boston and San Francisco. They maintained these cities accurately reflect the current immigrant population entering the US from Mexico, Central America (El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala), China, Dominican Republic, and Haiti. The researchers narrow their focus on students who embody the most salient demographic characteristics of immigrants, such as speaking a language other than English and ranging from ages 9 to 14. The authors gathered data from 470 participants through student interviews, parent interviews, standardized test scores, report cards, and case-study portraitures.

The first part of the book describes the research approach and findings on factors that promote or inhibit immigrant students' learning. They begin by describing the patterns in participants' academic achievement and performance. They find that, over the five year study, all the informants experience a drop in their GPA, which is consistent with the data on immigrant and non-immigrant populations (Passel, 2006). Unlike most research that concludes with this finding, Suarez-Orozco et al. continue to look at what affects an outcome like the one described above. They determined that family context is essential in understanding academic achievement. For example, having an employed father is a significant characteristic of successful students.

The researchers further develop their findings by analyzing networks of meaningful relationships that support immigrant students. Critically important support people include parents, peers, extended family, teachers, religious centers, or school faculty. The authors also examine the role of schools and how they help, or fail to help. They find that immigrant students are more likely to attend low-performing schools, further hindering them from achieving academic success. Finally, the researchers focus on the students' additional challenge of learning to speak and write English. They determine that learning this new skill is contingent on multiple factors such as their aptitude for learning a language, motivation, exposure, and quality of instruction.

The second half of the book uses anecdotes to illustrate the personal experience of immigrant students in American schools. The authors develop five categories based on the students' academic trajectories: Rapid Declining Achievers, Slow Declining Achievers, Low Achievers, Improvers, and High Achievers. For example, declining achievers are students whose performance is declining, slowly or rapidly. One particular student, Lotus, was doing well in school when she first entered the school system but then declined because she did not have emotional support from her family or the school. As a result, she became depressed, and her motivation, engagement and performance decreased. On the other hand, improvers are more likely to be girls and often have a mentor or a critical person guiding them. The authors use these profiles and the statistical data to suggest implications for educators and policy-makers.

While the text is strong and convincing, there are a few areas that I would have liked the authors to develop further. The conclusion criticizes current immigration laws and poses questions that policy makers should consider, yet the authors do not offer alternative possibilities. When discussing the downfalls of schools in meeting the needs of immigrant students, the authors suggest what the Gates Millennium Scholarship promotes, the "three R's" (p. 367): Relevant curriculum, rigorous classes, and relationships that promote academic success. I wanted to know more about how specific solutions, such as the "three R's," might be implemented in schools. Also, the authors fail to provide convincing reasons to explain why Chinese immigrants are

overly represented in the High Achievers category. They suggest the possibility that the Chinese have a history of "worshiping education" (p. 357), which adds more pressure on Chinese students to perform well academically. Finally, since data was gathered in major cities, a study in rural areas might be useful to gain a better understanding of immigrant youth. Do immigrants in suburbs and rural areas experience the same academic challenges? Further research in this area may provide a helpful comparison and begin to answer these questions.

As this country becomes more diverse, *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society* will prove to be an important text. In the current context of immigration in the United States and the policies surrounding immigration and non-English language use in classrooms, this book is extremely timely. As the daughter of immigrant parents from Mexico and Lebanon, I am personally able to associate with some of the observations the authors noted. Also, as a teacher who previously taught in a third grade, predominantly Latino classroom, I feel the book did an excellent job offering an understanding of the experiences of immigrant youth. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary approach taken by Suarez-Orozco et al. provides a rich account of immigrant youth in the United States. Their use of both qualitative and statistical data to interpret immigrant students' lives on a macro and individual level provides convincing arguments. The authors offer a conceptual model for further research on the academic achievement of immigrant students. Consequently, the volume will appeal to a wide audience including educators, sociologists, anthropologists, and policy makers.

Learning a New Land: *Immigrant Students in American Society* has won Harvard University Press's annual prize for outstanding publication because of its unique approach of incorporating multiples levels of data to explain the experiences of immigrant youth. Suarez-Orozco et al. are able to provide the reader with extensive information to meet the needs of immigrant student. As the authors suggest, as a nation, we need to allow young immigrants to "unleash their great potential to the benefit of all Americans" (p. 377).

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