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# Introduction

Whether from Spain or Central or South America, Spanish-speakers\* share a rich cultural heritage, replete with expertise in visual arts, architecture, language (poetry, stories, literature, myths, *dichos*), music, science, and mathematics. Before the Spaniards reached the shores of Mesoamerica, indigenous people and civilizations had flourished for centuries. The Aztec city of *Tenochtitlán* (now Mexico City) that the Spanish encountered in the fifteenth century was beautiful and vast. Influence of the Aztec culture is evident today even in the English language, whose words *chocolate*, *tomato*, and *avocado* were derived from their Nahuatl dialects. Maya societies of southern Mexico and Central America were highly accomplished in art, science, and math, with a complete written language predating the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Add to this Spain's heritage in visual art (El Greco, Velázquez, Goya, Picasso), literature (Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Rubén Darío, Federico García Lorca), and architecture (intertwining Arabic, Christian, and Judaic influences), and you have a people steeped in rich and varied culture. Today, you can read the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz or the writings of Gabriel García Márquez, Julia Alvarez, and Mario Vargas Llosa. You can explore the inventions of Victor Ochoa and Juan Lozano or study paintings by Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.

\*In this book we use the terms *Hispanic*, *Latino*, and *Spanish-speakers* interchangeably. Our focus is on Spanish-speakers, since this is the dominant home language, after English, spoken in the United States. However, we do not wish to exclude from this definition those of Hispanic heritage who speak Portuguese or indigenous languages. According to a 2010 Census brief, *Hispanic* or *Latino* refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

## The Challenge We Face

Despite their rich cultural heritage, it is also true that Central and South America have suffered rampant poverty in some areas. Often, people see no escape from the cycle than to leave all behind and seek a fresh start in America. Mexican-born migrant worker turned distinguished professor and author, Francisco Jiménez, verbalizes the dreams of many with his words: “. . . someday we would take a long trip north, cross *la frontera*, enter California, and leave our poverty behind” (Jiménez, 1997, p. 1). Of course, families immigrate for reasons other than economic, such as seeking political or religious freedom or to reunite with family. For centuries, Hispanics have been an integral part of American society and culture. In the past few decades, however, immigration from Spanish-speaking countries to the United States has increased in significant waves, much like the migration from Eastern Europe and Ireland in the early twentieth century.

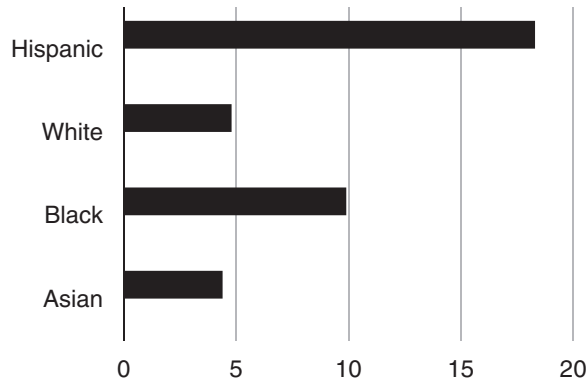
As the number of Latino students and English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools has climbed rapidly, many researchers, educators, and commentators have highlighted a staggering gap in school achievement for Hispanic students. The data show that this disparity, beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the entire trajectory of a student’s education, results in a disproportionate number of Hispanic high school dropouts and low college graduation rates. In fact, the high school dropout rate for Hispanics (17.6 percent in 2009) is almost three and a half times that of Caucasian students, and about twice that of African American students. (See Figure 0.1.)

For regular classroom teachers especially, this influx has presented an unprecedented challenge as they try to juggle the unique learning needs of Spanish-speaking students while continuing to meet required state and national curriculum standards. Even those in established programs for bilingual students struggle with limited time and resources to address not only the increased population but also the varying levels of proficiency and ability in English language learners. Most teachers feel that they have more on their plates than ever before. It seems impossible to serve the diverse needs that present themselves in the classroom while also meeting the demand for higher test scores and minimum proficiency for all students.

In 2010, while significant gains had been made, still only 32 percent of Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college. This compares to 38 percent of blacks, 43 percent of whites, and 62 percent of Asians. In the same year, only 54 percent of Hispanics were at four-year colleges, versus 73 percent of whites.

These statistics do not tell the whole story, however. Thousands of Hispanics thrive across the spectrum of professions and overcome the challenges of childhood immigration, assimilation into a new culture and society, and poverty. Though many of these students slip through

**Figure 0.1** High School Dropout Rate by Ethnicity (2008)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2010). The Condition of Education 2010 (NCES 2010-028).

Note: The status dropout rate is the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in high school and who lack a high school credential. A high school credential includes a high school diploma or equivalent credential such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate.

### College Enrollment Rates 2010 (18- to 24-year-olds)

Hispanic	Black	White	Asian
32%	38%	43%	62%

### Percent of College Students Enrolled at Four-Year Colleges 2010

Hispanic	Black	White	Asian
54%	63%	73%	78%

Source: Adapted from Aud, S., Fox, M. A., and KewalRamani, A. (2010b, pp. 118-124). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

the cracks, some do not. Often, it is a single teacher or mentor that makes the difference. Hispanic educator Jaime Escalante of *Stand and Deliver* fame raised expectations for high school math students in the *barrio* of East Los Angeles. Jiménez acknowledged his own teachers in *The Circuit*: “I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my teachers whose faith in my ability and guidance helped me break the migrant circuit” (Jiménez, 1997). Sandra Cisneros, whose biography we examine later in the book, is another author whose teachers greatly influenced the course of her success.

## The Potential for Change

As a classroom teacher or administrator of a school, you likely are wondering what you can do right now to help your Hispanic students succeed. Whether you are a bilingual or ESL specialist teacher, an English-speaking classroom teacher, a classroom teacher with partial or full fluency in Spanish, or an administrator, you face the challenge of educating a growing population of students with whom there often exists a cultural and linguistic barrier. In this book, we demonstrate:

- How to leverage bilingualism and culture to facilitate student learning;
- How to recognize strengths and talents in children even in the face of a language barrier;
- How teaching to these strengths brings tangible benefits to Hispanic students, including ELLs, and to teachers who need practical ways to assist them;
- How to adapt the tools and strategies to the unique needs of students; and

Ingredients for schools and classrooms where Hispanic students thrive:

- Parents and community engaged
- High expectations
- Cultural understanding and respect
- Motivation through instruction relevant to students’ lives
- Challenging, rich learning experiences
- Recognition of cognitive benefits of being bilingual
- Trusting, respectful atmosphere

- How to connect with parents and the greater Spanish-speaking community to support this work.

Designed to be a practical resource for teachers and administrators, the book assists even non-Spanish-speakers to break through cultural barriers to build and create an educational community that truly advocates for ELL and Hispanic students. It also provides teachers, schools, and districts with practical guidance and strategies for engaging parents

and the local Spanish-speaking community, thereby creating a larger network of support for Latino learners.

Our focus specifically relates to students whose home language is Spanish because these students are the great majority of ELLs in the United States, and because the achievement gap in Hispanic students' educational success demonstrates a significant need. Today, more than ever, teachers and administrators are looking for specific strategies for building relationships with Spanish-speaking communities around the country. However, the principles explored in this book apply to students from other cultural or linguistic minority groups, as well. Teachers can use this book as the basis to acquire a deeper understanding of the cultural groups represented in their classrooms. In addition, the classroom strategies we propose have proven effective with a wide spectrum of students, including underachievers and gifted learners. By supporting ELLs, therefore, teachers can also improve the educational experience for many more students.

We agree with key conclusions drawn by Gándara and Contreras (2009), that Hispanic students need teachers who:

- Can and will communicate with their parents and communities;
- Understand their unique and bountiful culture; and
- Create rich and challenging learning experiences that draw out and build on their strengths.

Both research and practical experience have pinpointed key characteristics of schools and classrooms in which Hispanic students—whether recent immigrants, ELLs, or third-generation children—have experienced educational success and growth. High expectations, challenging content, and an education more relevant to their lives enable Hispanic students to thrive. The Hispanic Dropout Project, a study commissioned by the U.S. Secretary of Education, reported a revealing conclusion:

Students' reports to the Hispanic Dropout Project and our own observations during site visits corroborate what is reported in the research on tracking and on instructional quality of lower tracks—that is, the everyday in-school experiences of too many Hispanic students fail to engage their minds. In contrast to their criticisms of their secondary schools, many students interviewed by the Hispanic Dropout Project praised volunteers and teachers in their schools and in alternative placements who made course work relevant to their lives and, thereby, compelling enough to make them want to achieve. (Secada et al., 1998, p. 15)

We provide best practices in Chapters 7 and 8 on how to structure your classroom to provide the rich learning experiences that Hispanic students and ELLs need to excel.

Almost of equal importance is parent engagement in the education of Spanish-speaking children. Research has demonstrated time and time again that effective communication with parents improves minority children's educational experiences (Gallagher, 2007; Henderson & Berla, 1995; Van Tassel-Baska, 1989; and others). Communicating with parents and understanding students' backgrounds and motivations require a certain amount of cultural knowledge, as well as specific strategies to reach out to the greater Spanish-speaking community in your city or town. In Chapters 3 and 6, we share student stories, cultural background information, and outreach possibilities.

This book is designed to help you build on your own knowledge and strengths as an educator. You do not have to reinvent the wheel, as you most likely are using at least some of the strategies we propose. With minor adjustments, you can go further to support the needs of your Hispanic students, whether recent immigrants or not. This may require only a simple change in approach (such as adjusting choices in activities or resources) or a deeper awareness and exploration of the Spanish-speaking community. Many ideas will be familiar to you from other teaching contexts, and we translate them here so that you can apply them more effectively to your Spanish-speaking students. The strategies we propose are not only straightforward and practical, but gradual, thus freeing you to integrate them without constraining you to a system that will require substantial time to learn and implement.

We believe from our collective 100 plus years' experience in education at the classroom and administrative levels that individual teachers and districts need practical ways to extend their knowledge so that they may act right now to support these deserving students. Your own life as an educator will become less frustrating and more satisfying as you witness positive change in student learning.