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Book Review

Learning and Not Learning English: Latino Students in American Schools. Guadalupe Valdés. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001. 177 pp.

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Ten years ago, in Rhode Island, I observed in a middle school English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom where the teacher directed her instruction primarily at a single Spanish-speaking, but clearly somewhat bilingual 12 year old. After making a point, the teacher would wait as the girl repeated her comments in Spanish for her Spanish-speaking classmates. Then the teacher would wait again as some of the Hmong-speaking students interpreted the Spanish version into Hmong (apparently these Hmong students negotiated a classroom and peer environment where Spanish seemed to be a more important second language than English). Whatever learning was going on in that classroom, students were not rapidly acquiring English, nor were all those who had gained some adeptness in English being allowed to transition to the next level. Guadalupe Valdés' stirring new book is set in California, not Rhode Island, but it familiarly describes what I saw in that classroom ten years ago and it describes what I have subsequently often seen in middle school and high school ESL settings. Too often our secondary-level ESL infrastructure is inadequate for the expressed task of teaching English to English-language learners, and it is equally inadequate, if not more so, in promoting these students' broad academic accomplishment.

In this poignant short volume, Valdés is adamant: Latino students, specifically the thousands of Latino newcomer students who start their U.S. schooling at the secondary level, deserve a chance to learn English

and to continue their development of other academic skills. She is also blunt: typical U.S. schooling of Latino newcomers is multiply inadequate and inappropriate. Thus the goal of promoting English mastery is compromised, as are these students' overall academic opportunity horizons. Though her initial problem diagnosis—that current ESL programs poorly serve most students in them—may superficially agree with the problem diagnosis of neoconservative crusaders such as Ron Unz, the inadequacies and possibilities she identifies depart substantially and explicitly from the Unz-supported policies of California's Proposition 227 and its equivalents.

Valdés considers the issues of Latino newcomer students' acquisition of English and their general academic trajectories through biographic sketches of four Spanish-speaking newcomer students who begin their U.S. school experience at Garden Middle School. Four of the book's eight chapters are devoted to these sketches whereas two other chapters focus on the community contexts and classroom specific contexts that so shape the experiences of Lilian, Elisa, Manolo, and Bernardo. Valdés spends enough time explaining her site selection—she looked for a typical "nonexemplary setting" (p. 42)—and in relating this study to the literature and other studies she has done, that one trusts her claim that these four students' experiences are representative of the school experiences of a much larger number of Latino immigrant students.

Emphasizing how important full acquisition of English will be for these youngsters, Valdés illustrates the rarity of authentic English interchanges or exposure in the linguistically segregated classrooms that these students encounter. Much of the students' instruction is dominated by the teacher's out-loud reading from a children's book from the front of the classroom. Another common activity is the game "hang-the-spider," which focuses on a decontextualized vocabulary word and during which many students maintain their silence. Neither activity requires much engagement, though both lend themselves well to the classroom management challenges a monolingual teacher faces if she follows a teacher-centric pedagogical style. Neither activity has much to do with the ways students will want or need to use English outside the classroom; nor do these activities build on anything students have already learned at school in Latin America (e.g., the concept of verb conjugations and algebraic principles).

Lest these accounts seem like a diatribe against the four students' primary teacher, Valdés is emphatic that the teacher she observed longest was a "teacher of goodwill" (p. 43). Valdés followed the four students

as they encountered other teachers in other ESL and sheltered-content classes, and she notes that the details of instruction might differ (e.g., no “hang the spider”), but the students’ opportunities for learning were equally problematic with other instructors. Valdés makes achingly clear that the lack of adequate training, the challenges of too-large class size, and some of the flawed premises within which the teachers have to operate contribute to poor pedagogy, suggesting systemic rather than individual problems.

Valdes also takes issue with the curricular insistence on using only English to teach English, and the distortions this leads to, including the retention of some students who can help interpret and orient for others (akin to what I saw in Providence). Noting that *foreign* language instruction in the United States often includes some instruction using English (particularly for beginners), some English in textbooks (such as directions, translations of vocabulary words), and instructors with whom students can interact in English if they are confused, troubled, excited, or late, Valdés complains angrily that such scaffolding and courtesy are unavailable to many English-language learners. In other words, although the ostensible goal of these ESL programs is to promote English-language acquisition, their very design hampers realization of this goal.

In Valdés own words, “This is neither a happy nor a comforting book. It is not a book about successes” (p. 3). Still, it is an important book that is defiantly optimistic, despite the bleakness of the scenarios Valdés witnesses. Again in her words:

> It is my hope that this book, by offering a glimpse into the lives of four youngsters, may help to illustrate the kinds of struggles that learning English involves. Adequate policies and practices can only be implemented if policy makers, school administrators, and practitioners begin with a deep and clear understanding of the complexity of the issues surrounding the acquisition of English by minority youngsters. [p. 9]