



Protean Literacy: Extending the Discourse on Empowerment. Concha Delgado-Gaitan. Washington, D.C.: Falmer Press, 1996. 151 pp.

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Protean Literacy culminates a decade of research and analysis by Concha Delgado-Gaitan. The book comprises an introduction and six chapters: "Community Landscape," "Participatory Voices," "Building on Family Strengths," "Shapeshifting: A Self of Many Possibilities," "Protean Pedagogy," and "Dimensions of Change." The introduction is itself a description of the early roots of Delgado-Gaitan's research in Carpinteria, California. (The introduction is difficult to read as a result of poor editorial work, but this should not be taken as representative of the remainder of the book. Additionally, frequent typographical errors are found in the Spanish-language texts throughout the book.) Subsequent chapters, as can be inferred by their titles, are organized to bring the reader along a ten-year continuum of research and participant interactions. In reading, one begins to follow a thread in the lives of the individuals who have fueled this work and the dynamics of their involvement. This is facilitated by the author's narrative, which is richly infused with participants' testimonials.

To speak of this work as protean or as empowerment, as the title suggests, is confusing. While the work described is on community and family and while the use of such terminology may clarify particular concepts, a proper marriage of the two has not been made. Individuals do not speak of their literacy or their actions as empowering or protean in nature. This is not a critique of this work alone but also, in general, of research that tends to lose sight of the subjects of a study while promoting a terminology-laden orientation.

Additionally, while the existence of a continuum of literacy (low literacy . . . less literate) is implied, it is in contradiction with the protean outlook suggested in the book, because literacy is itself in such flux and highly dependent on context. The work, however, is largely based on the dynamics of literacy and families' expanding uses of it. This book offers greater insight into what are monumental tribulations in the lives of minority families, as they affect the education of their children and the often invisible lives they lead in society.

Delgado-Gaitan alludes to the influence of Freire in her research. Yet contrary to the philosophical underpinnings of Freirian pedagogy, underlying her research is the notion that parents lack certain skills. The research begins with an imposition of "teaching families a literacy program" during the first year, followed the second year



by a phase wherein "parents practiced their reading in the home with their children," and were visited "periodically to examine how they progressed with their reading" (p. 112). Additionally, discussions shared by the school and the larger community remain tinged by a certain paternalism, as suggested by a newspaper article on COPLA, the organizing committee of Carpinteria parents. The article lauds the school district, not the parents, for "bending over backward to provide Hispanic students with an enlightened education" (p. 11).

If this research were indeed a process of empowerment, of *conscientización*, one would expect to find families challenging the passive roles ascribed to them as parents and community members, based on their lived realities. Further, although the author suggests the significance of including the sociocultural ("how literacy . . . contours their lives and in turn how they create meaning of literacy in the sociocultural context" [p. 7]), she overlooks the sociohistorical and sociopolitical contexts essential to reform. There are, nonetheless, two major contributions made in this work: (1) the minority community's involvement with and as subjects of the research, and (2) Delgado-Gaitan's own growth as a member of her communities of involvement.

In discussing change in the families, Delgado-Gaitan suggests that it has been for many of them a matter of power, that "people can't always find their power when their lives feel out of control" (p. 65). Yet what resonates is not power, but strength (as suggested in chapter three) and resilience. It is the strength found in solidarity and the resilience fueled by speaking out and being heard that enable minority and economically disadvantaged families to grapple with the mundane of their lives in all its dimensions. The term *power* diminishes the push and pull of opposing forces, implying instead an inherent weakness on the part of those lacking power.

Delgado-Gaitan professes having pushed the boundaries of her training and moving toward the self-reflective (what she terms "reflexivity") as a teacher, principal, and researcher. For example, she reflects on her personal immigrant experiences in relation to the present work. In the book itself, one can fathom subtle changes in the author as she moves from teacher to researcher. But again, the underlying tensions between these points (e.g., the discontinuity between teacher and principal, between teacher and researcher, and between principal and teacher, among others) are not explored.

Delgado-Gaitan's work offers a glimpse at the potential of human endeavors, where, in the process of grappling with the dailiness of their lives, people experience contexts previously closed to them. This is the mechanism eventually set in motion by



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Delgado-Gaitan's research. The proof of these dynamics is to be found as they take on a momentum of their own, as some have over the course of a decade.

I recommend this book to those interested in education, immigrant families, family literacy, and parent-school interactions. There are, through Delgado-Gaitan's toil and labor, important lessons to be shared and learned. As the author gains clarity in her reflective actions as researcher, one would hope that she continues to share the juxtaposition of that introspection with her evolving roles. These are challenges that face not only Delgado-Gaitan but any other researcher participating in the lives of others.

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