

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Book Review: Academic Profiling: Latinos, Asian Americans, and the Achievement Gap

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/583903rp>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 10(2)

Author

Murillo, Marco Antonio

Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.5070/D4102022752

Copyright Information

Copyright 2014 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Academic Profiling: Latinos, Asian Americans, and the Achievement Gap by Gilda L. Ochoa. University of Minnesota Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-8166-8740-4.

Addressing the “achievement gap” in academic performance has become prominent in educational reform efforts. However, too often, outcomes gathered from accountability measures are used to create hierarchies between students’ performance based on gender and race/ethnicity. While such comparisons have traditionally been made between Black and White students, recently, more attention has been given to the performance of Latina/o and Asian American students because of their growing numbers in the educational system. In *Academic Profiling: Latinos, Asian American, and the Achievement Gap*, Gilda L. Ochoa examines how a focus on the achievement gap, which she argues gives the “illusion” that inequality is being addressed by shifting the focus to high-stakes testing, hinders both Latina/o and Asian American students by ignoring structural and systemic injustices that “perpetuate hierarchical and binary thinking” (p. 2).

Ochoa looks beyond the *products* of education, as derived from assessment outcome measures, and focuses on the *processes* that foster opportunity gaps. These processes (e.g., tracking, access to resources, and social supports) are influenced by the intersection of structural factors and ideologies at the macro-level, school policies at the meso-level, and everyday school experiences at the micro-level, all of which affect students’ school performance. As such, the author organizes the book into three parts using a macro-meso-micro framework. In doing so, Ochoa is able to strongly articulate how neoliberal policies focused on standardized testing and narrow categorizations of students perpetuate racial, class, and gender hierarchies that limit students’ access to resources and support. In this way, she theorizes the processes underlying opportunity gaps and uncovers the mechanisms that continue to stratify students.

The first part of the book examines the ways in which macro-structures and ideologies influence perspectives, resulting in disparate academic outcomes. Ochoa demonstrates how biological explanations are used to label females as “hard workers” and males as “lazy” and less mature. Furthermore, Ochoa argues that school administrators use cultural deficiency perspectives to explain disparities in academic performance between racial/ethnic groups. Ochoa details how Asian American students are thought to be more academically inclined whereas Latina/os are viewed as social and “fun.” In addition, these culturally deterministic views are used by staff to critique Latina/o parents for lacking involvement in their children’s education, while praising Asian Americans as a “model minority” for valuing education.

Ochoa also highlights the way standardized scores, middle school courses, and teacher recommendations are used to place students into high-track and low-track programs that result in inequitable academic opportunities. The

author succeeds in making visible the seemingly inconspicuous structures that lead to tracking and result in inequitable academic opportunities. For example, she examines how “racialized and class reputations” (p. 57), which effectively label students in their feeder middle schools, are used to make tracking decisions in high schools. As a result, Asian American students are disproportionately programmed into high-track courses while Latina/o students enroll in lower tracks. Ochoa points out that higher-track students are allotted higher status across the school, which grants them access to resources and institutional agents that support their academic progress and college preparation. In contrast, students in less academically rigorous courses, most of whom are working-class Latina/os, hold a lower status and their needs are seldom prioritized.

Moving from an analysis focused on the macro-level structures that perpetuate hierarchical and rigid racial and gender categories, in part two, Ochoa shifts to a meso-level analysis. In this section, she demonstrates how tracking influences school policies and student treatment. Ochoa provides evidence of differential student treatment by demonstrating that high-track students are held to higher academic standards, while lower-track students encounter harsher discipline. In multiple interviews, both Asian American and Latina/o students acknowledge the special treatment afforded to high-track students. Ochoa finds that students in higher tracks boasted about their presence being unquestioned in certain parts of school and being able to easily access their academic counselor. In contrast, students in lower tracks, in particular Latino boys, are policed because of racialized assumptions that label them as gang members, whereas Latina bodies are sexualized, scrutinized, and patrolled. Ochoa exposes how such policing expends energy and resources and works to prevent the school from creating a nonjudgmental and supportive environment for students.

Continuing her analysis of the meso-level structures that reinforce racial and class-based hierarchies, Ochoa also notes that the weight placed on standardized testing, SAT scores, and grade point averages has led families to seek supplemental education through the for-profit tutoring industry. In an effort to ensure that their children are admitted to a top university, many Asian American middle-class families invest in tutoring services. Students who are unable to afford tutoring services outside of Southern California High School (SCHS) the majority of whom are Latina/o, are often also unable to find similar help at school. The influence and role of the tutoring industry has become so prominent that many teachers assume students have these services and no longer engage students in stimulating and challenging class material. Ochoa terms this phenomenon the “tutoring cycle” (p. 135) because disparities in human, social, and cultural capital are reproduced because of assumptions made by teachers regarding supplemental education access. Ultimately, students who require the most assistance do not receive it and are left to flounder. At a time when greater emphasis on

competition and being the best is rewarded, many students resent being left out. Ochoa appropriately claims that instead of leveling the field, the system seems to foster a “cycle of privilege” (p. 160).

The macro- and meso-constructions of students’ racial and ethnic identities cut across the everyday relationships they experience in school. In the third section, Ochoa showcases how the construction of Asian American students as “intelligent” and Latina/o students as “average” creates academic and social hierarchies at school. For Asian American students, the “model minority” myth creates pressure to perform at a high level whereas Latina/o students fight to counter labels that construct them as “dumb” or as being more apt to socialize rather than study. Those who don’t fall within these homogenized racial categories find it difficult to navigate the school and find guidance. Despite the prevalence of binary and hierarchical thinking, Ochoa offers examples of how students participate in everyday forms of resistance by “defying typification” (p. 221). Whereas Asian American students emphasize what makes them distinct from other Asian students, Latina/o students vocalized their desire to contest stereotypes about Latina/os. Some students even engage in transformative resistance through organizations, such as *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlán* (MEChA), which work to empower students in order to disrupt the cycle of unequal tracking. Clearly, she argues, students’ identities are rich and complex; therefore, there is a need to create dialogue among school staff and students that promotes a critique of simplified constructions of Latina/o and Asian students.

Ochoa concludes by documenting her experience sharing the study findings with school administrators and teachers. She states that despite her findings being affirmed by a few teachers and staff, the majority were reluctant to implement change and relied on prevailing cultural deficiency views to explain the findings and students’ performance. The role the school played in perpetuating differential outcomes was also lost on school administrators and teachers. Despite the tepid response to Ochoa’s findings by school staff, her contributions reinforce the need to critically examine how access to resources is allocated among students and to reflect on how to better support marginalized student groups. Without direct action from administrators and teachers, the processes of stratification will remain to the detriment of academic opportunities for students.

Academic Profiling calls into question the homogenization of Asian American and Latina/os bolstered by an emphasis on standardized testing, the utilization of deficit frameworks, and a superficial celebration of diversity that masks the role of structural forms of oppression. In an increasingly diverse society, Ochoa’s work showcases the need to focus on how unequal schooling hinders opportunities and fuels further divisions. Moreover, it critiques how the assessment achievement gap, mostly measured quantitatively, encumbers student-centered learning. By highlighting how schools such as SCHS perpetuate

inequality, *Academic Profiling* challenges educators, policymakers, and researchers to move beyond the achievement gap and work to create inclusive, caring, and empowering learning environments. Finally, Ochoa offers an analytic and critical lens for understanding the heterogeneity of racial groups as well as a tool for educators to challenge passive and ineffective school practices that hinder the academic success of all students. As such, it is an important read for anyone who seeks to re-imagine schools as a place where students' cultures and identities are affirmed through an asset-based, socially conscious curriculum. With schools in the U.S. becoming more diverse, Ochoa's work should serve as a guide for researchers conducting work with different racial/ethnic groups. Ochoa offers a road to follow in further learning about the array of experiences students experience in school.

Reviewer

Marco Murillo is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research focus is on the immigration status of high school students and the effect of that status on their academic trajectory. In addition, his research looks at students of colors' transitions into postsecondary education and the role higher education institutions play in supporting their academic adjustment and degree completion.