

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

Let Our Children Soar! The Complexities and Possibilities of Educating the English Language Student

Reviewed by Janet Zandy



COUNTERSTORY: THE RHETORIC AND WRITING OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY. BY AJA MARTINEZ. (2020). NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH.

Bolgen Vargas (2023) *Let Our Children Soar! The Complexities and Possibilities of Educating the English Language Student.* Melton, Woodbridge, UK: John Catt Educational Ltd.

I am not of the exceptional. I am rather of the fortunate.

- Elizabeth Catlett¹

Books saved my sanity, knowledge opened the locked places in me and taught me first how to survive and then how to soar.

- Gloria Anzaldúa²

A six-year-old boy living in a remote hamlet of the Dominican Republic climbs a tree. Holding a branch with one hand, and reaching out with the other, he plucks “the ripest and sweetest mango” to give to his mother as a loving gift. She responds, “*Gracias, este es el mango mas dulce*” (16). Now imagine that boy grown into a man who worked—not on plowing land or caring for animals—but to pluck every opportunity that came his way to acquire learning and academic degrees. To assume, however, that this is another “look how far I’ve come” narrative, misses the intent and beauty of Bolgen Vargas’s individual and communal life story, *Let Our Children Soar!*

Vargas develops a hybrid form, moving his personal story into wider circles of reflection and experience by concluding each chapter with what he calls a “Reflect and Imagine Activity” intended for educators and administrators. Vargas—who never held a pencil in his hand until he was seven years old—slowly, patiently, and with a powerful work ethos, acquired high school and college degrees as well as an Ed.D. in educational leadership³ from the University of Pennsylvania. He went on to become a school counselor for twenty years in the Greece, NY school district, then a Board of Education member for eight years in nearby Rochester, followed by four years as President of the Board and then five years as Superintendent of Schools there, and finally three years as Superintendent of Schools in Manchester, NH. Is there a harder job than being superintendent of a large urban school district such as Rochester where 89% of the students are considered “economically disadvantaged?”

Vargas saw himself as “frontline worker” rather than a school district boss, and he understood that changing the lives of children in the most impoverished neighborhoods takes not only good sense but power from the top as well as respect for education workers at every level.

“But the University of Pennsylvania?” he writes: “This was as big a leap as changing my mode of transportation from donkeys and horses in my hamlet to the subway in Manhattan. But, as my mother often said, dreams become real if you dream at night and work hard during the day—and in my family, that also meant taking advantage of the harvest moon to work a little longer” (93).

The most memorable and moving parts of Vargas’s *bildungsroman* are his immigrant journey and his emphasis on the importance of seeing children whose first language isn’t English as students possessing strengths rather than deficits. Vargas was the youngest of eight children born to Octavia and Jesus (his father was called Maria) Vargas. Every day the parents would quarrel over their children’s futures—the mother urging them to leave and get an education; the father wanting them to stay on the farm and do things his way. About his loving mother, Vargas writes: “She was strong and brilliant in her environment, but she couldn’t sign her name. I am still haunted by that” (19).

Vargas cautions his reader that his experience and family circumstance should *not* be construed as representative of all English language learner (ELL) students. Indeed, this book is a reminder of the crucial importance of factoring class differences into the broad-stroke category of “immigrant.”

One particular rhythm of Vargas’s early life was his relationship to the natural world: “Nature found its way to warm the heart, humble us, and make us appreciate what very little we did have.” Vargas’s family may not have had electricity or running water, but they had a large mango tree that would shade the family gathered beneath it: “Everyone in the family...remembered her [i.e., the tree] when they were growing up” (17). And, of course, there was baseball: “When we die, if we were to see two trails, one leading to heaven and the other to a baseball game, most Dominicans would follow the trail to the baseball game” (23).

Vargas’s life circumstances, common to many other ELL students, was a desire to learn despite poverty, the lack of books at home, and the realization that his first language was not the language of either school or the wider world. But this is larger than language differences. Vargas recognizes multiple literacies and pre-literate language strengths, such as an orality of prayers, sayings, and his mother reciting “*decimas Dominicana*,” a form of folkloric poetry, which widened what he calls a “special experience of words” (51). Vargas’s book can be situated in a lineage of class-conscious pedagogical writing, especially with his emphasis on common sense, respect for non-institutional knowledge, and the critical necessity of hope. He cites Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*,⁴ still requisite reading for those who teach the least privileged. I’m also reminded of Paulo Freire’s politically informed analysis of literacy: “Being illiterate does not preclude the common sense to choose what is best for oneself, and to choose the best (or the least evil) leaders” and that “We can learn a great deal from the very students we teach. For this to happen it is necessary that we transcend the monotonous, arrogant, and elitist traditionalism where the teacher knows all and the student does not know anything.”⁵

Bolgen Vargas brings to the surface often unnamed and bourgeois assumptions about the self. His self is not singular; he carries what I call “the we inside the I.” On one level it is the traveling memory of the lived conditions of one’s family that had limited access to education. On another level is the real, crucial, material support systems that sustain other family members. Vargas could not have left the Dominican Republic without the money sent home

by his older brother Arsenio or his efforts in acquiring the necessary papers for the family to enter and work in America. Indeed, work is central to this book. Or, as Vargas puts it: "From a young age, I had derived my self-worth from work and the contribution that I made to my family" (70). He worked full time as a dishwasher and busboy while attending high school in NYC until his mother gained access to subsidized public housing with reduced rent and fewer rats. He still worked odd jobs and family members pooled their earned money.

Although not a classroom teacher, Vargas respects teachers' work lives. He knows how lucky he was to have the right teacher at the right time. He remembers and names his important teachers: "maestro" Juan Ramos in the D.R. whose grade-school curriculum was supplemented with radio lessons; Diana Acosta, counselor and bilingual teacher in NYC's Seward Park High School, who understood the difference between fluency and potential; Judith Goldberg, who allowed him to stay in her advanced English class where he was mistakenly placed. From her he earned not just a hard-won C, but an appreciation for how literature can shape lives. Outside the classroom he acquired something else: his precious New York City library card and a place where it was warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

Like work, Vargas also reflects on time—hamlet time, city time, and teacher time. He acknowledges the importance of teachers learning about the lives of their students and their families, but also the equal importance of administrators seeing the burdens on teachers' own time, exacerbated by bureaucratic pressures as well as workload. "I believe that the most effective way to improve outcomes for students is to improve the lot of teachers," writes Vargas (138).

Teachers and students face a wall of tests. Although not an overtly political book, one can hear, beneath the memoir's surface, a political hum. This is most evident in Vargas's commentary about "No Child Left Behind" and its test-driven approach to learning and teacher evaluations, not to mention school districts' dilemma in facing unfunded federal mandates or having funding depend on adopting state or federal (so-called) standards. As Vargas argues, "Even though I could agree that the education system needed significant change and reform, I did not believe this approach to reform would address the most important goal on our own local education reform agenda: *to create for our most vulnerable children all the opportunities that were available in middle-class communities throughout America*" (126).

Education is a class issue and a class struggle. Vargas's short, communal memoir has quiet resonance. I am less enthusiastic about his infrequent use of such education jargon, as "gateway protective factors" (107), but then I was always allergic to those required education courses in my 1960s teachers' training college. And I wish there were an index.

Let Our Children Soar! is an important addition to the work of Mike Rose, Ira Shor, Paulo Freire, Walter Ong, Richard Ohmann, and many others. They would no doubt appreciate how Bolgen Vargas never forgets the child in the remote hamlet who plucked a sweet fruit for his mother.

Notes

1. Quoted in Melanie Anne Herzog, *In the Image of the People* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2005), 15.
2. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/aunt lute, 1987), Preface.
3. Unpacking that academic category, "educational leadership" is a task for another writer. The content of such an academic path is unclear to me, but it seems to be a requisite for administrative authority in schools.
4. Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).
5. Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*, translated by Donaldo Macedo, (Granby, Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), 176, 177.

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