



Rodríguez, L. F. (2014). *The time is now: Understanding and responding to the black and latina/o dropout crisis in the U.S.* New York, New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

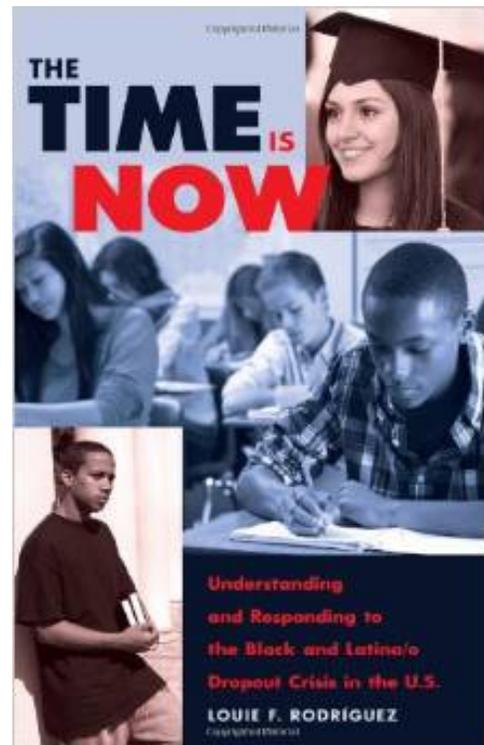
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I approached this review with a keen interest in grasping the urgency of the school dropout crisis confronting Black and Latina/o youth in the United States today, a concern clearly captured in the title of the monograph. More importantly, I was interested in understanding what specific steps can be done as a necessary counter to this stark reality moving forward in the twenty-first century. My interest in this issue also stems from my own background as a first-generation college graduate from a predominantly Latina/o low-income high school, similar to what is described in this book. Author Louie F. Rodríguez does not disappoint, and this is the kind of book that should be widely distributed, read, and applied by educators and policymakers in school districts nationwide.

Rodríguez begins his narrative by introducing a metaphor originally developed by legal critical race scholars Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres about the use of a canary by mine workers to understand the condition of race in the United States (Guinier & Torres, 2003). The singing of the canary determines the level of toxicity in the air, which alerts the workers to then vacate the mine.



While Guinier and Torres use this metaphor to highlight the importance of race in the general sense, Rodríguez applies this same framework to contextualize the alarming school dropout rate confronting low-income Black and Latina/o urban communities in the United States today. As he states, “the canary has become our Black and Latina/o youth who drop out at rates of 50% or higher. And the 21<sup>st</sup> century mine is the classroom” (p. xiii). He then elaborates on this important topic throughout the book by sharing insights learned from three principal locations over a ten-year period—Boston, Miami, and southern California—and then proposing a theoretical plan of action moving forward for school practitioners and researchers alike.

In the first chapter, the author provides a brief overview of the dropout crisis in the United States among low-income students of color. Although there has been substantial empirical research that describes the importance of this topic in the last two decades, Rodríguez cautions that these efforts by researchers, policymakers, and school practitioners have failed to provide a clear and sustainable response or plan of action. Part of the reason stems from the “methodological and epistemological nature of research, and the misguided nature of structurally driven school reform efforts” (p. 12). Unfortunately, students are often viewed as subjects of research as opposed to agents for change.

Rather than solely provide continued descriptive analyses of “the problem,” Rodríguez instead offers a research-driven approach in chapter two that focuses on critical self-examination and systemic change within the institutional culture of schools, or what he terms the “school culture.” This framework, known as the “Paradigm to Understand and Examine Dropout and Engagement in Society” or PUEDES approach, is distinct because of the Freirean emphasis on listening to voices of the marginalized, in this case the students themselves. Engaging youth as intellectuals capable of naming their own world is critical to transforming their sense of agency from being a just a problem to actual “champions of equity and opportunity within

their schools and in their communities,” according to the author (p. 35). By examining their own experiences through dialogue, students themselves engage in a process of what Freire called education for critical consciousness (Freire & Macedo, 2001). The PUEDES approach is also unique by illuminating “how the various structures and processes within school shape student agency” (p. 24).

In chapter three, Rodríguez shares his insights from three distinct experiences working with Black and Latina/o high school students in Boston, Miami, and southern California. The PROS Project in Boston, the POWER Project in Miami, and the PRAXIS Project in California all reaffirmed the importance of school culture to effectively counter the dropout crisis, which also informed his own approach for change. In chapter four, the author builds upon his experiences by underlining ten specific points that are absolutely critical to policy development and more research around the dropout crisis. These include the following: “1. Relationships; 2. Student Voice; 3. Students as Intellectuals; 4. Learning from the Canaries in the Classroom; 5. Community-Relevant Curriculum; 6. Culture of Dialoging; 7. The Struggle to Recognize; 8. School Assets; 9. Excellence; 10. Making Public Schools ‘Public’” (p. 71). This 10-point plan should involve community-wide support to work alongside the students, including parents, educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders. If seriously considered, the author posits that this plan should not only encourage critical dialogue among all key constituents, but also help to affect long-term systemic change regarding what types of policies are enacted and how further research is conducted.

Rodríguez completes his book by re-emphasizing the ten-point plan and the PUEDES approach that he addressed in the previous chapters. “In order to confront the 50% dropout crisis facing our youth, communities and society,” he affirms in chapter five, “we need to create conditions in our institutions so that our students not only stay in school but also thrive academically, interpersonally, and intellectually” (p. 103). What is also critical in

this last chapter is his direct call to action for schools, communities, school districts and policymakers seeking to engage in this issue. Most critical in this process is the need to invest in healthy student-teacher relationships to directly support student achievement and success. A related concrete step for schools and school districts is to be intentional about cultivating learning environments where student voices are recognized. In this regard, Rodríguez encourages schools to revisit this notion of school excellence to help shape school culture in the every day.

Although the narrative does read more like a report than an engaging story, which is reflective of the intended readership, Rodríguez still is able to provide a human dimension to the central issue by highlighting profiles of real students when possible. To demonstrate the effectiveness of the PUEDES approach in chapter two, for example, the author introduces a Latino high school student in the Northeast named Ramon. Although school data often portrayed Ramon as a disengaged anti-authoritarian, a deeper analysis through the PUEDES approach shows that his perspective sheds light on the inadequate structural and cultural environment of the school itself. According to the author, “Ramon’s experiences and perspectives show a complex interplay between various factors associated with societal, school, and classroom structure and Ramon’s agency” (p. 30). In chapter three, Rodríguez highlights the experiences of a Latina high school student in Miami named Tina. Through her participation in the POWER Project, Tina excelled and reflected for the author the central importance of creating intentional spaces where students can share their own knowledge and perspectives within the school environment.

Another refreshing point made by the author is the continued need for culturally-and-community-relevant curriculum to empower Black and Latina/o youth as part of his 10-point plan for policy development and research. As Rodríguez makes clear, part of the current problem is that “the history of people of color and their role as builders of knowledge and their contributions to the development of our democracy are largely excluded

from the curriculum and pedagogical practices in the K-12 school system” (p. 84). Whether highlighting specific court cases, like *Mendez v. Westminster*, or key historical figures and social movements, like the César Chávez and the farmworker movement, curriculum does matter.

## References

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