

## **Cultivating Humanizing Interactions and Developing Ideological Clarity: A Book Review**

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Gallo, S. (2017). *Mi padre: Mexican immigrant fathers and their children's education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Interaction is at the core of all that we do. Each day we interact with other people, materials, documents, and ideas. These interactions shape our ideologies about cultural norms, language, and education among other things. Because our ideologies develop through everyday seemingly mundane interactions, they can be difficult to identify and understand. However, as Sarah Gallo suggests in her 2017 book *Mi Padre: Mexican Immigrant Fathers and Their Children's Education*, teachers and administrators must examine their underlying assumptions about what counts as valuable educational experiences at home in addition to at school. This book shares findings and pedagogical takeaways derived from Gallo's (2017) three-year ethnography study of how Mexican fathers in Marshall, Pennsylvania contributed to the linguistic and sociocultural development of their children, often in ways not recognized by traditional schooling.

Throughout the book, Gallo (2017) emphasizes the importance of developing what she calls a *humanizing family engagement* framework. This framework advocates teachers and administrators examine what counts as parent involvement, educational support, and knowledge. Additionally, her framework underscores the need for teachers and administrators to learn from the diverse perspectives of students and their families and build awareness about the assets they

bring to the classroom. She further suggests teachers and administrators, through this process, seek ideological clarity, in which they reflect on their own beliefs and question how these beliefs impact their ideologies about difference, power, privilege and educational practice. However, Gallo recognizes the process of developing ideological clarity “can be difficult for members of the dominant society because it requires regularly questioning what we have always assumed to be unquestionably true” (Gallo, 2017, p. 108). Because our ideologies begin developing from our earliest interactions, these interactions play a significant role in shaping not only our concept of what is true but also our identities. Thus, changing our ideological perspectives about what counts as valuable family engagement and education practices and often requires teachers and administrators to renegotiate societal norms which have historically marginalized and dehumanized immigrant families and their roles in their children’s education.

*Mi Padre* contains seven chapters grouped into two parts. Part I, entitled “From Stereotypes to Humantypes and Leveraging Difference,” first centers on breaking down stereotypes portraying Mexican men as uneducated, illegal criminals. Then, this part discusses how the parental engagement practices of Mexican father’s have been historically misunderstood. The final two chapters in this part share the stories of different Mexican immigrant fathers and how they adopted valuable educational practices at home for furthering their children’s education, even if these practices did not align with the school’s expectations of family engagement. Part II, entitled, “Working with Immigrant and Undocumented Families,” discusses the challenges families face when they do not have proper documentation to live in the United States and how undocumented families develop *politicized funds of knowledge*, the knowledge children gain about “navigating citizenship status, ...border crossing,...[and the] range of experiences that are often excluded from schooling” (Gallo, 2017, p. 80). Moreover, the

last chapter in this part provides specific action steps for both administrators and teachers to create more humanizing engagement practices in their schools.

Throughout *Mi Padre*, Gallo (2017) provides explicit pedagogical takeaways and reflection questions for educators to examine their own practices. Additionally, she provides explicit resources educators can use to begin to cultivate humanizing interactions with students and families. Because this book has such a clear audience, teachers and administrators, she structures the narrative to be accessible for this audience and ties the narrative directly to implications for practice. Although most of the book seems to be speaking directly to teachers, she openly addresses administrators towards the end, emphasizing the need for teachers and administrators to work collaboratively to cultivate humanizing interactions with students and families. The takeaways and reflection questions incorporated throughout the book are designed aid educators and administrators in the process of developing ideological clarity and humanizing practices; however, Gallo (2017) does not propose that the process will be fast or easy. Instead, she acknowledges the complex process involved in cultivating these practices. Thus, readers should not underestimate the normalizing force of a society or a school operating under colorblind, language-blind, or culture-blind ideologies.

Furthermore, Gallo (2017) encourages educators to find allies for pedagogical change who will help resist these forces and pave the way for more humanizing approaches. Collaborative discussions with like-minded professionals help educators to delve into issues of injustice and develop more humanizing pedagogical approaches to teaching. Through this humanizing approach to teaching, students and teachers engage in active dialogue in effort to co-construct new understandings and develop asset-based teaching practices designed to build upon the diverse backgrounds of students. Thus, according to Gallo (2017), a key component in

developing ideological clarity and cultivating humanizing pedagogies involves teachers and administrators being in collaborative dialogue with students and families.

In chapter 4, for example, Gallo shares the policy changes that took place over a three-year period at Grant elementary, the setting of the study, and how these changing practices effected families. She shares the challenges that parents, Cristián and Paloma, of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Grant elementary student, Emily, faced in supporting their daughter with her homework assignments. Teachers at Grant elementary assumed the assigned homework activities would be easy for all parents to support, but the obscure vocabulary and lack of meaningful context in these activities made these homework assignments difficult to complete for Spanish-speaking families. A pilot initiative which brought together Spanish-speaking families, teachers, and university researchers to problematize these types of issues allowed for humanizing interaction that could support educators in developing ideological clarity about the needs of Spanish-speaking families. However, even though this pilot program allowed opportunities for Spanish-speaking families to voice their concerns and more authentic literacy practices were starting to be implemented (e.g., writer's workshop) in the classroom, these humanizing practices were curtailed with new administration. Grant elementary hired a new principal when Emily entered second grade. This principal employed an English-only homework policy that solidified English as the language of school, and therefore reverted much of the progress that had been made.

The policy practices of each administration at Grant elementary highlight the contention between state, district, and local mandates and humanizing classroom and family engagement practices. As a former, K-8 English as new language teacher and secondary English as a second language specialist, I could really relate to the struggles encountered at Grant elementary. In my own experience, many teachers feared taking on humanizing pedagogical practices if they went

against district and/or local administrator mandates. Thus, I appreciate that Gallo's takeaways imply creating humanizing interactions with students and families requires a simultaneous top-down and bottom-up effort which includes administrators, educators, and other school support staff. By including specific takeaways for administrators in addition to teachers, Gallo acknowledges how district and building level mandates shape teachers' perceptions of what is possible in the classroom. While having district and local leaders support and guidance is preferred, even teachers without explicit support from administrators can take steps to implement humanizing pedagogies within their classrooms and, as suggest in the foreword written by Guadalupe Valdés (2017), "find 'wiggle room' in the curriculum and organize against harmful policies and practices" (p. x).

Gallo also recommends resources to support educators in carving out this "wiggle room" (e.g., Teaching Tolerance <https://www.tolerance.org>; Rethinking Schools <https://www.rethinkingschools.org/>, p.114; Colorin Colorado <http://www.colorincolorado.org/>, p. 72). Moreover, she encourages teachers and administrators to conduct home visits. I agree home visits are a worthwhile experience for building trusting relationships with students and families. However, I know from personal experience that home visits are difficult for teachers and administrators to conduct due to long work hours, family obligations, and after school activities. Therefore, I wish Gallo had provided more suggestions about how to support teachers and administrator in carving out time for home visits. For instance, when I was working as secondary English as second language specialist, our district English as a second language team which was headed by our district's English as a new language coordinator made a point to spend a full day once a month visiting the homes of new enrollees. During these visits, we introduced ourselves, provided resources, answered questions, and invited families to special parent

information nights held throughout the year. We also worked with other school personnel and local community organizations to connect families with health resources, education programming options, and English classes. Our team viewed communicating with families as a district priority, and the leadership I received during this time help to further my own ideological clarity. Thus, our district leader had a vision for supporting students and families at all levels, which goes beyond the scope of Gallo's book. Although Gallo provides excellent suggestions for educators and administrators, she doesn't include many suggestions for how educators and administrators can collaborate with school psychologists, counselors, support staff, and community organizations to help meet the diverse needs of families. Still, this book offers plenty of valuable and practical suggestions to support administrators and teachers in reflecting and improving upon family engagement practices, and these suggestions could be applied in other contexts.

For example, Gallo (2017) suggests teachers draw upon the knowledge students bring from home and explicitly develop metalinguistic awareness in the classroom by incorporating discussions about the similarities and differences among languages. In *Mi Padre*, Gallo (2017) shares how Cristián helped his now fourth-grade daughter Emily to recognize the similarities and differences between Spanish and English including pointing out cognates and differences in word order. These practices are easy to incorporate in the classroom and do not require the teacher to know Spanish. Yet again, I could relate this takeaway to my own experience. I frequently incorporated metalinguistic discussions in my classroom, and I found it allowed students to draw on their funds of knowledge and me to continue to learn from them.

Moreover, I appreciated how *Mi Padre* emphasized the important language learning that was happening in the homes of students at Grant elementary. In the book, Cristián also taught

Emily the importance of linguistic appropriateness and how to switch discourses based on the situation. He again demonstrates a simple but important strategy teachers can incorporate into their daily practice. Gallo (2017) implies modeling linguistic appropriateness and providing students opportunities to switch between and blend different discourses and languages helps students to understand the linguistic expectations of various places and offers them more opportunities to interact and experiment with their discourse in a safe space.

Additionally, throughout *Mi Padre*, Gallo shares many challenges immigrant families face including the criminalizing of undocumented individuals and deportations. In chapter 5, Gallo (2017) describes a scenario in which Mateo, an undocumented Mexican father, refuses to allow a policeman in his house without papers (referring to a warrant). This play on the word papers serves as a counternarrative to the societal grand narrative that criminalizes undocumented individuals for not having papers. In other words, this play on words helps Mateo take back some power and dictate his own story. Moreover, this scenario demonstrates Mateo's knowledge of the legal system as well as his witty use of double-meaning words "in an act of reclaiming their home as a safe space" (Gallo, 2017, p. 80). One of my former students used similar double-meaning word play in the classroom. Anytime I said I was going to pass out papers, this student would jokingly say, "You're passing out papers? I need some papers." I always chuckled at the joke and assured the student that if I could get my students papers I would. Stories like Mateo's and my former student's demonstrate resilience and resistance. Both of these stories demonstrate politicized funds of knowledge and advocate for changes to the grand narrative. Although Gallo does not provide a lot of explicit resources for supporting families, educators, and administrators in developing greater understanding of the legal rights of

immigrants and language learners, *Mi Padre* provides several other valuable resources for teachers and administrators.

In sum, *Mi Padre* provides readers with insight into how Mexican father's support their children's educational practices at home and challenges educators to expand their view of what counts as valuable learning experiences in and out of the classroom. I personally found the book relatable to my own experiences working with K-12 English language learners and their families, and I gained new knowledge about how the father's in the study supported their children's learning that I will use to inform my practice in the future. Therefore, I would highly recommend this book to teachers and administrators looking to better support their immigrant families and develop more humanizing practices in their schools.

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