

Book Review

***Esperanza School: A Grassroots Community School in Honduras*, by Eloisa Rodriguez.
Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012, 131 pages.**

Families and Communities in a Super-Exploited Context: A Review of *Esperanza School: A Grassroots Community School in Honduras*

“The uneven relationship that exists between Honduras and the United States continues to this day, and is manifested in the way the US interferes in the daily activities of [Honduras].”

Rodriguez, 2012, p. 2

Given the economic and education systems in Honduras, Eloisa Rodriguez’s (2012) book, *Esperanza School: A Grassroots Community School in Honduras*, sets out to answer the question, “is it possible to provide equal education for all Hondurans?” (p. 5). Contextualized in the oppressor-oppressed relationship between Honduras and the United States, Rodriguez makes the argument that a better quality of public education is the solution for decreasing poverty in Honduras. Rodriguez looks to grassroots community schools, which have been established globally, as a means of addressing poverty and inequitable access to schooling, and provides a case study of Esperanza School as a model for the kind of school that could break the cycle of poverty that leads to poor education, which subsequently maintains poverty. Rodriguez views education as the means to social transformation, and she sees grassroots community schooling in particular as “a quiet revolution in schooling... a revolution aimed at provided [sic] quality education for all, not just for the privileged” (p. 12). In this review, we provide a brief overview of the book’s chapters and main themes and then offer our own analysis of the broader economic and political situation in Honduras, as related to education and communities.

Esperanza School: A Grassroots Community School in Honduras focuses on a rural, private bilingual (English and Castilian Spanish) elementary school and the surrounding community. In chapter 1, Rodriguez briefly outlines Honduras’ economic and education systems in order to provide readers with a context in which to understand Esperanza School. This is important background information to have, given that Honduras is the third poorest country in the Americas and that among the poorest quartile of Hondurans, only 8% of young people will graduate from high school (Inter-American Development Bank, 2015).

Chapter 2 provides a definition of grassroots community schools. Acknowledging that definitions and terminology varies, Rodriguez defines a grassroots community school as “a school which is created by the community’s interest, is governed by the community, and its policies are dictated by the needs of the community” (p. 12). By means of a short literature review, Rodriguez adds that grassroots community schools are characterized by the following: teaching and learning in non-formal education programs; a set of partnerships between the school and the community; an emphasis on and commitment to “whole-hearted involvement” (p. 13) by adults and parents in a community; a commitment to meeting the community’s needs and involving the community in planning programs; and a goal of community development and improvement. Rodriguez promotes Esperanza School as an exemplar of “this revolutionary

movement, one that is aimed at equal education for all and at empowerment of community members” (p. 14).

In chapter 3 Rodriguez establishes her theoretical framework using Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy and John Dewey’s work on education and experience. Rodriguez describes some of Freire’s foundational ideas about education – such as *conscientization*, a rejection of the banking model, and an emphasis on dialogue and mutual respect – in relation to reflecting on her own educational practice. She also explores some of Dewey’s views about society and the individual and ties Dewey’s and Freire’s beliefs about the democratization of education into the grassroots community schooling movement.

In chapter 4, “Educational Possibilities for Honduras,” Rodriguez provides an overview of how Esperanza School aligns with the key characteristics of grassroots community schools that she has developed: the perpetuation of community values, meeting community needs, community involvement in planning programs and choosing curriculum, and fostering community development. Rodriguez also introduces her research participants and her research methodology, multicultural cross-cultural narrative inquiry.

Chapter 5, titled “Esperanza School and the People who Matter,” elaborates on Esperanza School’s history and its stated social justice mission. Interestingly, for a community school defined as one created by the community, governed by the community, with policies dictated by the needs of the community, of the nine “people who matter” at Esperanza School highlighted in this chapter, all but one are from the United States, some of whom are visiting Honduras for the first time and for only three weeks. Rodriguez provides an in-depth description of a typical day for Betsy, the school principal, exploring what involvement in the community and commitment to the school might look like in practice, and making connections to Freirean and Deweyan philosophies. She also offers insights from one of the founders of Esperanza School, two teachers, and five U.S. American preservice teacher participants who spend two weeks at the school as part of their field experience on a study abroad trip to Honduras.

Throughout chapter 6, “Realities and Dilemmas,” Rodriguez elaborates and reflects on the four predominant characteristics of grassroots community schools that she constructed from her research, initially outlined in chapter 4. She relates these characteristics to her research participants’ narratives, drawing on what they shared about Esperanza School to articulate its functioning as a grassroots community school. These are what she calls the “realities” of the school, on which we elaborate below. We also elaborate further on the dilemmas that Rodriguez describes – the imposition of English through bilingual education, U.S. Americans running and staffing the school, and a community school available only to a select few in the community.

Chapter 7, “A Dialogue about Esperanza School,” is an imaginary conversation between Rodriguez, Paulo Freire, John Dewey, William Schubert, and William Pinar. Rodriguez poses a question to the educational scholars: what kind of education is taking place at Esperanza School, and is it even possible for that to be reproduced nation-wide in Honduras? After struggling with questions of whether Esperanza School truly constitutes the definition of a grassroots community school, or whether it is an elite school that maintains the status quo, Rodriguez suggests a solution to the problem of making high-quality education available to all: Esperanza School could function as a model for other branches across Honduras, each one sponsored by a local company. This idea is lauded by “Dewey,” who says, “Can you imagine the impact on Honduran society if the impoverished feel that the wealthy are looking after them? If these companies take

over schools and sponsor children in the area to attend classes, it would generate a larger labor force, reduce school drop-outs, and increase the literacy rate” (p. 105).

Esperanza School ends on an anticipatory note. In the final chapter, “Hopes and Expectations,” Rodriguez delivers some suggestions of how schooling in Honduras and teacher education, both in Honduras and the United States, might move forward, including by creating awareness among preservice teachers of the existence of community-based schools.

Esperanza School is a useful starting point for curriculum scholars, teacher educators, preK-12 educational practitioners, and preservice teachers to gain insight into international teacher education and how families and communities in super-exploited countries negotiate conflicting curricula between nationalistic formal schooling and lived experiences. The many critical educational issues raised in the book invite further exploration through dialectical understandings of larger social issues. It is on these larger social issues that we wish to focus our attention.

Honduran Context

The material reality of Honduras’ position as a super-exploited nation-state in the international arena is the primary determinant for its sociopolitical context of formal schooling. In a nation-state where 60% of the population lives below the poverty line (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015) as neoliberal economic reforms exacerbate socioeconomic disparities, the renegotiation of schooling is necessary. However, this renegotiation often takes the form of an attack – albeit oblique – on public schooling. The “quiet revolution” that Rodriguez describes is also what she calls “the kind of school that I have long dreamed of as an alternative to the public schools in Honduras” (p. 12). Yet, it is shortsighted to determine that public schools are ineffective or failing without asking why that is the case.

Rodriguez recognizes a lack of funding as a major impediment to public schools in Honduras but offers very little analysis of *why* Honduras is an underdog in the global economic arena. Rodriguez states that “Central American governments have always had a subjugated position in international relations” (p. 2). She concludes that, “Honduras depends economically and politically on the United States and therefore is forced to comply with its pressures and demands” (p. 3), as if economic and political dependency just emerge organically instead of being intentionally and explicitly created by U.S. government and business interests. It would behoove anyone looking to understand the education system in Honduras to first ask, how did it come to be this way?

Disappointingly, throughout the book there is barely a mention of the structural inequities that shape the school system in Honduras, or the fact that the U.S. government and corporations have systematically exploited Honduras for its land, resources, and labor. Rodriguez devotes one sentence to the Banana Wars: “Since the 1920s United States owned banana companies ‘benefitted from and forced Honduran peasants off Honduras’ good soil’ (Pine, 2008, p. 18).” If Honduras depends economically and politically on the United States, this explanation provides insufficient context. In attempting to understand the context in Honduras, it cannot be ignored that the United States Marine Corps carried out military interventions in Honduras in 1903, 1907, 1911, 1912, 1919, 1924, and 1925 for the purpose of protecting U.S. commercial interests and disenfranchising Hondurans (Striffler & Moberg, 2003). The lack of in-depth contextualization is particularly relevant to the school under discussion here. What Rodriguez does not say is that

Esperanza School was originally established by the granddaughter of Samuel Zemurray with money from the Samuel Zemurray Foundation.

Zemurray was a U.S. businessman who was the head of the United Fruit Company. In 1912 he hired mercenaries and brought a ship full of weapons into Honduras to help overthrow Honduras' government. In return, the newly installed president granted Zemurray low taxes and land concessions. (To understand how much wealth Zemurray accumulated through his exploits in Central America, when he was 53 years old he sold the company to United Fruit Company for \$31.5 million in stock, the equivalent of \$271 million today.) When Jacobo Árbenz, Guatemala's democratically-elected President, suggested that 2% of the population should not own 70% of the land in Guatemala, Zemurray played an instrumental role in the 1954 CIA coup that removed a democratically-elected leader and replaced him with a U.S.-backed military dictator (Schlesinger & Kinzer, 2005). The historical context of Esperanza School is important because it is closely related to U.S. imperialist aims, and served as public relations propaganda at a time when United Fruit and the U.S. government negated the autonomy of democratically elected Central American governments through interventionist policy and a complete disregard for human rights.

The current relationship between Honduras and the United States remains one of oppressed-oppressor, exploited-exploiter. Since the 1980s Honduras has been a key supporter of U.S. national interests while the U.S. continues to support domestic repression of dissent in Honduras. For example, in 2014 when indigenous activist groups were peacefully resisting the construction of a dam that would privatize a sacred river on their ancestral lands, then-U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Lisa Kubiske accused the indigenous groups of blocking progress and called on the Honduran government to prosecute activists (Bell, 2014). Between 2009 and 2014, the U.S. government gave \$40 million in police and military aid, largely used for repressing citizens. Since 2009 the U.S. has also build three additional military bases in Honduras, bringing the total to six U.S. military bases in a country with a population of 8 million people (Bell, 2014; Forde, 2014). Other ongoing forms of oppression in Honduras include multinational corporate land grabs for building tourist resorts and palm oil plantations, stripping indigenous land rights in the process (Kerssen, 2013). Honduras' Mayan tribes, minoritized ethnic groups (e.g., Garifunas), and mestizo populations navigate inequitable social relations in a nation-state where a handful of elite families maintain control of political and economic decisions.

The rhetoric of instability (e.g., teacher strikes, 2009 government coup) that Rodriguez employs in her description of the current political climate seems to disregard teachers' labor rights, or the general population's right to protest. Rodriguez claims to understand that political protests in Honduras "are forms of expression for oppressed communities," even though she fears "for the country's stability in terms of daily riots" (p. 25). The overview provided is accompanied by a total absence of agency, as if Honduras inevitably and spontaneously just *became* poor and dependent. Therefore, when Rodriguez states that grassroots community schooling is a possibility for Honduran education by utilizing "the potential of people so that they can recognize and implement available resources for community improvement" (p. 17), it ignores contemporary colonial structures that might constrain local communities in Honduras from recognizing their potential. Communities in Honduras were able to recognize their potential, and were flourishing, prior to Spanish and then U.S. colonization. The system of public schooling in Honduras is neoliberal doctrine enacted at its best – to claim that a public institution

is failing, you must recreate the conditions in which it would be impossible to succeed (Harvey, 2007).

Communities and Schools

Rodriguez states, “While I know that education occurs not only in the classroom, I nonetheless feel, as well as educators in general do, that children belong in schools” (p. 21). This statement is problematic. We, along with others (e.g., Ivan Illich, Peter Gray, John Taylor Gatto, John Holt), are two educators who do not believe that children “belong” in schools. The onset of national schooling projects has created an ethos that designates schools as natural, unavoidable, and synonymous with education (Gray, 2015). Throughout the book, the concepts of education and schooling are often conflated.

Communities, which can also be classified as families and family networks, have always educated their members in the ways of knowing and being in their society. Schools are one form of inculcating community values, but there are many others. Freire, for example, famously taught illiterate peasant laborers in Brazil in the fields where they worked. Rodriguez uses Freire’s ideas, but does not disambiguate Freire’s notion of education from the notion of schooling. One goal that Rodriguez has for Honduran education is to raise the literacy rate. As one of many components involved in the struggle toward equitable social relations, one can imagine a literate peasant class in Honduras taking a stand for their labor rights, and human rights in general. However, even without literacy, many Honduran activists have been able to effect change (e.g., Bell, 2014). Activism has even been a path toward literacy for *campesinas* like Elvia Alvarado (Alvarado & Benjamin, 1989).

Rodriguez says that she is “grateful” for the *maquiladoras* (sweatshops) in Honduras, reasoning that they “keep people off the streets” (p. 25). For an elite Honduran to claim that keeping people off the streets is important for Honduran society suggests a desire to maintain an inequitable status quo. While Freire (1970) advocated exploration and analysis of oppressor-oppressed relations, Rodriguez acknowledges that she judges and criticizes public school teachers for “striking for what they believe in” (p. 24). What they believe in is the desire for a living wage and better benefits. Rodriguez struggles with this tension because as a private school teacher earning six times more than public school teachers, she also feels herself to be one of the oppressed, as private school teachers do not have a secure tenure system.

We believe that people need to be out on the streets learning through a culture of activism, as Freire would advocate. The *maquiladoras* are not phenomena for which to be grateful, but rather a form of social control through cultural eradication and economic impoverishment. Communities throughout Honduras do not need to be empowered, they need to engage in a process of onto-epistemological decolonization, and this includes communities of elite Hondurans as well.

It is difficult, therefore, to view grassroots community schools as revolutionary (i.e., new, radical, groundbreaking) when by their very definition they resemble a *return* to what has been before. Communities can “school” themselves through the creation of schools, or through the extension of cultural ways of knowing that valorize the human rights that existed prior to the imposition of Spanish and Anglo/U.S. capitalist philosophies. We might question what is so unique about a private bilingual school in rural Honduras compared to a public elementary school in suburban Portland, Oregon or suburban West Lafayette, Indiana? All three cases have

heavy parent involvement. All three are exclusionary, either through tuition or the ability to live (based on property values) within the district lines of the school. The question of access to Esperanza School should be considered in relation to the characteristics of a grassroots community school, provided in chapter 2 and elaborated on in chapter 4. Rodriguez states,

The goal of providing education for all cannot be met by simply investing in the expansion of the regular public system without considering how best to organize schools that can respond to the particular needs of a country's most disadvantaged families and children. (p. 18).

Education for all, a noble goal, will not be met in a privately funded school that charges tuition. Embedded within the statement is an argument that attacks publicly funded educational systems. Ultimately, Rodriguez admits, "It is not easy for me to say this...but, in some ways, Esperanza School is not truly a grassroots community school as a grassroots community school is represented in the literature" (p. 96).

Conceptualizing Equity

In discussing a liberatory education, Rodriguez states that people need to be critical about their educational reality. We propose that such criticality should also be extended to our social reality. In chapter 7's imaginary dialogue, "Freire" raises questions about Esperanza School being extolled as a grassroots community school when it does not seem to meet many of the required characteristics. Rodriguez responds to Freire's critiques by reasoning:

I understand I am thinking that education takes place only in the classroom and in textbooks, but that is because that is all I have known how to do. I do not know how to liberate myself from this oppressive thinking and break the chains of this learning ideology. I was given an opportunity to attend a bilingual school and was successful in it.

I can only want others to be exposed to my same experience. (p. 102)

In conceptualizing what social equity means, Rodriguez seems to yearn for a replication of her own experience in a bilingual school. Bilingual schooling for all students may be possible, but it does not need to be done through the privatization of education; it could conceivably be achieved through a publicly funded schooling project. The nation-state has become a tool of multinational corporate interests (Bakan, 2005; Chomsky, 1999). Whether Rodriguez imagines the same schooling experience that she had for everyone, it does not matter the form (public or private), because what is imagined is a normative schooling that does not allow questioning the social, economic, and political structures that constructed inequitable social relations in the first place.

Freire (1970) proposes an education that is cultural in challenging oppressive norms. Cultivating equity within communities must begin with addressing the colonial structures that perpetuate colonial social relations. Esperanza School is a direct product of colonial structures, in this case the exploitation of banana production in Honduras. While some students at Esperanza School come from economically impoverished backgrounds, the mission of the school's curriculum is to provide a path for poor students to become economic overlords themselves, which in turn necessitates an economically impoverished working class, thus perpetuating economic and social disparities in Honduras. The project of schooling is a farce if social relations are not transformed.

Families, Nationality, and Language

Rodriguez rightfully points to the English language as colonizing verbal communication, representative of a U.S. desire for hegemonic control of global relations (Spring, 2007). For example, in order for Esperanza School to be accredited by the U.S.-based Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, it must meet U.S. schooling standards, which are measured by U.S. standardized tests that ask questions about “U.S. American currency, U.S. American monuments, snow, or white picket fences” (p. 97). All instruction is in English, except for music, art, physical education, and Spanish language classes. The majority of teachers and staff are from the United States. The U.S. American principal believes that the U.S. teachers she hires “provide examples for Honduran teachers” (p. 54); hiring U.S. teachers “represents increased credibility” (p. 67) for the school. Donations for scholarships largely come from U.S. donors. Teachers’ professional development is based on a U.S. university’s summer workshops; the few teachers from Esperanza School who attend the workshop return to Honduras to disseminate what they have learned.

Again applying the characteristics of a grassroots community school provided by Rodriguez, we question how the dissemination of U.S. imperialistic ideologies constitutes community development. What of meaningful engagement in germane learning that one would expect in a child-centered place of learning created based on a community’s needs?

Rodriguez acknowledges the massive cultural influence of U.S. whitestream society on mainstream Honduran society. However, she also provides a narrow definition of “success,” based on her own experiences. Families define success in many ways; this should be acknowledged and celebrated. Is success defined as only working one’s way up the neoliberal capitalist ladder? Can rural life in Honduras, just like rural life in the U.S., not be an end goal? For the poor in Honduras, the meaning of family can become one of coalition and resistance in a context where lived experiences teach transformative lessons compared to the official national school curriculum. The struggle against oppressive social relations in Honduras informs the global community of how a pedagogy of resistance can foster transformative educational experiences. The goal of social equity requires a challenging of the normative definitions of education and family and an embrace of critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

While Rodriguez waivers about whether learning English imposes U.S. culture, ideology, and ways of knowing on a Honduran community, she ultimately equates not knowing English to “remain[ing] in the darkness” (p. 94), envisioning English fluency as a means to an end, without questioning that the desired outcome might be different for everyone. Honduras is one of many nation-states where English is valued for the benefit it offers individuals to attain higher socioeconomic status. Knowing English makes you more employable. However, we would question the idea of attaining a higher status in an inherently hierarchical system. While a few people may experience upward social mobility, as long we operate within a system of unfettered capitalism that reduces the worth of humans to how much they can produce and consume, there will be a need for an exploited class. Until this is questioned, acknowledged, and addressed, the promotion of bilingual education as working toward social equity stands as an educational Potemkin Village.

Rodriguez points out the importance of family connections for Hondurans and states that Hondurans want to serve their families first. Yet, this is also used against Honduran teachers at

Esperanza School who are critiqued for prioritizing a personal life. Self-colonialization is part of the larger project of colonialism (Fanon, 1963/2005).

I wonder if Honduran leaders would be best for this type of school...One of the characteristics I have noticed in my data was the type of foreign teachers and personnel the school hires. They all had a common interest in trying to “help others,” a strong desire of giving back to the less fortunate. The foreign teachers devoted themselves to planning extracurricular activities or putting social action projects into practice. On the other hand, I have observed the Honduran teachers as the first ones to leave the school at the end of the day. Why? Because they had family to attend to, a second job to go to, or simply lived in the city and wanted to get home early. (p. 95)

However, the dependency on U.S.-based teachers and leaders is problematized as well and Rodriguez wonders if Honduran culture and identity are being adversely represented through the emphasis on English and the special status that United States teachers are given. She also questions why she was never taught to critique sociopolitical circumstances such as *maquiladoras* and the “imperfect” products that were sold in Honduras, while the “quality” products were exported for multinational corporations’ profit. Rodriguez concludes with the notion that she will continue questioning the contradictions of what works in the short term and what is most beneficial for the long term goal of equitable social relations.

Teacher Education

Learning about grassroots community schooling can help teacher educators contemplate and complicate the often taken-for-granted broad aims of education. The trend of consolidating schools in the U.S. presents challenges to fostering a sense of community around schools, at least beyond shallow athletic loyalties. The portrait of educators at Esperanza School provides an example of how a sense of community might be cultivated. The principal, Betsy, and Mark, a teacher from the U.S., were both quite involved with local social justice efforts in the community. Teacher educators can share this example with preservice teachers who may work in communities different than those in which they were raised. Creating relationships across differences in social identities and circumstance is crucial for the educational endeavor to be meaningful for both student and teacher (Faber, 2015).

Rodriguez also outlines the experiences of preservice teachers who participate in a short-term study abroad program in Honduras with field placements at Esperanza School. The majority of the preservice teachers engage in novel interactions with students, teachers, and parents at the school. Cross-cultural experiences in Honduras can provide opportunities for teacher educators and preservice teachers to develop multicultural awareness with the hope of translating new perspectives into practice in the U.S. and/or globally. Esperanza School provides preservice teachers a glimpse into a more humane schooling project and can even raise questions about the relationship between schooling and education. The educational context within Esperanza School can be informal compared to overly monitored U.S. elementary classrooms. The pedagogical lessons possible through field placements at Esperanza School provide teacher education with new insights around the struggle against the standardization of curriculum, including rethinking contemporary forms of tracking students and the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2010; Meiners, 2007).

Additionally, using this book as a course reading for preservice teachers could provoke discussions about the meaning of education outside of schooling, the possibility of addressing community needs through the institution of schooling, and an examination of coloniality within teacher education. Analysis of macro- and micro-level dynamics between groups lends itself to a critical reflection of how power dynamics shape lived experiences and material realities. The power differential between the U.S. and Honduran governments play out in parallel in an elementary school with the children of transnational elites and poor uneducated Hondurans.

Rodriguez points to the concept of the “glocal” with the assertion that Esperanza School has instigated community development as envisioned by a local community with an influx of outsiders. The social aspects of education that surround Esperanza School demonstrate the potential of the institution of schooling to support community change efforts. This process in itself is an educational endeavor that takes up Freire’s argument that the oppressed will liberate the oppressors. It is the subaltern who can teach the oppressor class and build coalitions across groups to work for social justice.

Hope and Futures

Rodriguez presents a complex and complicated perspective on the Honduran educational context, situated within sociopolitical understandings. The acknowledged shortcomings of the study are useful as lessons for educators, teacher educators, preservice teachers, and curriculum scholars. The project of education, especially through schooling, is not an innocent panacea when nation-state and private, for-profit interests are involved. Rodriguez makes us aware of the contradictions that exist within the mission statement of Esperanza School based on its history and contemporary situatedness. The various tensions laid bare in *Esperanza School: A Grassroots Community School in Honduras* attest to the struggle for social justice in a global, industrial, capitalist, socially constructed system. Rodriguez explains her own personal struggle grappling with critical curriculum theories and social justice ideas with an upper-class upbringing and grooming. Readers will likely appreciate the honest assessment of the benefits and pitfalls of Esperanza School as a model of grassroots community schooling. It becomes evident throughout the book that there is a need for greater push toward working for equitable social relations. The process of personal onto-epistemological decolonization cannot occur individually in isolation. Rodriguez provides a platform for future hope.

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