

Book Review: Culturally Responsive Care in the Rural Classroom

Wiktoria Kozłowska, *Purdue University*

Book Reviewed: *Struggling to find our way: Rural educators' experiences working with and caring for Latinx students*, by Stephanie Oudghiri: Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2022. ISBN: 979-8-88730-072-6. 203 pages.

Keywords: Latinx immigrant students, culturally responsive teaching, elementary education, *Struggling to Find our Way*

In *Struggling to Find Our Way: Rural Educators' Experiences Working with and Caring for Latinx Students*, the author seeks to understand how Latinx immigrant students in a rural Midwestern school district are presently and pervasively underserved by the educators who purport to care for them. Using a methodology of narrative inquiry, Oudghiri reflects on a year's worth of observations in a rural Indiana elementary school. She persistently rearranges the "puzzle pieces" of the "entangled lives" (Oudghiri, 2022, p. 10) of her participants to explore deeply how rural educators perceive and describe their relationships with immigrant students and families. Oudghiri reveals each educator's "ethic of care" (p. 25), or lack thereof, and how such modes of caring are influenced by daily instances of personal and professional identity formation. Indeed, the idea of *care* for diverse youth is woven throughout the entirety of Oudghiri's work: her position within the field of education echoes scholars such as Noddings (2012), who claims that "establishing such a climate [of care] . . . is *underneath* all we do" (emphasis in original, p. 777), and Gay (2002), who famously honors the "characteristics, experiences, and perspectives" (p. 106) of culturally diverse students. *Struggling to Find Our Way* thus seeks to prepare an audience of rural educators to care in a culturally responsive manner.

Dr. Stephanie Oudghiri currently serves as a clinical assistant professor of Curriculum Studies at Purdue University. Her research include social justice and ethics of care for minoritized students in rural communities, particularly those of Latinx immigrant background. Oudghiri describes herself as "a daughter of an immigrant, a former teacher of immigrant students, a current teacher educator, and a resident of a rural Midwestern community" (2022, p. 5). Her diverse teaching experiences in rural and urban districts, as well as her own memories of marginalization in school, have sparked in Oudghiri a frustration with systemic inequities and a desire to conduct research as a form of advocacy for underserved students. Chapters One and Two of *Struggling to Find Our*

Way explore this personal positionality as well as introduce demographic data on both rural education and Latinx immigrant students. Chapters Three and Four dive deeply into Oudghiri's chosen methodology of narrative inquiry and her care-based theoretical framework; they also contain the bulk of the classroom narratives that serve as the heart of the story. In Chapters Five and Six, Oudghiri analyzes these narratives through a lens of care, then artfully reimagines them in the form of a play centered around a kitchen table. Chapter Seven takes on the format of a podcast episode offering advice to pre-service educators grappling with Oudghiri's work. Finally, Chapter Eight provides an update on the rural school community in which the story is situated.

The story behind *Struggling to Find Our Way's* stories is a critical one: rural communities, according to Oudghiri, "have historically been overlooked" (p. 16) in educational research, and literature on immigrant students within rural districts is particularly sparse. Oudghiri includes ample citations (e.g., Indiana University Public Policy Institute, 2016; Showalter et al., 2019) to establish the importance of her research. Indiana holds one of the largest populations of U.S. students attending rural schools, and with less than forty percent of Latinx students graduating from Indiana high schools, the need to examine Latinx student experiences in the rural districts of Oudghiri's home state is clear. Her choice of narrative inquiry as a methodology allows her to not only retell the stories of the classrooms in which she conducts her study, but to "situate those experiences within [the] larger context" (p. 32) of rural education nationwide. Care is paramount to all educators, and Oudghiri's use of Swanson's (1991, 1993) middle range theory of caring as a theoretical framework allows her to unpack how teachers and paraprofessionals exhibit "*knowing, being with, doing for, enabling, and maintaining belief*" (emphasis in original, p. 71) in their relationships with Latinx immigrant students. Gay (2002) emphasizes that "culturally responsive caring is *action oriented*" (emphasis in original, p. 110); indeed, Oudghiri (2022) draws from the work of Swanson specifically because it "expresses care theories in action" (p. 71). The result of these deliberate choices — Oudghiri's repeated "returning to [her] research puzzle" (p. 72) through various lenses — is a harmonious series of stories that function, too, as a call to action.

Oudghiri's findings are sometimes encouraging, often visceral, and frequently eye-opening to the harsh realities many Latinx immigrant students face in their classrooms. One participant, for example, flounders in her attempts to connect with these students. Narratives demonstrate her inability to *know* or *enable* her students when she bars the use of Spanish in her classroom; *be with* them when she openly questions her undocumented "students' placement within the classroom" (p. 88); or *do for* them when she isolates one student inside a square of blue painter's tape. This teacher, Oudghiri concludes, fails to *maintain belief* in her Latinx immigrant students, and this lack of hope obstructs her ability to "embrace the other caring processes" (p. 94). Other educators are more successful, such as an ESL paraprofessional whom Oudghiri highlights as *maintaining* a "fundamental" belief in "her students as learners and human beings" (p.

108). Her own Latinx Spanish-speaking background informs her desire to simultaneously uphold the heritage language of her students and acknowledge their vulnerability, even when she is “constrained by the realities of being the only ESL paraprofessional” in the school (p. 104). Ultimately, many readers will likely see themselves in Linda, the remaining participant whose practices fall somewhere in-between: though Linda *maintains* an attitude of hope, her actions are influenced by her subconscious belief that her Latinx immigrant students must achieve “dominant classroom norms” (p. 83). She is able to *do for* these students by recognizing their strengths and purposefully selecting dual language stories, for example, but her treatment of bilingual students as a proxy for communication with Spanish-speaking students inhibits her capacity for *knowing, being with, or enabling* either the former or the latter group. On their own, Oudghiri’s reflections on these narratives are already illuminating; the addition of Chapter Six’s imagined kitchen table conversations — which combine unaltered participant transcript data with paraphrased words of scholars such as Noddings and Gay — allows Oudghiri to draw even more thoughtful conclusions, such as the fact that schools lack sufficient resources to support students’ mental and emotional health, or, critically, that there is a need for “communities [to] work with one another” (p. 168). These major themes situate Oudghiri’s unique findings in a more systemic context.

Struggling to Find Our Way is a stellar example of all of narrative inquiry’s core tenets at work. Detailed and inviting descriptions of settings and participants, for example, make the work readable and engaging; such accessibility is “a hallmark of narrative inquiry” (Kim, 2016, p. 112). The “autobiographical touchstone[s]” (Oudghiri, 2022, p. 4) included throughout the work call for reflection on Oudghiri’s own opportunities for improvement (Adams, 2017), and her openness to such accountability leads her to share multiple stories of times she “could have done more” (Oudghiri, 2022, p. 20) as an educator. Such attention to her methodology of choice makes *Struggling to Find Our Way* a relatable story, eliminating some of the fear that accompanies the acknowledgment of one’s shortcomings in the classroom. Oudghiri writes: “I wonder how you will imagine yourself within each story — as a second and/or third grader, a classroom teacher, or a researcher” (p. 50). Indeed, it is easy, as a reader, to step into each pair of shoes, and I recommend this work to each of the above communities. However, I recommend it most to in- and pre-service rural educators. Based on conversations with her own pre-service students, the penultimate chapter of the book addresses “a way of looking toward future experiences” (p. 171) by answering authentic questions in the form of a podcast transcript. Oudghiri offers numerous suggestions — such as educating oneself on immigration policy, visiting the homes and community spaces of students and families, and “seeking out the help of cultural brokers” (p. 185) to bridge gaps of understanding — that orient themes drawn from previous narratives toward new forms of action. Directions for reflective activities and a list of discussion questions frame this work as an opportunity for educators to learn and grow.

Ultimately, Oudghiri's story is one of hope. After a brief reflection on the state of the community in which she conducted her research, she concludes *Struggling to Find Our Way* by describing herself as "hopeful that we can prepare future educators to acknowledge, support, and celebrate the social, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of students" (p. 180). While teachers of Latinx immigrant students may find this book particularly enlightening, any rural educator of diverse youth can benefit from these stories and the opportunities they provide. *Struggling to Find Our Way* is a work of both honesty and optimism and, thus, precisely the type of work needed to bring rural communities and the schools that serve them closer together.

References

- Adams, T. E. (2017). Critical autoethnography, education, and a call for forgiveness. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 19(1), 79–88. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i1.1387>
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003>
- Kim, J.-H. (2016). Understanding narrative inquiry: The crafting and analysis of stories as research. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802861>
- Noddings, N. (2012). The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(6), 771–781. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.745047>
- Oudghiri, S. (2022). *Struggling to find our way: Rural educators' experiences working with and caring for Latinx students*. Information Age Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.3102/1880432>

About the Author

Wiktorja Kozłowska holds a B.S. in Mathematics with a concentration in Secondary Education from the University of Notre Dame. She is currently a second-year master's student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction's Curriculum Studies program at Purdue University. Before beginning her graduate studies, she taught mathematics at a public suburban middle school for two years. Her research interests include narrative studies that examine the schooling experiences of students belonging to marginalized populations, particularly those who are undocumented, to increase educators' understanding of how such students' strengths and needs may be more thoroughly addressed.