

Why Supporting Latino Children and Families Is Union Work



Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

BY CATALINA R. FORTINO

When AFT members last year passed the resolution “¡Si Se Puede!: Improving Outcomes for Latino Children and Youth and Addressing the Needs of the Latino Community,” I was extremely proud

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of our union for championing an issue so close to my heart.* As an immigrant, a native Spanish speaker, and a former early childhood teacher of many English language learners (ELLs), I saw myself reflected in the body of this resolution.

After acknowledging that “Hispanic students are the fastest-growing segment of the public school population,” and that “Latinos will account for 40 percent of the growth in the electorate over the next two decades,” the resolution affirms the AFT’s commitment to elevating the importance of Latino issues. As a union committed to social justice and equality of educational

*To read the resolution, visit <http://go.aft.org/AE117link1>.

opportunity, the AFT is advancing the credo that supporting Latino children and families is union work.

That's why I was thrilled to be a founding member of the AFT task force that wrote this resolution. Its passage has prompted me to reflect not only on my own work with ELLs but on the work that I have done collectively with my AFT brothers and sisters over the last 10 years in launching the award-winning website ColorinColorado.org, along with the groundbreaking work of the AFT ELL Educator Cadre, a nationwide advisory task force. I was proud to be one of the first content developers and reviewers for [Colorin Colorado](http://ColorinColorado.org), which has become the most widely used online resource on how to work with and teach ELLs.

In fact, I was the teacher representative who announced the website's launch in 2004, at a press conference in Washington, D.C. The [Colorin Colorado](http://ColorinColorado.org) website first started as an educational initiative of the public television station WETA and the AFT; more recent partners include the National Education Association. It's been gratifying to contribute to this union-generated tool, which really laid the foundation for promoting the AFT's support of ELLs.

Life in a New Country

Each one of us, as educators, comes to our beloved profession with the richness of our personal stories, imbued in culture, language, and traditions. And so it is for me. My immigrant experience of coming to this country at the young age of 9 shaped me and defined who I am as a teacher of ELLs.

I was born in Argentina, and I came to the United States with my nuclear family. My parents, like so many immigrant families, fled political turmoil and economic despair. I can't even imagine the strength of resolve that it must have taken for my mother and father to uproot us and bring us to a land they hoped would hold a brighter future. It was an emotional sacrifice for my family, because we left behind all our extended family and friends.

I knew very little English, aside from "yes," "no," and "good morning," and at P.S. 59 in New York City, my first public school in America, there were very few English language learners. I was fortunate to have been placed in Mr. Aberbach's fourth-grade class. Even though he was a monolingual teacher, he had some basic command of the Spanish language because of his summer travels to Mexico. He turned out to be a wonderful teacher who embraced and supported me through what I refer to as my "silent period."

As difficult as it was for me to understand the academic lessons being taught, it was especially hard to sit there watching all the peer interactions in school, without having the words to understand and join in the conversation. I knew students were socializing around me, and it hurt knowing I lacked the language to engage in those friendships. But because of the way Mr. Aberbach approached me, the children in my class gradually began

to respond to my nonverbal communication as I attempted to participate in their conversations and games. This was not only a new country with a new language but a new environment where one had to learn a new set of rules and social norms.

It took awhile for me to really grasp English. It wasn't until sixth grade that I could begin to do academic work in English and socialize with my peers. Many years later, as an educator, I gained a deeper understanding of my school experiences as a new immigrant through the pioneering work of researcher Carola Suárez-Orozco. In her seminal work, *Children of Immigration*, she depicts how immigrant families experience stress, loss, and achievement. And she describes how second-generation children negotiate different identities within U.S. cultural settings.

While my parents overcame myriad obstacles in coming to this country and were passionate about being in America, one

constant that remained in our family was our native language. At home, we spoke, read, and wrote in Spanish, and my parents were very proud of that, as it was part of our culture. My mother loved poetry, and she read it and other Latin American literature aloud to us. Every two weeks, we wrote letters in Spanish to our family members in Argentina, under the careful eye of my mother, who would check for proper grammar, correct spelling, and the application of the right idiom.

This correspondence helped us maintain not only our native language but also our long-distance relationships with grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. The

language afforded us an intimacy we would not have experienced if we had communicated in our emerging language, English. Speaking our native tongue at home strengthened our bonds as a family unit. And that source of strength helped us as children facing the challenges of our new school experience. For these reasons, the value of bilingualism was inculcated in me from an early age. Being bilingual and bicultural is at the very essence of my being. So, it is no surprise that this has informed my work with ELLs and their families throughout my career as an educator. The inner strength that I gained from being steeped in my native culture and language while I navigated a new world shaped the way I approached working with immigrant students. I always strived to promote resilience and fight any immigrant bias on the part of policymakers, education leaders, the mainstream media, and the general public.

Promoting Resilience

One researcher whose work deeply influenced my own in promoting resilience among students is Tara J. Yosso. In her article "Whose Culture Has Capital?," she presents a particularly useful model for understanding the factors that foster resilient behaviors among Latino youth.¹ She contends that these students, and

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especially children of immigrants, bring specific strengths to the classroom and beyond—strengths that can serve as tremendous assets in their development. The following are Yosso’s six forms of “community cultural capital,” which all help to shape Latino youth:

Aspirational capital is the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers. For 17 years, when I worked as an early childhood teacher, I would always ask my students’ families what their aspirations were for their children. I made such aspirations a part of my teaching, so I could help students and their families realize their dreams.

Linguistic capital is the intellectual and social skills attained through communicating in more than one language or style. A central question that I brought to my lesson planning was, How am I providing different opportunities for students to express their understanding in ways that acknowledge and support the language and communication strengths of each student?

Familial capital is the cultural knowledge nurtured within the family that carries the sense of community, history, memory, and identity. I have found this to be one of the most powerful, and often moving, teaching tools to engage students in tapping into their life stories as a source of knowledge and a springboard for new learning.

Social capital is the networks of people and communities that support families as they navigate society’s institutions. Often, the neighborhoods where our children live are underutilized sources of support. In my work with pre-service teachers, I would encourage them to create a map outlining community assets to uncover erroneous assumptions and biased beliefs before they began work with students in the classroom.

Navigational capital is the ability to maneuver through social institutions by drawing on culture-specific skills and experiences. This particular principle came to light for me when I was facilitating school teams to examine barriers that prevent our youth from successfully transitioning from middle school to high school, and then to college and career. It has been rewarding work to help school teams examine underlying beliefs that may hinder the achievement of ELLs and then to create new school policies and structures that promote success for these students.

Resistant capital is the knowledge and skills that foster self-esteem, self-reliance, and the strength to persevere. Promoting and advancing the work of student leadership is central to the mission of teaching and learning. By encouraging students to share their personal struggles and hopes, participate in school teams that make decisions affecting the school experience, and give their perspective on policy recommendations, I have

brought the voice of ELLs to the arena of advocacy outside of the classroom and into the halls of school boards, legislative chambers, and governors’ mansions.

What I have come to appreciate is the diversity of the immigrant experience. In our advocacy work for ELLs, it is always important to emphasize that this population is not monolithic. Each of our students comes to the schoolhouse door with unique immigration experiences.

Every stage of my career has encompassed a different aspect of teaching and advocating for our young people who navigate two worlds, engage in learning with more than one language, and embody the intersection of diverse cultures. Our role is to recognize the diversity of ELLs and continually ask ourselves, Are we meeting the diverse needs of this heterogeneous population?



Throughout my career, I have been especially interested in how educators are viewed in the home cultures of ELLs and what roles teachers play in their societies and in ours. I know that the images of my own beloved “maestros” are never far from my mind. When I was a young girl in Argentina, I grew up learning about “los maestros”—the teachers—and how they were always fighting in the streets to call out injustice. I also think of my seventh-grade science teacher in East Harlem, who encouraged me to fight past the unspoken boundaries that too often limit children who are immigrants. And I remember my

professors at Queens College who taught me that teaching—at its heart—is subversive because it challenges the status quo.

“Los maestros” inspired my life’s work, as a teacher and as a unionist, fighting to bring about justice for all. I became a teacher because my own teachers taught me the power of education to change lives.

As a young teacher, I became active in my union, the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, because I recognized the union’s role in advancing our profession. As I have humbly worked on behalf of ELLs, I know that I stand on the shoulders of union giants, and I am forever indebted to them.

As we begin to make the promise of “¡Si Se Puede!” a long-hoped-for reality, let us remember that at the very heart of the union movement is the belief that we don’t achieve anything in this world alone. We work together, in solidarity—and that always has been, and always will be, our strength. We live our history, and our union principles, in our daily actions. And that’s why I’m proud to say, and why our union has said, supporting Latino children and families is union work. □

Endnote

1. Tara J. Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8 (2005): 69–91.