

The Power of

Acknowledging the strengths that Latinos bring to school and community is crucial for their academic and social success.

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As the largest minority group in the United States, Latinos account for 14 percent of the U.S. population. By 2050, they will account for 25 percent. Despite the hefty increase, many children of immigrants consider themselves members of a minority group in a way that negatively affects their behavior, school performance, and social integration (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). As educators, we should develop a better understanding of the culture and issues that affect the well-being of Latino English language learners because these issues will ultimately affect the future of the United States.

Addressing the needs of Latino students means acknowledging and capitalizing on the cultural and linguistic strengths that they bring to the classroom. Schools should

- Foster a positive ethnic identity by viewing bilingualism and biculturalism as an asset and immigration as a source of pride.

- Empower Latino students through leadership roles within the school and community.

- Encourage student voice by having students speak and write from experience.

Adding or Subtracting?

Latinos are a varied ethnic group representing 20 countries, including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, and the United States. Despite class, race, and national differences, Latinos have found ways to coalesce on the basis of a shared language and a common identity (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). Recent studies have found that a strong, positive ethnic identity is associated with high self-esteem, a commitment to doing well in school, a sense of purpose in life, confidence in one's own efficacy, and high academic achievement (Benard, 2004).

Developing identity is one of the sociocultural tasks of adolescence. During adolescence, many immigrant youths are learning to become members of a nondominant group. They need to strike a balance between the native culture found in their homes and communities and the dominant U.S. culture that exists in most schools. This culture often assumes that students will quickly assimilate by learning English and forgetting about their home countries. Students may experience this process of assimilation as a subtraction of their first culture and language, leaving them vulnerable and alienated from both cultures (Valenzuela, 1999). But a more hopeful outcome is possible: These students may integrate the two cultures, thereby fostering a new, additive bicultural identity that takes from various sources.

David Hernandez, a bilingual community liaison in Virginia's Arlington Public School District, created the concept of "Remix-tino," the process through which students



PHOTO COURTESY OF ESOL CLUB OF WASHINGTON-LEE HIGH SCHOOL

Positive Identity



As they try to untangle who they really are, both ethnically and individually, Latino students often have much to say.

access to computers, Latino role models and mentors, bilingual counseling, and clubs and family involvement activities in Spanish.

It would also be helpful for educators to participate in staff development through which they learn Spanish and familiarize themselves with Latino culture and related issues. Partnering with community-based organizations is also an excellent strategy. The Arlington Public School District has partnered with a nonprofit organization, Escuela Bolivia, Inc. On Saturdays, students and adults from various countries learn Spanish, Quechua, and English, and they participate in cultural and family leadership activities (Osterling, Violand-Sánchez, & von Vacano, 1999).

Identity as Bilingual

More than 100 empirical studies show a positive association between additive bilingualism and students' linguistic, cognitive, or academic growth (Cummins, 2000). Developing literacy in two or more languages not only results in linguistic and academic benefits for individual students but also prepares students to work in both

blend language with family and cultural values to create their own sense of a U.S.-Latino identity. These students move fluidly within the Latino community; at the same time, they are fully aware of their multilayered identity. As Hernandez puts it, "The students see the Remix-tino process as a production, as their ultimate composition" (personal communication, June 2006).

Unfortunately, immigrant students face many challenges daily that exacerbate their problems adapting to the culture, such as financial problems, discrimination on the basis of their immigration status, linguistic differences, and family separations. Moreover, Latino students can easily experi-

ence U.S. culture as an onslaught of materialism, television, pop culture, and technology. For example, because they do not have an iPod or a computer with Internet access at home, they might see themselves as poor and as disconnected from the school community.

Immigrant students need increased guidance as well as family and community support to succeed in this society. School leaders can facilitate this transition and tap into Latino students' strengths by providing a number of services, including instructional programs that build on language and Latin American culture, English language courses for parents, student

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national and international contexts. Advances in technology, communication, and transportation have created a global environment that depends on interaction among nations and businesses in every corner of the world. Nevertheless, many critics continue to argue that English language learners should focus solely on learning English, leaving their home language behind.

We have taken a different tack in Arlington Public Schools, where 44 percent of our student body speaks a home language other than English and 33 percent of students are Latino, with Bolivians representing the largest group. We have implemented several programs that provide a supportive environment for all students' academic and sociocultural development:

- Dual-language immersion programs, in which native English-speaking students and Spanish-speaking students take science and mathematics in Spanish.

- First-language support programs, in which Spanish-speaking students with parental permission receive content instruction in Spanish for approximately 6-10 hours each week. While they are learning English, Spanish students take social studies and science in Spanish.

- Spanish for fluent speakers programs at the middle and high school levels. In high school, advanced placement classes in Spanish offer students the opportunity to continue developing their language skills and cultural knowledge while gaining access to college courses.

Arlington also promotes various supportive practices. Both monolingual

and bilingual teachers often tap into the background knowledge of students by allowing them to express their knowledge or thoughts in their native language, either in a small group setting or through free writing. This approach gives students the chance to be "equal" in the classroom to their native English-speaking peers and helps prepare them to learn new information. In fact, using



Students in Saturday Spanish class at Escuela Bolivia.

their native language while they learn English facilitates English acquisition and can reduce students' anxiety about learning. Quite often, students use native language when new information is unclear or when they explain an important concept or abstract idea to another student who is struggling with it. Using native language becomes a foundation for acquiring new information—regardless of whether that information is presented in English or in the native language.

The school system also provides books, dictionaries, and other resources in students' native languages in the library and classrooms. Teachers can prepare units that incorporate languages other than English in meaningful ways, by using bilingual story-

tellers, for example, or implementing a school pen pal program in which students communicate with one another in their first language through e-mail (Collier, 1995). Students can also use the Internet to do research in Spanish.

Many Latinos are driven to succeed when they adhere to the enabling values of love of and loyalty to family, community participation, respect for education, and a strong work ethic. To encourage the academic success of English language learners, educators should recognize and nurture the close relationship among these values and each student's home language and social identity.

Identity as an Immigrant

The image of tongue-tied students who occupy a marginal position within U.S. schools and society leads to the misrepresentation of immigrants, not only in mainstream media

but also in the nation's psyche. Latino students complain that it's hard to fight the negativism about being immigrants, especially when people underestimate their potential.

Some of this negativism insidiously works its way into the language that we use. For example, Latino students have expressed their frustration and anger that some teachers and classmates refer to immigrants as "illegals" or "aliens." The words that teachers use matter, because they set the tone for language in the classroom. To improve relationships and create a classroom atmosphere that welcomes diversity, teachers should avoid such terminology, going beyond even the neutral language of "undocumented" to promote the positive notion of "immi-

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grants as essential workers” (Lakoff, in Rodriguez, 2006).

Moreover, we often forget that many immigrants have a legal presence in the United States—students on temporary visas, for example, or with “protected” status. Under the current quota system, many families have been waiting for years to get their permanent residency. Meanwhile, students suffer. For example, one Latino student, who was valedictorian of her high school class and whose family had a legal presence in the United States, was recently offered admission to a prestigious university. However, her “temporary” immigration status prevented her from receiving any state or federal aid.

Students Learn to Lead

To flourish, immigrant students need to feel that they belong. Schools should provide English language learners with opportunities to participate in activities that promote a sense of community by sponsoring clubs that foster leadership skills and pride and that honor the heritage of students who speak different languages. Creating leadership opportunities for Latino students is a natural outgrowth of any approach that capitalizes on student strengths.

Arlington schools boast many clubs—such as the Arabic Club, the Vietnamese Club, and Latinos and Latinas en Acción—that cater to a diverse student body. For example, the members of the ESOL Club of Arlington’s Washington-Lee High School hail from such countries as Equatorial Guinea, Bolivia, Mongolia, Ethiopia, and El Salvador. The club provides students with a place to bond outside the classroom after school and during various club outings. When students participate and take leadership positions in a club in which they experience a sense of belonging, they often will participate and become

leaders in other organizations beyond their language and cultural groups.

At Conferences . . .

For the past 12 years, Arlington has held an annual Latino Youth Leadership Conference, which involves nearly 400 Latino secondary students in the Arlington Public Schools. Coordinated by Congreso Estudiantil Latino (CELA),

Latino students can easily experience U.S. culture as an onslaught of materialism, television, pop culture, and technology.

the conference fosters leadership among Latino students by showcasing positive Latino role models, such as Walter Tejada, the first Latino elected to the Arlington County Board. The conference also offers presentations on career and college topics. Deeply involved in coordinating the event, students develop conference themes—for example, Honoring Our Identity, What It Means to Be Latino, and Our Road to Success. They select topics for workshops and manage the event down to the details of what food to serve.

The conference brings students together from the various high schools and middle schools in Arlington, fostering connections among students who often become future leaders and organizers of Latino clubs at the university level. One former student conference leader organized an Equal Access Education group at his high school and participated in a lawsuit filed in 2003 by the Mexican Legal Education Fund against several Virginia colleges for their admission policies dealing with undocumented students. Now at Virginia Tech, he serves as a liaison, welcoming prospective Latino students from his former high school.

In Classrooms . . .

Students helping students is a wonderful way to build community among students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. One English as a second language (ESL) peer tutor explained that he volunteers because he wants to give back to the group that helped him when he first arrived in the United States from Bolivia.

The Latino Student Association staffs the peer tutoring group at Washington-Lee High School. ESL students drop in whenever they need help completing schoolwork, but they also form friendships and learn from one another as they converse. For example, one student, on discovering that one of his Spanish-speaking peers had managed to change his placement to a more advanced math class, learned to advocate for himself and do the same.

Tutoring has proven highly successful, not only to the tutees but also to the tutors. When students have mastered enough English to tutor with confidence, they reinforce both their language and leadership skills as they take on a meaningful role in school. Peer tutoring creates a model community among English language learners that can extend to activities outside school as well.

And on the Streets!

As the U.S. Congress debated future immigration policy in spring 2006, Arlington Latino students stepped up and displayed leadership in organizing peaceful student protests. Directly affected by the possible criminalization of undocumented immigrants, students

recognized the immediate need to rouse themselves out of silent complacency and speak out for their families and their future. Students came alive with the energy of organizing the Latino population for a student march and rally.

Student organizers worked with county representatives, police officers, and the school administration to plan an after-school rally and discussions that would highlight the contributions of the immigrant community in Arlington. The student organizers experienced a sense of pride, autonomy, and empowerment; shy students bloomed as they worked with community leaders.

Coming to Voice

Once English language learners have a taste of leadership, they will no longer fall back into silence. The student leaders who naturally emerged in the process of creating and managing a successful rally exercised their freedom of expression through *conscientização*, a deepened awareness arising out of a state of oppression (Freire, 2000). Once a person awakens to *conscientização*, he or she recognizes the systematic inequity in this world and the need to actively dismantle its mechanisms to prevent its continuation.

Latino students also need to find their voices in the classroom. By tapping into the personal experience of immigrants, teachers can help English language learners become comfortable speaking and writing from their own perspectives. In Arlington, one author gave "zine" workshops (magazine self-publishing) to ESL classes. One 6th grade class chose to write on the topic of family. A student wrote about how courageous his mother was to come to the United States when she didn't speak English and about how tenacious she'd become about learning the language. Another wrote about how thankful she was that her mother always took time

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to sit with her and talk. Students enthusiastically shared in English their interpretations of what family meant to them. Student blogs are another popular medium in which students can engage one another on a variety of topics.

Latinos are frequently interested in writing about who they are, about their identities as Latinos. The issue is complex. When many Latinos arrive in the United States, they tend to think of themselves as "Bolivian" or "San Salvadoran," for example, but bureaucracy reduces them to a single box to check on a form—"Hispanic." As they try to untangle who they really are, both ethnically and individually, Latino students often have much to say.

Teachers might sponsor a student-run newsletter that publishes student-selected topics. Latino students value a community space in which they can discuss their identities as Latinos, as well as any number of issues of interest: music, sports, relationships, culture, current events, immigration, and education opportunities. Students develop their voice and critical thinking skills while gaining self-confidence in managing a publication, from the early brainstorming days to final distribution. Through a monthly publication like this, students can help shape the community's perception of its immigrant members.

Honoring Experience

Experience is the best teacher. By focusing on their own experience, students can "claim a knowledge base from which they can speak" (Scrapp, in hooks, 1994, p. 148). By honoring the

complexity of language and culture as well as the tenacious spirit that Latino students bring to the classroom, schools *can* teach to Latino students' strengths. This will not only enrich our lessons, but also our schools, our communities, and our world. **EL**

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