



THE SATURDAY SCHOOL WHERE MEXICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN LEARN ABOUT THEIR HERITAGE: A Q&A WITH NEPC FELLOW ANGELA VALENZUELA



There's considerable evidence that ethnic studies courses are associated with a host of positive outcomes, from higher levels of student achievement to fewer student absences to increased rates of civic engagement. Although ethnic studies courses demonstrate benefits for all participants, they can be especially valuable to students of color, who too often find themselves marginalized by mainstream curricula. Yet if young people encounter this material at all, they must often wait until college. In fact, nine years ago, the state of Arizona passed a law, subsequently struck down, that banned a Mexican American studies program altogether in the Tucson schools. Although other states have since mandated that schools offer ethnic studies, it's usually not available until high school.

At a community center in Austin, Texas, a group of parents, local leaders, K-12 educators, and university faculty members are challenging that status quo with *Academia Cuauhtli*, a weekly Saturday school that teaches local fourth graders about indigenous Mexican/Mexican culture, history, language and experiences, all through a social justice lens. The students are not only the children who attend the class but their families and their instructors, who receive professional development around a curriculum developed with input from faculty at the University of Texas at Austin. Unlike many other other heritage schools that focus on students' language and culture, *Academia Cuauhtli* is free to participants thanks to support

from the local school district, the city of Austin, the university, and donations and grants.

National Education Policy Center Fellow [Angela Valenzuela](#) directs the academy. In the Q&A below, she describes its history, its approach, and the ways in which the school has become an oasis of empowerment in an era in which people of Mexican descent all too often find themselves under siege. She concludes with recommendations for those interested in replicating the model in their own communities.

[Valenzuela](#) is a professor in two UT-Austin program areas: Educational Policy and Planning, within the Department of Educational Administration, and Cultural Studies in Education, within the Department of Curriculum & Instruction. She also serves as the director of UT's Center for Education Policy. Her research and teaching interests include the sociology of education, race and ethnic relations, education policy, school partnerships, urban education reform, and indigenous education.

Q: What is Academia Cuauhtli? Who founded it? When?

A: Academia Cuauhtli is a Saturday school physically located at the Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Culture Center (ESB-MACC) in Austin, Texas. "Cuauhtli" means "eagle" in Nahuatl [an Uto-Aztecan language] so our name means "Eagle Academy." Founded during the 2013-14 school year, we are now entering our sixth year of operation. We are not a charter school; we are a formal legal partnership, involving the Austin Independent School District (AISD), the City of Austin's ESB-MACC, and our community-based organization (CBO) named Nuestro Grupo. We serve fourth-grade children from five East Austin schools, namely, Sanchez, Metz, Zavala, Houston, and Perez elementaries.

Nuestro Grupo was formed after a September 20, 2013 meeting at the ESB-MACC to discuss literacy in East Austin. The ESB-MACC is located near our participating East Austin schools, and their eagerness to support us emanates from their desire to serve this same community. Nuestro Grupo is comprised of student volunteers, faculty from UT-Austin and Texas State University, community elders, parents, and AISD bilingual education teachers.

An amazing detail is that this work has resulted in pathways for undergraduates to graduate school, or from masters students to the doctoral program. Since we began our work in the community—where we hold weekly meetings at the ESB-MACC—we have created pathways for at least 13 students into the masters and doctoral programs at UT in Educational Leadership and Policy, as well as into the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Hence, we are growing our own critically conscious, community-based, social justice-oriented, masters and doctoral students.

To the best of our knowledge, we are the only Ethnic Studies program at the elementary grade level in the state of Texas and one of only a few nationwide. The number gets smaller when taking into account that we also offer a curriculum in Spanish. We see ourselves as a culture and language revitalization project where we nurture a Spanish-speaking, Indigenous identity, and civil rights consciousness. Our curriculum is further place-based, social justice oriented, community-centered, and parent-engaged.

Q: Why is Academia Cuauhtli important?

A: Academia Cuauhtli is important for many reasons. For starters, folks should know that Ethnic Studies is important because it instills students with knowledge of history, a deep sense of place and belonging, and thusly, pride and a positive sense of identity. For these reasons, it helps them to see themselves as part of the grand American narrative that they are. Our curriculum, which is aligned to state standards, teaches them that their ancestors never left the continent and so they should always feel at home anywhere they live, north or south of the border. This happens to be a major takeaway for our kids.

Interestingly, last year's cohort consisted of second-grade students because their teacher, Santa Yañez Montemayor, who had them in her regular bilingual education classroom, thought that they would benefit. Her second-grade classroom is the recipient of the Academia Cuauhtli curriculum: Specifically, "Who was this person named (in Spanish) Cristóbal Colón?" they asked her emphatically.

And why did he think that he could come and "discover" us? And who told him that he could go and "find" us? Was he lost? What was he doing, and who told him to go and "explore," and who came with him and who were they anyway?

Consider that these questions are coming from second graders and also that we don't teach Columbus. This means that children as young as seven to eight years old are thinking deeply about what they and their teachers are learning at Academia Cuauhtli.

Another positive impact that we hear from principals is that the students are speaking more Spanish in their classrooms and on school grounds as a result of our Spanish language instruction that makes it cool to be a Spanish-speaker and to be bilingual. Add to this the basic Nahuatl that they get in the context of the danza [Aztec ceremonial movement] curriculum together with learning danza in the context of yet another "danza community" (also called, "kalpulli" in Nahuatl), and we can only surmise that they come to see school, education, and community differently—all working together to help them to feel safe, be cared for, have fun, and ultimately, succeed by reinforcing their own families' values.

Many of our students are either first-generation immigrants themselves, or children of immigrants. They live in a community that is gentrifying. They are also the target of the federal government, with students and families over the past several years—including even before Trump became president—experiencing harassment by police and ICE officials. Families face crises, disappearing overnight because they have fled or faced deportation. Daily crises in the schools we serve have unfortunately become the norm. We therefore offer a modicum of equilibrium and a safe place to just "be" at Academia Cuauhtli.

Q: What is the curriculum of Academia Cuauhtli? What is the pedagogical approach? Who are the instructors?

A: A crucial developmental moment of transition occurs for bilingual students from the third to the fourth grade. In this transition they become self-conscious about being Mexican, Latino, and Spanish speaking. We become an outside validator of who they are and we do this through language, specifically, but also through a co-constructed curriculum that taps into their families' funds of knowledge that are of course considerate of the current anti-immigrant moment that our country is experiencing. For example, this year our

curriculum consists of the following:

- *Raíces (Roots)*
- *Curanderismo y Medioambiente (Folk Medicine and Healing and the Environment)*
- *Defenderse contra la Discriminación (Defending Yourself Against Discrimination)*
- *Danza Mexica (Aztec dance or ceremony)*

We work closely with a rotating set of certified bilingual educators from AISD and have prepared by now over 100 teachers in the curriculum, a number of whom have taught at the Saturday school in the six years that we have been in operation. We try to pair expert with novice teachers. We are always bringing new teachers into the fold through our recruitment efforts, working in tandem locally with the Austin Area Association for Bilingual Education organization, a key partner.

We have therefore become a professional development space for bilingual and dual language educators. Relatedly, we're also finding that our curriculum liberates educators to teach our curriculum in their regular classrooms. In the past, local school politics sometimes discouraged them from addressing multicultural education. Our work can help teachers feel empowered to broaden their curriculum.

We also offer ESL instruction in a way that empowers parents and cultivates parent leadership. The danza Mexica component is a signature part of our program that has proven to be inspirational to parents and youth. The art form nurtures students' and parents' sense of identity and emphasizes exquisite cultural inheritances. It's so rare that we experience the sacred in education. Danza Mexica, together with the familial atmosphere that we promote, helps to accomplish that.

Our model has broader, systemic impacts. While annually we only serve anywhere from 27 to 34 students, the curriculum is available to teachers districtwide. They can download it and implement it in their classrooms. From what we gather, mostly bilingual and dual language teachers are accessing these resources, but they're available to everyone.

The pedagogical approach, in practice, is multi-age, given that students' siblings and parents frequently attend and participate in Academia. Increasingly, parents also direct aspects of the curriculum. Rather than having the younger siblings run about aimlessly, our expert teachers establish centers for them so that they, too, are learning and occupied. This openness to children of different ages helps to account for the ease that Ms. Yañez Montemayor felt in inviting her second graders to Academia Cuauhtli.

Family-child field trips are another important part of our program. For example, each year we attend the Austin Powwow, where families get to learn about, discuss, and think deeply about Indigeneity and what it means to have this ancestry even if they do not specifically know their ancestral Indigenous lineages. We also regularly host community-building events that we call "convivios" (social gatherings). The convivios bring us together to play games, enjoy family learning activities, and/or to eat food, which is sometimes prepared by the parents themselves. We call our professional development workshops "pláticas," or conversations, to promote solidarity and togetherness. Over the summer months,

our bilingual and dual language teachers work to develop a curriculum and roadmap so that there is no ambiguity during the school year. This approach allows teachers to rotate in and out without losing a step or experiencing confusion about what needs to get accomplished on any given Saturday.

Q: Are you aware of other similar efforts elsewhere, beyond Academia Cuauhtli?

A: We're not finding many schools like ours at the elementary level either in Texas or nationally. One exception is Academia Huitzilín in Tucson, Arizona, whose existence Academia Cuauhtli inspired. "Huitzilín" means "hummingbird" in Nahuatl, which is a very sacred symbol for the Mexica. Their founders, University of Arizona doctoral student Imelda Cortez, and Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) Mexican American Studies Specialist, Maria Federico Brumer, offer an Indigenous Studies curricular focus centered on leadership building, cultural awareness, and community empowerment. This past year, ancestral games were an important component of their curriculum.

Q: What can research tell us about the ways in which a culturally relevant curriculum impacts students?

A: It's such a great time to be an advocate for culturally relevant curriculum, because the jury is in. Well-designed programs such as the kind that the embattled TUSD implemented, along with evidence from San Francisco schools, shows that the results for underserved youth are phenomenal. Check out this statement by the SFUSD website, regarding the impact of Ethnic Studies:

"We're learning about power—political, economic, social—our race, ethnicity, culture, nationality," says 14-year-old freshman James Liu.

That's because Ethnic Studies is not simply a history course detailing the achievements of members of different racial groups; the curriculum is conscious of and sometimes analytical about how race and ethnicity are intertwined with power.

The benefits of Mexican American Studies in TUSD were borne out by Nolan Cabrera's, Francesca Lopez', and others' research—which helped TUSD student and teacher plaintiffs prevail against the state of Arizona's Department of Education, following a seven-year legal battle that was finally won in 2017 in a federal district court decision from Judge Wallace Tashima.

Q: To what extent are students in the United States exposed to such curricula in their schools?

A: Unfortunately, Ethnic Studies is scarcely taught. This is changing quickly in light of the resurgence today of this movement, largely as a result of the Arizona Court battle. That battle served as a wake-up call by turning a spotlight on threats to programs in K-12 and also at the postsecondary level. Ethnic Studies is much more common in higher education than in K-12, but the Ethnic Studies movement is changing that and bringing it down to the lower levels. Our communities are demanding it.

Q: How did your own research and the research of your colleagues impact the design of the academy? In turn, how, if at all, have your experiences with the academy impacted your research?

A: When it comes to my own research, the question has always been about how not to be subtractive, but to be culturally and linguistically additive. By this I mean honoring the students' languages, cultures, and community-based identities rather than subtracting these as a consequence of a culturally chauvinist curriculum and pedagogy.

To this end, when we co-constructed this curriculum with members of the community, teachers, and school district staff, we sought to be both research- and values-based. Our experiences with the academy have had a definite impact on our research. For instance, we just submitted a grant proposal to study the impact of our Indigenous curriculum on teachers. We have evidence that our curriculum helps teachers stay in the district longer than they might have if our program were not a factor, meaning that we are contributing positively to teacher retention, which is a widespread problem in many school districts. The program nurtures them. As one teacher shared, "Teaching at Academia Cuauhtli allows me to teach bilingual education in the way that it should get taught." Bilingual teaching is more than language. It's also about culture, community, sacrifice, love, protection, and experiencing the sacred through the stuff of social relationships, the community that it builds, and a curriculum that inspires.

Q: In today's political environment, there is a lot of anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican American sentiment. How, if at all, has the academy addressed this with students?

A: Yes, this has been severe. In the wake of Trump's election to the presidency and his ensuing attacks on our community, we were able to hold "Know Your Rights" sessions at the school in order to inform parents of their rights and give them access to immigration attorneys. Also, just being a safe space is no small thing. Our children and families have been terrorized, and it has literally taken years of trust building to get us to where we are.

It's that slow and patient process of engaging families that makes us trustworthy. There are no shortcuts here. We see our curriculum as an intervention. As mentioned, this year we have a unit titled, "Defenderse contra la Discriminación (Defending Yourself Against Discrimination). Our curriculum has been about agency since day one, but in light of the El Paso shootings and the rise of white ethno-nationalism, more must be done. Again, our children are taught a deep sense of their history and their rightful place on this continent. We are aware that this gives them a deep and powerful sense of belonging that challenges the historic, social construction of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Q: What advice would you offer to those interested in starting a similar academy in their own communities? What have been the biggest struggles, and how have they been overcome?

A: My best advice is to anchor such efforts in a community center or space and to do so in partnership with a school district that can direct Title I and Title III dollars and other

sources toward costs that cover teachers' salaries, bus pickups, breakfast, supplies, and the like. Food is very important not just for nutritious reasons, but also because it helps to build and strengthen community relations. Breakfast itself becomes a time to "convivir" and to appreciate each other's presence and contributions.

Universities should also be partners in order to make sure that curricula are research-based and so that undergraduate students, graduate students and faculty can also be involved. Either one full-time or two part-time coordinators—in our case, currently paid for by the district—are essential for maintaining the smooth operation of the school, for recruiting students, and for remaining in regular contact with teachers, stakeholders, volunteers, and in our case, Nuestro Grupo, our CBO comprised of an intergenerational community of volunteers that meets weekly during the year to plan and coordinate the academy.

For those of us at the university, Nuestro Grupo and Academia Cuauhtli are research sites, and we have been able to collect and analyze data, present in conferences, and publish our work. Hence, the act of setting up the academy is the same act of developing and elaborating a research program and policy agenda.

The biggest struggles have involved funding in an age of budget cuts. To address funding, we have had to get creative and fundraise independently to make ends meet. Student attendance can also be challenging, especially during testing season, when schools often schedule Saturdays for exam preparation. We have decided this year to have students and parents sign up for each unit. That way, if they know that their child is going to have to miss out during a particular time period, they can let us know and we can have another student take their place so that no seat is empty. We are hoping that this works.

On top of this, our dream is to create group pathways into the teaching profession. It's hard when we get them so young, but our task this year is to work with the district so that we can track down these students. Right now, our very first cohort is in the ninth grade. Perhaps in another interview we can discuss how we're embarking on this at the University of Texas. We hope that at least some students, with a pathway and supports that we would provide, will return to the neighborhood as "homegrown bilingual or Ethnic Studies teachers" so that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that they have acquired can mean something very positive for future students. This is a long-range vision, but doable and desirable. We are also working with the district to strengthen our role as a professional development space and recruitment tool for future bilingual teachers.

One thing that one learns pretty quickly in the process is how getting grounded in the community helps us to extend agency in other areas like the AISD school board, Texas State Legislature, and the Texas State Board of Education. That is, in all three of these significant contexts, we in Nuestro Grupo have been able to advocate for Ethnic Studies. Because of our advocacy, our district has adopted Ethnic Studies in almost every high school, districtwide. We were also a core part of a larger, statewide effort that resulted in an official course elective in Mexican American Studies, African American Studies, Native American Studies, and Asian American Studies. And what better time for all of this—particularly since Ethnic Studies can constitute a helpful antidote to white ethno-nationalism, prejudice, racism, bigotry, and to the institutional expression of these views? Our own teachers

tell us that they do not know how they would have survived this punishing political moment without Nuestro Grupo and Academia Cuauhtli. We can only imagine how we might have benefitted our children, parents, and community.

NEPC Resources on Multilingual and/or Multicultural Education

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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