A University of Texas at Austin professor and author, who has long worked to support educational advancement in Latinx and ethnic communities, has been named an Extraordinary Woman by the Austin Stateman and Thomas J. Henry Foundation. Dr. Angelica Valenzuela, Ph.D., is a professor in both the Educational Policy and Planning Program within the Department of Educational Administration and holds a courtesy appointment in the Cultural Studies Program within the Department of Curriculum & Instruction. She is also the director of the UT Center for Education Policy.

Valenzuela majored in English and provided assistance in Spanish at Angelo State, where she took three of her master's courses, and from there got a master's degree in sociology of education – I went to UC Davis and got my master's and my doctoral degree in sociology. Besides sociology of education, Valenzuela said, studies concentrated on race and ethnic relations.

Valenzuela was inspired to pursue a career in education when she got to the University of Texas at Austin.

While in the UT Austin master’s program, Valenzuela had an internship in a research center where she came across a Harvard University publication that looked at inequality. Valenzuela was determining what she would do with her degrees – teaching English in a foreign country and traveling the world was one possibility – but she was also drawn to pursue what became her career.

The interactions of language and identity had become increasingly significant to her as she learned about the analyses that people were doing at the time in the area of class and race, and how those analyses were inspired by particular readings that really inspired me in terms of what I got there as well – they were very personal to me. I felt like I was living, and as a result of my own having grown up in East Texas, that I saw and experienced in very close terms, the way, the racism and discrimination. I felt that I had some insights as a result of that, that helped me later to basically fold all of that into my actual thinking and writing and scholarship.

In 1999, Valenzuela published her first book, Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring. It won the 2000 American Educational Research Association Outstanding Book Award and was an honorable mention from the Gus Tavias Myres Outstanding Book Award. In 2000, Valenzuela received an honorary mention from the Gus Tavias Myres Outstanding Book Awards for Mexican American Studies and a testimonial for the future, for really any group, including the Mexican-American student population.

Valenzuela has long been affiliated with UT’s Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program. "One thing that really helped me survive is that my actual thinking and writing and scholarship. They’ve been really involved in that aspect as well, through my own work in policy for some time. And it’s less about who students are and more about how well they perform on a test, and so, who they are is really irrelevant to the goals of schooling. That’s not a healthy prescription for the future, for really any group, including the Mexican-American student population."

The school works in partnership with the Austin ISD and Austin’s 3, Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center at 600 River Street.

“By not really valuing the students’ cultural inscription for the future, for really any group, including the Mexican-American student population. Valenzuela has long been affiliated with UT’s Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program.”

The role of the eagle is to guide the students on their path. The eagle mean is that up till that they need to have, that strong spirit to be able to withstand the odds on their families and communities and also to celebrate and honor their rich cultural heritage. Valenzuela said. "Parents tell us that what they really appreciate about our school is that their value is reinforced and that they are able to celebrate with us and honor us with the rich cultural heritage that we have that absolutely is not taught in our schools."

The curriculum has developed since the school started eight years ago, and the roster of roughly a dozen teachers are trained in the lessons, which are also available to other educators in Austin ISD.

Valenzuela noted that the inspiration for the Academia Cuauhtli began when the Texas Center for Education Policy was approached by a number of community members.

They said we need to do something about literacy in East Austin schools,” Valenzuela said.
Extraordinary Women Award Winner: Dr. Angela Valenzuela

Their concerns centered on children’s experiences between third and fourth grade. “It seems to be a very common find and not just an Austin but in other places,” Valenzuela said. “As students who are Spanish-speaking make that transition—maybe it’s developmental—but they become embarrassed by the fact that they are Mexican, that they speak Spanish, and they refuse to speak Spanish anymore.”

Valenzuela also spoke Spanish fluently as a child. “But when I went into the public schools, it subtracted that from me,” Valenzuela said. “And I remember growing up thinking that I lost it, and that people lose their Spanish, partly because that’s how people talk about language—that they lose languages.”

In her work to interpret and understand policy in a deep way, Valenzuela hasn’t found language and cultural maintenance to be part of the Texas education code. “So with that understanding, we wanted not to be a bilingual program—even if we support bilingual education—and we didn’t want children to feel like they’re going to school six days a week,” Valenzuela said. “We wanted it to be a program of renewal, so we’re allowing a culture and language revitalization project—that’s what we call ourselves, a culture and language revitalization project. So that as children make that transition from the third to the fourth grade, they’re proud of their parents, they’re proud of their language, pride of being bilingual, and beyond that, proud of being indigenous and being the ancestors of people who are native to this continent.”

Academia Cuauhtli works with students from Sanchez, Metz, Houston, Perez, and Zavala elementary schools, and during remote learning added two more, Travis Heights and Harris. “A really nice outcome of the school is children getting support for the Spanish language,” Valenzuela said. “It really encourages them; we’ve had two children who have won writing contests in Spanish.”

The indigenous aspect is part of the larger emerging ethnic studies movement, Valenzuela said. “I’m also a leader in that—it’s really interesting because when I wrote Subtractive Schooling, it wasn’t exactly telling people what to do, it was just trying to layout an analysis in the way it discussed why Latinos underperform, and so that was my main objective at that point, and then what happened was, I got into the high stakes testing battle.”

Valenzuela has been an expert witness in court trials over Mexican-American curriculum, including GI Forum v. Texas Education Agency, and her advocacy has continued to evolve. She founded and operates a blog called Educational Equity, Politics, and Policy in Texas (http://teaxseedquity.blogspot.com/), which tracks current legislation, including Texas’ Ethnic Studies HB 1304, which was just approved 6 to 3 by the Texas Senate Education Committee on May 24.

Valenzuela also serves on the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) National Task Force on Higher Education, and she is the executive director of the National Latino Education Research and Policy Project (NLERAPP), a consortium of 11 institutions that works to enhance teaching for high school students in Texas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, New York and Wisconsin. Among the NLERAPP goals is developing critically conscious educators. “In these areas of race, culture, language, identity, if we are to teach to an increasingly large demographic of color in our state and nation,” Valenzuela said. “The data are very clear from research that having a teacher who is Latino or African-American helps you, because they’re a role model of achievement to envision yourself as a potential teacher or professional. “There’s no shortcuts here, you need good teachers everywhere, and they also need to be attuned to students’ differences.”

At UT this past year, Valenzuela taught Foundations of Education Policy to students in the master’s program and Race/Ethnicity in the Schools to doctoral students. She also received the Henry T. Tusha Award for Research Leading to the Transformation of the Social Contexts of Education from the American Educational Research Association. She has also recently been inducted as a member of the National Academy of Education and will receive her recognition on Nov. 11 in Washington, D.C.

Valenzuela expressed gratitude for receiving the Extraordinary Woman Award. “You don’t set out on the path to win awards,” Valenzuela said. “My path is to do good work and to do work that I enjoy, of course. I enjoy all of this, and to have integrity in the process, to be ethical and seek justice and try and make the world a better place, and that’s a recipe for victory, it turns out.”

Valenzuela’s other books are Leaving Children Behind: How “Texas-style” Accountability Fails Latino Youth (2005) and Growing Critically Conscious Teachers: A Social Justice Curriculum for Educators of Latino/a Youth (2016). “Some of my best thoughts, some of my best learnings, my theoretical contributions come precisely from being deeply involved in solidarity with the community,” Valenzuela said. “I can’t help but feel hopeful, I really do feel hopeful for the future.”

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