

# extraordinary WOMEN

presented by

THOMAS J HENRY

## Extraordinary Women Award Winner DR. ANGELA VALENZUELA UT Professor, Author and Advocate

Angela 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 in Education Program within the Department of Curriculum & Instruction. She is also the director of the UT Center for Education Policy.

Valenzuela was inspired to pursue a career in education when she got to college. “I wasn’t sure what I would be or do; what I did know fairly early on was that I wanted to make the world a better place, and I felt that education was a route toward that,” Valenzuela said. “I grew up in a family of ministers and I’m the descendant of ministers, and so our work always involved addressing issues pertinent to the Mexican immigrant community in my hometown of San Angelo, Texas, where I grew up.”

Her family’s work made a lasting impression on her own career in education and public policy, Valenzuela said.

“My grandfather was my pastor, and he was from Mexico, and because of the real difficulties that so many of the people had as a result of their status in the community, the church was one of those spaces that was able to address the needs on both material and spiritual,” she said.

Valenzuela majored in English and minored in Spanish at Angelo State University and from there got a master’s in sociolinguistics – an intersection of sociology and language – at UT Austin.

“And in the process, just falling in love with sociology – in particular, the sociology of education – I went to Stanford University and got both my master’s and my doctoral degree in sociology.” Besides sociology of education, Valenzuela’s studies concentrated on race and ethnic relations.

Stanford is also where she began dating her husband, Emilio Zamora, who now is also a professor at UT Austin, where he teaches on the history of Mexicans in the U.S., Texas history and oral history. The couple has two daughters. The eldest, Clara Zamora, has two children – Feliciano, who turns 9 in June, and 2-year-old Mia Luna. The couple’s younger daughter, Luz Zamora, is a choir teacher at Sunset Valley in Austin ISD.

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 inspired by what she learned to pursue what became her career.

“Because of that, and the mentorship that I got there as well – they were very influential in exposing me to critical readings that really inspired me in terms of the analyses that people were doing at the time in the area of class and race,” Valenzuela said.

The intersections of language and identity had become increasingly significant to her, Valenzuela said. “Because when I was going to school in West Texas, I felt that we were all being discriminated against, but I didn’t have

an analysis for it – I didn’t have the lexicon, that discourse or the frameworks – and these are so important, to be able to understand in a deep way the dynamics that preserve these systems of privilege that relate to the English language, the real dominance, such that when I grew up, I had real difficulties speaking the Spanish language, I had real difficulties because it wasn’t reinforced in school,” Valenzuela said. “And even now, today, for the most part, our systems are transitional – the idea is to be English fluent – and so I just have always felt that that was not very democratic, and that was unfair, particularly since the people that are from this region of the country have spoken language – and many other languages, indigenous tongues – for millennia.”

And so early on, Valenzuela added, she saw herself as part of a cadre of academics, activists and advocates who want to change policies.

“To make them more inclusive,” Valenzuela said. “So, it wasn’t really totally abstract – although I had to learn a lot of abstract stuff in college – but it was actually something that was very personal to me. I felt like I had lived, and as a result of my own having grown up in West Texas, that I saw and experienced in very clear terms, by the way, the racism and discrimination,” Valenzuela said. “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 received an honorable mention from the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Awards 2000, as well as the 2001 American Educational Studies Association Critics’ Choice Award.

The publisher’s website notes, “Provides an enhanced sense of what’s required to genuinely care for and educate the U.S.–Mexican youth in America,” and the Harvard Educational Review wrote of it, “Valenzuela’s thoughtful and thorough analysis of Latino/a students’ experiences in a large urban school powerfully defines the educational challenges facing Latino immigrant and U.S.-born youth and outlines important elements for transforming their academic experiences.”

The book reflects her interest in inequality and how race and culture are part of that reproduction of inequality, Valenzuela said.

“What I had found at Stanford when I was there on a quantitative research project was that in these six schools in this city-suburban area south of San Francisco, that there were generational differences in achievement within the Latino population, Valenzuela said. “What I call the middle majority, their experience is actually one of becoming with each generation more and more disaffected from school.”

Valenzuela’s book research looked at more than 2,280 students.

“And this was concerning because it means we have a lot of young people that are not affirmed,” Valenzuela said. “And when they’re not affirmed, they’re alienated from school, and they drop out, many of them where they don’t do well.”

Valenzuela’s work has been widely cited as a study that was able to carry out ideas and frameworks of racialization.



To some degree, the schools themselves have reinforced the idea of underperforming Mexican-American or Latinx students, Valenzuela said.

“By not really valuing the students’ cultures, languages,” Valenzuela said.

“They’re very test-driven. I’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.”

Valenzuela has long been affiliated with UT’s Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program.

“One thing that really helped me survive Stanford was being part of the Mexican-American Graduate Students Association,” Valenzuela said. “We all leaned into each other and really helped each other through the dissertation and just the many challenges of getting a degree at Stanford.”

“It provided that community that we needed, and also real opportunities to develop ourselves in terms of our own advocacy and activism and in organizing student events and bringing speakers and becoming part of a larger community, not only at Stanford but nationally as well. And these are really important networks that continue to be important and influential to me today.”

More recently, she’s been an affiliate in UT’s Native American and Indigenous Studies program.

“That came later, and it coincided with the establishment of our Saturday school, Academia Cuauhtli,” Valenzuela said.

The school serves 40 fourth-grade students from seven schools in Austin and is sponsored by Nuestro Grupo, of which Valenzuela is a founding member. The school works in partnership with the Austin ISD and Austin’s Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center at 600 River St.

“We just call it a heart-centered curriculum,” Valenzuela said. “Our theme song is about the eagle – Academia Cuauhtli means Eagle Academy, and we really love the eagle because it is a symbol of resurrection and renewal, and we want our children to be renewed and particularly in that journey to the self.”

The role of the eagle is to guide the students on their path.

“The idea is to provide them with that uplift that they need to have, that strong ego to be able to withstand the assaults 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 values are reinforced and that they’re able to celebrate with us and honor with us 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 its 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.

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# Extraordinary Women Award Winner: Dr. Angela Valenzuela

*Continued from previous page.*

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 about 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, proud 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://texasedequity.blogspot.com/>), which tracks current legislation, including Texas' Ethnic Studies HB 1504, 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 Latina/o 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. Trueba 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 Washing-

ton, 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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