

Cross the street to a new world

Learning about and respecting each student's family, history, and literacy skills will improve educators' opportunity to reach those students.

By Fernando Naiditch

I remember walking the last blocks to a teaching assignment in a public elementary school in the Bronx. I was eager to get into the classroom to get to work, despite vague warnings about how exhausting — even dangerous — teaching in the inner city can be. I knew that learning in schools like this one often was overshadowed by the distractions of the street, the weight of poverty, the apparent blankness of the students' future. As I approached the school, I began to feel as many teachers in this environment do. Given all the outside demands on these kids, how do you start, how do you prioritize? I was soon to find that there are unexpected opportunities, for students and teachers, but finding them required me to push the notion of where learning happens.

I met Pedro on my first day at the school. Pedro was an 8-year-old boy who had been in the U.S. only a couple years. The teachers at school told me he was very quiet and reserved. I immediately thought that this shyness might be part of his silent period or even reflect his stress in adapting to American schools and a new environment. I was assigned as

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Pedro's tutor for English as a Second Language, and I was charged with getting him to read and write at grade level. The homeroom teacher's tired smile betrayed her doubts that I, or anyone else, could make the 1st-grade English language learner *actually* read or write something. After observing him for the rest of the day, I was encouraged that I could not find anything wrong with him. It was adamantly suggested to me that I "look more closely."

Pedro talked to me mostly in Spanish. He told stories about his neighborhood, his mom, his older brother. He never mentioned his father, and, later on, I learned he didn't know his father. The picture he drew of his mother and brother portrayed his world. Those were the people he called family — apparently a very different family from the one the teacher knew or expected. Pedro clearly understood family in a way that was shaped by his culture and personal history. I was beginning to sense a fundamental misunderstanding. Instead of trying to convince the teacher that there were different kinds of family — with and without certain family members — I decided to let it go.

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Still, I was new to the school, and had only just met Pedro, so I thought I should keep observing until I could find out why Pedro had earned the school's label of Learning Disabled.

"Did you see how he holds the books?" the teacher finally asked me. In fact, I had seen it. Pedro would hold his books awkwardly and often upside down. I had interpreted it as experimentation and play. Within a progressive classroom, wouldn't this be allowed? Let the child experiment and discover, create hypotheses and test them. I started to look more carefully at his behavior and consider its real cause.

Pedro did have a real problem. He did not know how to hold a book. He did not know that in English (as in Spanish) we read from left to right. He did not know how to accurately identify the parts of the book. *Qué significa cuando ella dice 'las partes de un libro?'* ("What does she mean by parts of a book?" he would ask me). He spent his reading time looking at the pictures and playing with the pages ("It's not origami, you know?" I recall hearing the teacher say).

I asked the teacher and the school counselor to explain what defined an LD learner and why there were so many English language learners with that label. The answers I got were not satisfying. In fact, their stereotypical explanations echoed those I had heard before when people described second language learners. Then it hit me. People rely on labels just like they rely on stereotypes. Many teachers and many schools are not trained or motivated to engage English language learners. Labels simplified everything and easily hid the problems of teaching across language barriers and between cultures. They shifted responsibility away from the school and insidiously placed blame on the students themselves.

The truth is nobody had taken the time to teach Pedro how to hold a book or to show him that we read from left to right. Isn't that what teachers are supposed to do? How could something this fundamental be overlooked in the classroom? I realized there is so much taken for granted. Teachers expect students to already know so many things when they come to class, and labels can easily explain away gaps in that knowledge.

English language learners in American schools have the double task of having to perform within the required academic standards while also struggling to make sense of the American language and culture. Caught between two worlds, they may opt for acting based on their native culture background, or they can display features that characterize the development of an *interculture*, a mix of their familiar and new worlds. Perhaps most distressing, they may opt out, be silent, or stay invisible. It is with these students

that teachers truly committed to English language learners can find some of their greatest challenges and greatest rewards.

Why do you care so much?

When I was asked this question, I had to think twice in order to answer it. The personal answer is that I am an immigrant and Latino, and, even though I came to the U.S. with a facility in English, I could see myself in that child. But the deeper answer was that not caring that a child was silent is tragic. Not caring shows that we have disconnected, given up, cut our losses. Teaching transfers knowledge, but it also builds the self, or helps *rebuild* it in a new country. Such teaching requires commitment, caring, and dedication, and this is what educators must be ready to do.

Pedro embodied this philosophical and personal challenge. One day, after school, I decided to try to meet Pedro's mother. She was just outside, across the street, waiting for her two sons. That moment was startlingly meaningful to me. She was alone, looking for them from a distance. Most of the other parents, mostly mothers, were waiting on the sidewalk right in front of the gates. Something about the school seemed threatening to her.

I crossed the street, introduced myself, and started a conversation with her in Spanish. I learned that she could not speak English but she also could not read or write in her native language, Spanish. We talked about Pedro and the day-to-day of the neighborhood.

I pieced together that there were no books, magazines, or newspapers in Pedro's home. His home life was rich with information and stories, but it was primarily oral and not written. I imagined what this would have been like. As is true for most people reading this article, I grew up in a household where books were common, and adults were always reading. My parents read with me and passed on their love of books. Pedro's mother said she enjoyed telling her sons stories about their homeland, Mexico, and about the tales she heard as a child. The oral tradition was being passed on in that house, but Pedro's mother hoped the school would provide the literacy tradition of books that she could not.

But it didn't. Instead, the school was blaming Pedro for not knowing how to hold a book without even considering that this might be the first time in his life he had ever touched a book. The school expected Pedro to know how to flip the pages or identify paragraphs without understanding that all of these skills represented an unfamiliar world for him. Most students in his classroom may have already known how to properly hold or browse through a book. The teacher never considered that this experience is not

automatic and not universal.

Parental involvement is important and necessary for successful academic achievement. Pedro's mother knew that, and she did her best at home to make sure the children did their homework, but there were clear limits to what she could do. When I asked why she had never spoken to Pedro's teacher to let her know about the family culture and oral tradition, she said she was afraid. She was embarrassed to admit to the teacher that she could not help the kids with reading or writing. She could supervise them, but could not explain or read what was on the handouts, even if it was written in Spanish. She depended on that school. It represented everything she never had and everything she wanted her sons to have. It was, in essence, the reason she came to this country.

I wondered for awhile if she could ever share with the teacher what she had shared with me. Had I not been able to converse in Spanish and share my own experiences as a second language learner, would she have responded the same way? I want to believe that the answer to my question is "yes." All it took for me was crossing the street. And sometimes, that's all it takes. It is a matter of interest. But who is going to take the first step — the mother who believes she has a deficit or the well-educated teacher? Who needs to reach out to whom?

Taking the first step

The reason Pedro did not know what was expected from him at school had nothing to do with being LD or any other label that the school may have attached to him. He was not cognitively challenged or developmentally delayed. He simply came from a home that valued oral literacy, and he did not have the opportunity to develop a relationship with the written word before coming to school. The school would have to help him cultivate that relationship, but did it have the capability of doing so?

For the teacher, Pedro was LD because he was compared to students who grew up in fundamentally different learning environments. In fact, the school did not see, let alone value, the kind of literacy and knowledge he brought to class with him.

I decided to try to convince the teacher to let me invite Pedro's mother to come to class and meet the students. On that day, she crossed the street to the school, and it turned out to be an inspiring educational experience for everyone involved. The school finally acknowledged Pedro's mother. Her voice and her value were heard, and students and teachers listened. The students were fascinated by her presence and by the fact that every word needed to be translated, which also gave the students a chance to familiarize themselves with Spanish. Other students in class spoke Spanish, and they also felt important.

After all, they were responsible for helping me make sure the stories were being accurately translated into English. Students started asking Pedro questions about the stories, his homeland, and what it was like to come from a place so far away.

This visit was about creating an environment that doesn't just preach diversity, but actually empowers, and encourages diverse contributions to the classroom. Once Pedro's comfort with the spoken word was present and accepted in the classroom, he too felt that he was part of that community. When teachers don't treat a child as a student with a deficit, when teachers and peers recognize and value what a child has to offer, then a student has the opportunity to develop not only knowledge, but a sense of themselves in that community.

I continued tutoring Pedro, and he eventually caught up with his classmates, but not to his grade level. Truth be told, many of his classmates still cannot read, let alone write, at grade level.

Conclusion

Taking an interest in the family life and its relationship to literacy is just a first step in addressing the needs of English language learners. Bringing parents to the classroom also helps bring teachers closer to their students' homes. Giving parents a voice and an opportunity is just a simple strategy that helps foster and strengthen the partnership between schools and the families that they serve. In the situation described here, the oral literacy of the home met the written literacy of the classroom, and they complemented and extended each other. Students made meaningful connections and understood the importance of family and peer support in the process. They also learned to respect and appreciate how much English language learners have to contribute to a more linguistically and culturally diverse classroom environment.

Pedro's story is not unique. American classrooms, not just in urban areas, are filled with students like Pedro, whose literacy skills reflect different ways of understanding and relating to the world. Educating English language learners depends on the knowledge that comes from the community, from crossing the street and getting to know a parent, a life story, a different way of defining and practicing literacy.

All it took was crossing the street to find out about Pedro's family, history, and literacy skills. Literacy sometimes is just across the street, in the bodegas and on the sidewalks. All it takes is developing a broader understanding of what literacy means and what it entails, particularly when dealing with English language learners — students who come from so many parts of the world and who bring with them so many literacies.

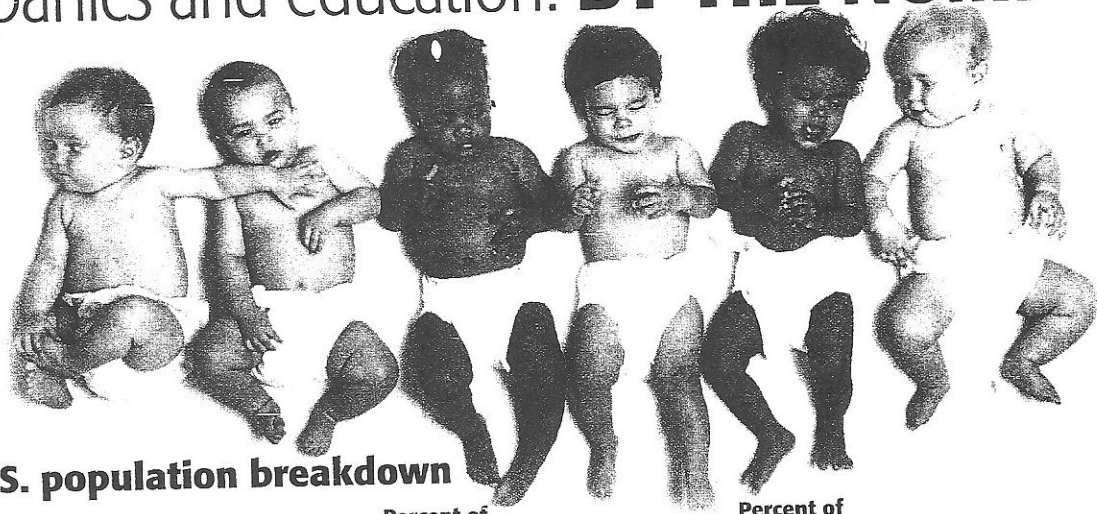
Bringing parents to the classroom also helps bring teachers close to their students' homes.



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Hispanics and education: **BY THE NUMBERS**



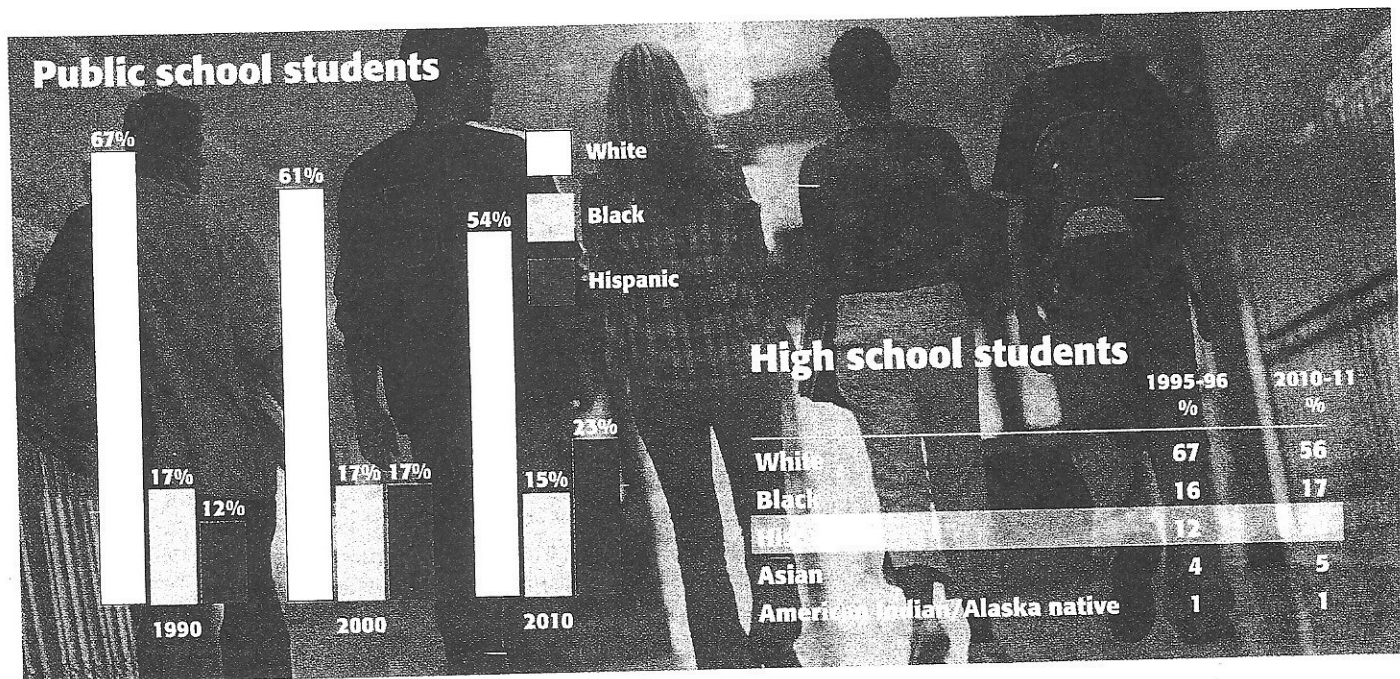
U.S. population breakdown

	Population 2000	Percent of population 2000	Population 2009	Percent of population 2009
Hispanic	35,204,480	12.5	48,348,144	15.7
Native born	21,072,230	7.5	30,278,868	9.9
Foreign born	14,132,250	5.0	18,069,276	5.9
White	194,527,123	69.1	199,327,245	64.9
Black	33,706,554	12.0	37,171,119	12.1
Asian	10,088,521	3.6	13,604,863	4.4
Other	7,895,228	2.8	8,548,185	2.8
Total	281,421,906	100.0	306,999,556	100.0*

Hispanic population growth accounted for 51.4% of the total U.S. population growth between 2000 and 2009; whites accounted for 18.8%; blacks, 13.6%; Asians, 13.8%; others, 2.6%.

*Effect of rounding is that all percentages may not add up to 100.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center. (2011). *Statistical portrait of Hispanics in the United States, 2009*. Washington, DC: Author.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The condition of education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Children (ages 5-17) of parents who have bachelor's degrees or higher

	1990 %	2011 %
White	31	48
Black	11	22
Hispanic	8	16
Total	26	37

Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The condition of education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Percent of children in each demographic group living in families below the poverty threshold, 2011

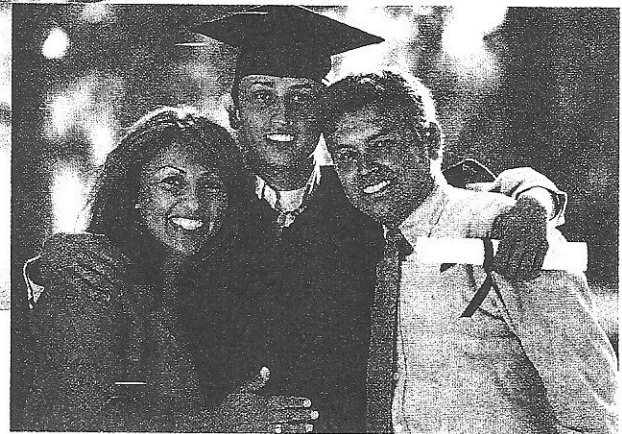
Black	51%
Hispanic	34%
American Indian/Alaska native	27%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	22%
Asian/Pacific Islander	19%
White	12%

Dropout rate

	1990 %	2000 %	2010 %
White	9.0	6.9	5.1
Black	13.2	13.1	8.0
Hispanic	32.4	27.8	15.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.9	3.8	4.2
American Indian/Alaska Native	16.4	14.0	12.4
Total	12.1	10.9	7.4

The status dropout rate represents the percentage of 16-year-olds through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development [GED] certificate).

Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The condition of education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.



12th-grade students with definite plans to graduate from four-year college

	1990 %	2000 %	2010 %
White	50	57	61
Black	38	57	59
Hispanic	38	43	50

Source: University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. (n.d.). *Monitoring the future*. Ann Arbor, MI: Author.
www.monitoringthefuture.org