

## Como una Leona: Shielding My Son from Discrimination at School

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The first time I heard the phrase *Where there is a will, there is a way* I was in seventh grade and my English teacher mentioned it. I do not remember why my teacher taught us this phrase, but she did explain to us that if we fought and worked hard—if we persevered—we could achieve our dreams. I heard the same advice many times from my parents, my grandmother, my aunts, other teachers, our priest...

Another trendy phrase I remember from that time was that *education was the vehicle to improve your quality of life and your social class*. Although I did not understand what this meant, I did understand when my father used to say to me: *Nena, tú tienes que estudiar fuerte y obtener un diploma de la universidad porque si tu marido te sale un sinvergüenza, le das tres patadas* (Munchkin, you must study hard and earn a college degree, because if your future husband turns out to be a scoundrel you can kick him out of the house with no remorse). These lessons were my guide during my developmental years, and I think they guided me well. I can affirm that I have achieved almost all my dreams. Therefore, I tried to instill in my children this same way of thinking. Unfortunately, the world they were growing up in and the people around them were different. We no longer lived on a small island with a homogeneous Spanish-speaking population. Sadly, little by little I discovered that these ideologies did not apply to my children.

Trusting that education is the vehicle for social advancement, in 1992 I moved to the United States to continue my doctoral studies in education. My oldest son was ten years old; my daughter was four, and the youngest was just one year old. Everyone—except the baby, of course—was very excited; it was a great adventure. Eventually, all my children were enrolled at the same elementary school. This school was part of the university I was studying at, which had a prestigious school of education. The student population at this university (around 40,000 students) was very diverse and most of the graduate students' children attended this elementary school; so, I thought my children would be safe there, free of prejudices, but I was wrong.

## My Son's Blood Is Red, Too

I do not remember the exact moment when this happened, but I remember it was 1996 and Diego, my youngest son, was in kindergarten. It was around 3:00 pm and I was preparing after-school snacks for Angela, my daughter, and him when the phone rang. It was Diego's teacher telling me that Diego was suspended from school because he had a fight and, worst of all, the other student was hurt. When I asked if anything happened to my son, she responded that I did not have to worry; that he was ok and on the school bus on his way home. Fifteen minutes passed, but it felt like an eternity for me. I tried to remain calm while waiting for the school bus. When the bus arrived, we walked home. I served them snacks and waited until they finished eating so I could ask Diego his version of the incident. *We were returning from recess and I was singing while walking to the classroom, he began narrating. The boy in front of me told me to shut up; I asked him why and he responded because...* And then, what happened, I asked. *I continued singing, and he turned back and hit me on my face with his lunch box.* What did you do? I inquired. *I pushed him, he fell and got hurt with a desk.* Was he bleeding? I asked. *Yes, and me, too; but the teacher sent him to the nurse's office and cleaned my nose with a paper towel.* Were you bleeding? Did she not send you to the nurse's office as well? I screamed hysterically. My husband was still at work, but I called him and told him what happened. He immediately called the school and requested a meeting.

We met with the principal and the teacher the next morning. The teacher summarized her version of the incident and obviously, she forgot to comment that even though Diego was also bleeding, she did not send him to the nurse. The principal continued the conversation and alerted us that Diego did not have the social skills necessary to go to first grade; therefore, were planning on holding him in kindergarten, or so she thought.

Since I was very nervous, I could not think in English accurately; therefore, I started speaking in Spanish and asked my husband to translate. "Did you know that the other child attacked Diego first and my son only defended himself?" "Did you know that my son had a bloody nose, but the teacher only sent the other student to the nurse's office?" I asked myself who was she to make that kind of decision? The pain and anger I felt increased with each question I asked. At the same time, I was thinking, how can they be so cruel to a five years old child? "My son has the same rights as the other kid. I wondered if she did not send Diego because he is Latino, and she inferred that he was responsible for the incident when he was the victim. My son's blood is red, too!" There are no words to express the suffering, anger, and despair I was experiencing at

that moment, only someone who has children can really know and understand that feeling.

The principal did not hide her consternation and her reproachful look towards the teacher. But I was not done. I told her that I was very sorry, but my son would go to first grade because I knew he mastered all the language and math skills taught up to that point. In addition, it was very sad that the academic year was ending, and we never had received any single note about Diego's accomplishments and good behavior. Apparently, she thought I did not know what I was talking about and she dared to ask me what skills I was referring to. I just responded, "I am completing a doctoral degree in curriculum and language education; I have been a teacher for many years; thus, I know what I am talking about." Unfortunately, I had to be as arrogant and pedantic as I could possibly be. Consequently, Diego was never suspended, the school administration apologized, and we received a note from the teacher celebrating Diego's accomplishments every week for the rest of the academic year.

Upon reflecting on this incident, I wondered how many parents were unable to protect or defend their children from incidents like these, and I wondered how many of these students ended up dropping out of schools after years of such forms of injustices. Latino students represent an estimated 26% of high school and elementary students across the country, and as a fast-growing demographic, are predicted to represent 30% of the nation by 2050 equivalent to 132 million students. Currently, one-in-four public elementary school students are Latinos. The percentage of kindergarten students of Latino descent increased from 14.9 percent in 1996, when my son was in first grade, to 25.7% in 2016 (Bauman, 2017). This is an indication that the young Latino population is growing quickly. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), in 2017 only 80% of Latino students graduated from high school compared to 91% of Asian Americans, 89% of Whites, 78% of African Americans, and 72% Native Americans.

Research conducted on Latino students has discovered several challenges affecting their education. One of those challenges is the mechanisms of discipline (Espinoza-Herold, 2003). The mechanisms practiced in schools cause Latino students' withdrawal because they feel that they are viewed as reckless and deceitful. Moreover, these practices are selectively enforced when Latino students are implicated. The data gathered by Espinoza-Herold (2003) regarding suspensions revealed that "given two schools with almost the same student enrollment, the urban institution with a majority Latino population had almost four times the number of suspensions than the institution with a majority White population" (Espinoza-Herold, 2003, p.124). Even though the

researcher interviewed high school students, these mechanisms apparently start as soon as Latino students enter kindergarten, like what happened to my son.

A similar incident involving a fight occurred when Diego was in fourth grade in another collegiate city school in the same state. In this case, the principal was aware that my son just defended himself. However, she held us responsible for not teaching our son to seek an adult's help instead of fighting back and they wanted to suspend him because of that. We told her that, given the fact of past bullying experiences at school, we have told him to defend himself when and if he needs to. The principal did not say anything in that respect; the meeting just ended, and of course, Diego was not suspended.

### Attention Deficit or Kinesthetic Intelligence?

It was the middle of October 1999, and like every year, we went to our first parent-teacher meeting at the school, where both my daughter Angela (sixth grade), and Diego (third grade) were attending. We did not want to waste time, so we decided that Victor, my husband, would go to Angela's classroom and I would go to Diego's. The meetings were with each parent individually and lasted about fifteen to twenty minutes. While I was waiting for my turn, I looked at Diego's works displayed on his desk, and also at what the teacher had posted in the classroom. On one of the walls, there was a chart in which she had identified her students' three strongest intelligences according to Howard Gardner's theory. I noticed that what the teacher had penciled in for Diego matched what I had already observed in him.

The teacher knew me because she taught my daughter in third grade as well; she even knew that I was studying my doctorate in education and that my husband was also studying his master's degree in adapted physical education. The first thing she mentioned after greeting me and after asking about "her favorite student Angela" was how different Angela and Diego were; "they are two extremes! She (Angela) is quiet, calm, disciplined, all goodness and sweetness; however, Diego...(and took a deep breath) he's pure dynamite!" This conversation started badly, I thought, but I just smiled and kept listening to her beautiful description of my beloved Boom Boom, as we affectionately nicknamed him...you can imagine why. Anyway, she was not saying anything that we did not know already; both were like that and as a mother, I had to accept it. The teacher's mistake was what she said next: "Therefore, Mrs. Nieves, we believe that Diego has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. If you wish, we can recommend a specialist to certify it."

As we say in Puerto Rico: “Aquí fue donde la puerca entorchó el rabo” (*This is where the pig twisted the tail*—literal translation for a Puerto Rican colloquialism meaning “here is when the conversation turned wrong”). I reacted like a lioness defending her cubs. “Excuse me,” I replied. As a teacher, I have the same training and knowledge you have on attention deficit; therefore, I am sure as an educator and as a mother, that my son does not suffer from that condition.

She was stunned; she was not expecting that reaction from me. I got up immediately and headed for the poster and she followed me like a robot. I pointed to my son’s name and commented: “I have observed that you already know that Diego’s strongest intelligences are kinesthetic, musical, and interpersonal. That means that he learns through movement, listening to music, and interacting with his classmates.” The teacher just nodded. I continued saying, “then, I ask you, what activities do you include in your daily lesson plans to meet the needs of my son and everyone who is like him? If you only incorporate activities where students are sitting for more than twenty minutes, of course, they will get bored and look for something more interesting to do.” The teacher had no choice but to rip up the appointment she had made with the psychologist. That was the end of our conversation, but not of the subject.

Two weeks had gone by and I attended a meeting of the *Women in Connection*. This was a support group for Latino mothers in which we discussed issues that impacted our families. Undoubtedly, I told them everything that had happened in my parent-teacher conference and, to my surprise, I uncovered a Pandora’s Box. I could not believe several of the mothers who were there had been given an appointment with a psychologist for the same reason Diego’s teacher tried to give me one. Their children attended the same school as mine. Realizing this “coincidence,” we decided to explore in this meeting the question *How is it possible that all Latino students in that school have attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder?* After discussing the issue for a while, we concluded that perhaps they wanted to keep our children as zombies in the classroom since, at that time, they were prescribing Ritalin for that condition.

Supposedly, Ritalin helped increase students’ ability to pay attention, stay focused on an activity, and control behavioral problems. It might have also helped the students in becoming organized and maybe improve their listening skills. However, in June 2005, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued a series of public health advisories warning that Ritalin and drugs like it, may cause visual hallucinations, suicidal thoughts, and psychotic behavior, as well as aggression or violent behavior.

Reflecting on this experience, I pondered how many students, now adults, have developed any of these conditions as a result of taking that medicine.

This incident took place in 1999 and, as a mother, I did not know much about this drug but, as a teacher, I had observed how medicated students behaved differently from their normal behavior. Instead of paying attention, students taking this drug daydreamed; they were physically in the classroom, but their thoughts were elsewhere. Therefore, teachers did not have to deal with them and worry about including different strategies or activities in the classroom to fulfill Latino students' learning needs. Several of these children did not speak English and needed additional help. In our meeting, we also asked ourselves, is this the new way to discriminate against minorities, especially against Latinos? All the mothers with a doctor's appointment for their children went to the school the following week and demanded an explanation from the school administration for that kind of tendency. As a result, no student was officially labeled with that condition.

### My Son Is Not Going Anywhere

It was 2006 and now we were living in the wild and wonderful state of West Virginia. Diego was in tenth grade and he was playing with the junior varsity basketball team. My husband and I used to watch every single game, but that night we could not go. We were just arriving home from our schools' teacher-parent conferences when my husband received a call from one of the team's parents. His son had called him to tell him what had happened to Diego. Then, we received another call, and another and another, but none of them was our son. We texted him, even though we knew he was not allowed to use his cellphone when playing a game. I was desperate to hear Diego's version of the incident. We finally found out when the game was over and he was able to call us.

Apparently when they were driving to the game, one of the players said something inappropriate and the assistant coach heard it. The assistant coach asked who was to blame for those words and some players blamed Diego. Immediately, the assistant coach complained to my son but Diego replied stating he did not know what the assistant coach was talking about since he was playing on his cell phone. I will never forget the assistant coach's words toward my son, Diego...*"Go back to your country, we don't do that shit here in the United States."* Just remembering those words still breaks my heart. My husband and I did not know what to do, and then it occurred to me to call my supervisor, and my husband called a colleague to ask for advice.

That night we could not sleep; nevertheless, we arrived at Diego's school first thing in the morning. The principal was not there, so the assistant principal

received us. We explained the reason for our visit and he immediately called the athletic director. Apparently, none of them knew what had happened. We introduced ourselves again, but this time emphasizing that we were both teachers and that, therefore, we were familiar with the protocol to follow in these cases. I also made sure they knew I had a doctorate degree in education. It may sound arrogant from my part, but sadly, we had already grasped that for many people in the United States, Latinos are nothing more than undocumented and illiterate individuals. My husband summarized what happened according to Diego and to the parents that called us. They were in shock; they knew they had everything to lose. They asked us what we wanted them to do. We demanded an apology from the assistant coach to Diego in front of the entire team; to humble himself in the same way he had humiliated our son. Both the assistant principal and the athletic director apologized and assured us that the assistant coach would apologize for his actions the very next day after basketball practice.

I could not go to the practice that Tuesday since I had to teach at night at the university, but my husband attended. We already imagined what would happen and we were prepared. The assistant coach apologized to the team in a very general way without specifying what he had done, and he did not apologize to Diego. When my husband left the practice, he was furious. The athletic director met my husband in the hallway. He asked my husband what was wrong and if he was not satisfied with the apology. My husband replied that if the assistant coach did not offer a sincere apology as we had demanded, both the coach and he would lose their jobs. My son's dignity was restored the next day.

The high school Diego attended consisted predominantly of White students and there were only 10 Latino students attending that institution. Diego was one of the only two Latino students playing in that team because he excelled in academics and was a very talented player. Diego was the shooting guard and the other Latino player was the point guard. Thanks to them, the following year, the team made it to the state championship for the first time in the school's history. I wonder if Diego would have had the opportunity of continuing playing basketball in the varsity team and of receiving a sports scholarship if we would not have defended him from that racial microaggression.

Unfortunately, not many Latino students can play in a state championship game, or even participate in a sports team. Although time has passed since my son's story, Latino students continue to be discriminated against in sports. For example, Latino students are not afforded the same opportunities, resources, and support students from other races receive. Such racial isolation in all educational disciplines including sports has detrimental effects on Latino students. In 2018, a civil rights advocacy group, the New York Lawyers for the



Public Interest, filed a class-action lawsuit, representing the student-led organization Integrate NYC Black and Latino students that were denied access to New York City public high school sports. According to this group, 17,000 New York City Black and Latino public high school students do not have any sports teams at their schools. They stated that:

On average, Black and Latino students have access to far fewer teams and sports, and the city spends much less per Black and Latino students than for students of other races. Thousands of Black and Latino New York City public high school students attend schools that offer no team sports whatsoever, and Black and Latino students are twice as likely as students of other races to attend schools without sports teams. (p. 1)

The lawsuit seeks to create equal access to high school sports for all students, regardless of race. As the suit details, access to school sports benefits students' mental well-being, physical health, can enhance college opportunities, and can also contribute to the development of team skills such as solidarity, collaboration, and friendships, which foster community.

### Final Thoughts

Upon high school graduation, Diego was awarded a scholarship to play basketball at a Division II university and he was also discriminated against by a coach. Upset with these experiences, Diego decided he did not want to endure these aggressions anymore. He left behind his passion for basketball and attended another university. Currently, he is twenty-eight years old and, more than ever, he continues to be a victim of discrimination now at his present job. As his mother, I cannot defend him the way I used to when he was a child. Obviously, Diego is now an adult and, furthermore, the discrimination he experiences nowadays is more subtle and more difficult to confirm. Nevertheless, I try to make him aware of how Latinos are being discriminated against when it comes to applying for jobs, being paid equally or especially, what is currently happening to him, not being considered when asking for a promotion. According to Crispin Ballesteros (2015), when applying for jobs, "African Americans and Latinos are less likely than Whites to receive an interview or job offer" (Crispin Ballesteros, 2015, p. 14). In addition, Crispin Ballesteros (2015) stated that Latinos do not have the opportunity of being promoted to supervisory positions or any other higher position because employers are predisposed by negative stereotypes.



Individuals who experience employment discrimination may be negatively impacted. According to Nadal et al. (2014), racism has been linked to mental health problems such as substance abuse, lower self-concept, mental distress, and depressive symptoms. When individuals perceive and experience discrimination in their personal lives, there may be detrimental impacts on their identity development and mental well-being. Additionally, Latinos may confront difficulties in securing suitable employment due to discrimination, which puts them at a greater risk for depression (Leung et al., 2014).

As a mother, I do not regret having taught Diego that hard work, perseverance, and academic preparation are the tools to achieve his dreams. It should be that way, at least, in an unprejudiced world. I am very proud of him because, despite all the injustices he has had to endure in his life, Diego continues to have a good heart and a noble soul. I believe that, as parents, we must continue to raise our voices and fight against all kinds of discrimination for our children and for humanity.

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