

For this teacher, Hispanic teachers have two souls, one in the American world and another in the Latin world

For Miguel Gonzales, a successful education teacher teaching in Las Vegas, the education system is failing its students. According to his teaching philosophy, if a professor is not truly interested in their students, he or she cannot teach or inspire them. And he knows it well: Both his brother and his father, who was his inspiration, were teachers like Miguel.

By [Juliana Jiménez](#) • Originally posted by [Univision Noticias](#)



Photo by David Maris

Miguel Gonzales came from a family of teachers. Today, he is a successful professor of leadership, educational psychology and higher education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, but the road to arrive here was long. And it started with his father.

Tell us your father's story. Did he influence your decision to become a teacher?

My father was always a great example and influence in my life. He was born in Texas to immigrant parents from San Luis Potosí and Monterrey, Mexico. He grew up in a poor environment, without much support or resources from his parents, practically alone. Like many Hispanic people in the United States, after graduating high school, he did not dream of attending college.

For years, he dedicated himself to working in minimum wage jobs and often he worked more than two jobs to support our family of four children. When I was 11-years-old, my father had, shall we say, an epiphany. He realized that to progress and help our family, he had to go back to school. So, in this moment, he also realized that he wanted to be a teacher.

My father loved the idea of being a teacher because he considered himself a “retired teenager” and loved to be with young people. He wanted to help and serve the youth, especially the Hispanic youth, with the tools to successfully navigate in this modern society. So, in 1999, when I was 17-years-old and was about to graduate high school, my father graduated from university. The next year, he'd achieved his dream of becoming a teacher.

Seeing the sacrifice, example, dedication and especially the joy that my dad felt for being a teacher inspired me his same path. I also wanted to have the same joy and influence in the lives of young students and in the Hispanic community as he did.

Tell us about the moment you decided to become a teacher and how that idea materialized.

I became a high school teacher in 2008. I had the good fortune of teaching at the same high school where I graduated in 1999 (Santa Maria High School). It was an unforgettable experience. When I started my career at that school, I really felt like a teenager again. There, [the school] had and still has a predominantly Hispanic student population with only a few Hispanic teachers. I had the privilege of representing the Hispanic community not only as a teacher, but also as a Hispanic alumnus of the school.

For most of my life, I attended schools of low socioeconomic status. I did not have many good experiences in terms of my own learning—I **saw and went through things that should never happen in a school.** And unfortunately, research shows that students in lower socioeconomic schools are less likely to graduate from high school, get good jobs and attend college.



Photo by David Maris

It was not until I went to college to learn to be a teacher that I realized that my education had been stolen; In other words, **they robbed me of opportunities to learn, to progress and to develop my skills and interests.** It was at that moment that I felt the urge to be a teacher because I wanted no student to feel cheated or robbed of a good education.

What was your path to become a teacher? Did you go the traditional route?

As I mentioned, it was in college that I realized that I had been cheated in my education and did not want any student to go through the same experience. There, I decided to become a teacher. I started at the local community college and later transferred to the University of California, Santa Barbara.

When I graduated, I took another year at Chapman University to earn my master's degree and a master's degree in pedagogy. As I progressed in my teaching career, I felt a great desire to obtain a Ph.D. I started applying to several universities and to my surprise, I was accepted to study at Harvard University. It was a dream of mine to study at Harvard.

But this dream was short-lived. After enrolling at Harvard, I had to leave school because I could not get the necessary finances to pay tuition. Thank God, he had other plans for me. Shortly after leaving Harvard, I was accepted to the doctoral program at the University of Southern California (USC). During my time at USC, I accepted an assistant principal position of a secondary school in Santa Barbara. One year later I accepted another position to be the executive director of a charter school and I graduated from the USC doctoral program.

Now, I am a professor of leadership and educational policy at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. It is my goal and hope to help change our educational system for the well-being of our future, and also help Hispanic youth to be successful in our society.

In your experience, what has been the most rewarding aspect of teaching?



Photo by David Maris

One of the most rewarding aspects is the relationships established with the students. **By establishing a relationship with students, teachers have the opportunity to help students change their thinking, habits and even character.** I'm always amazed every time I receive letters from my students who thank me for the impact I had on their lives. **For me, those cards are worth more than gold.**

Do you have an anecdote from a student with whom you've connected in a special way?

I remember one year, it was the first day of school, I'd asked a student to read something aloud. He refused to read and started to be very rude to me and his classmates. I asked him to leave the classroom for a while because he'd started to get out of control.

I thought this teenager was going to be a nightmare for me and that he would be problematic for the whole class. I left my classroom to speak with him and discovered he'd made a scene on purpose because he could not read. I do not remember exactly what I told him that day, but I promised him that if he came to my classroom during lunch, I would teach him to read. He was encouraged and began coming to my class during the lunch hour, and so we began to establish a positive relationship. His reading improved, and so did his behavior.

At the end of the year, he wrote me a letter thanking me and made me a duck paperweight in his carpentry class, which I still have.

Why do you think it is important to have Latino teachers, like you, in the classroom?

The Latin teacher has two souls, one in the American world and one in the Latin. With this advantage, the Latino teacher can become a bridge between schools and the Latino community.

With the increase of Latino students in public schools, I have observed that many schools, without bad intention, do not understand the Hispanic culture, much less immigrant culture. In addition, there are many teachers who do not understand the complexity of being Latino in the U.S. Nor do they understand how complex it is for Hispanic parents who are trying to raise and American child.



Photo by David Maris

However, most Hispanic teachers do understand the complexity and can be a key to helping the Latino community move forward. **They can help turn schools into mirrors, not windows, of the Latino community.** In effect, Latino students should see their identity reflected in their school community (mirrors), to know that people “like me” are full citizens in the school.

Equally important is that Latino students are challenged to look outside of themselves (windows) to understand, respect and appreciate the cultures and identities of others.

What have you learned as a teacher? What have you learned from your students?

Something I have learned as a teacher is that the teacher has a lot of power. A teacher’s duty is something great and noble, because in reality it is **the teacher who has both the present and the future in their hands at the same time.**

At the same time, I have recognized that the educational system we have today will not provide young people with the resources, experiences and skills they will need to compete and work in the 21st century. Our educational system is essentially an industrial model of education, **a model of manufacture, let’s say, that is based on linearity and conformity.**

I think we have to change the education system to a model that is based more on the principles of agriculture. **We have to recognize the that humans flourishing is not a mechanical process; It is an organic process.** In reality, the outcome of human development cannot be predicted. All you can do, like a farmer, is create the conditions under which students will begin to flourish. And it is the teachers and leaders of schools that have this great privilege and must create the conditions under which the students will grow.

I have learned many things from my students. I have come to the conclusion that the students really want a teacher who shows sincere interest in their well-being. **Without showing that he really cares about their well-being, a teacher cannot teach or inspire the student.**

To learn more about the important work of Latino teachers in our communities, visit our project in conjunction with Pearson, [*Nuestros Maestros \(Our Teachers\)*](#)