

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers, and the world.

This June marks not only Pride Month but also the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, that kicked off the LGBTQ civil rights movements. To celebrate, the Thought Project podcast is hosting guests to share their pride-related stories. Today, we speak with Jose Luis Jimenez, a New York City public school principal, and a PhD student in the Urban Education program at the Graduate Center CUNY.

He was recently selected for the Cahn Fellows Program for Distinguished Principals at Teachers College, Columbia University, a leadership program that seeks to improve urban education and places distinguished school administrators on a fast track to higher leadership positions in K-12 schools.

He is a steering committee member of the Proud Teacher Initiative, a network of teachers, principals, and school professionals supporting one another to take steps towards self-disclosing their LGBTQ identities in an effort to be the role models that they did not have when they were in school.

Welcome to the Thought Project, Jose.

Jose L. Jimenez: Thank you. I'm very honored to be here.

Tanya Domi: It's great to have you here during Pride Month. So, Jose, your journey to the United States is quite remarkable for many reasons, but not least among them is because you came with your family, which was seeking political asylum from Cuba. Can you tell us about your experiences in migration and actually starting school in America, speaking English as your second language?

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah. When I first arrived to the United States at the age of nine to Miami, I entered the school system and everything was new. My mother and father did not have the tools, necessarily, to know how to advocate for us. And my experience, in the very beginning was actually a little disheartening. The principal and teacher at the time told my mother that, after only having been in classroom for a few months, that I should be in a smaller class where I would do more physical education, gardening, and computers, and my mother thought that that was great.

It sounded like a great opportunity. The ESL teacher at the time, that knew me, that actually had a relationship with me, called my mother and told her, "This is the class where it's sort of perceived that the students wouldn't go to college, that they might be at risk for dropping out and that they feel like they need to give them more of a hands-on sort of trade experience."

Tanya Domi: Vocational, a bit.

Jose L. Jimenez: Right.

Tanya Domi: And you mentioned this was called the Spark Program that Miami schools-

Jose L. Jimenez: SARP.

Tanya Domi: Oh, thank you, thank you for correcting me. So in other words, in this program you would be sidetracked to not obtain a college degree. Is that correct?

Jose L. Jimenez: I think the idea was that identifying ... It was a students at risk program and it was intended, I think, to provide students that had been identified as being at risk with other avenues early on, but that wouldn't necessarily be college, that it would trade, vocational work.

Tanya Domi: Trade. You know, it's really interesting that Miami would take that approach given that most people who migrate to Miami, it's from Central and Latin America, and everybody speaks Spanish, and so English as a second language is probably very common in the city of Miami.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah. Just not every school was created equal, I guess, at that time. There were other schools that ... I mean, the first dual-language program was started in Miami, but the school that I went to was not one of those schools.

Tanya Domi: It wasn't orientated that way.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: So what did you do about that? Tell us your experiences. Basically, you resisted that definition.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, very much so. At the time, my mother followed the advice of the ESL teacher, said no to the principal, was sort of shamed in a way, because it was going against the recommendation, but ultimately, she had the choice. And then later on, in middle school, I went into the main office and I asked to take the gifted exam because I had other peers that were with me in elementary school when gifted was a pull-out service, versus a self-contained class, and in middle school they were no longer with me, they were now in their own classes. Right?

So they had the gifted class, science class, and the general education science class.

Tanya Domi: Science class, right.

Jose L. Jimenez: And I wanted to be with the peers that I had made relationships with, and I-

Tanya Domi: Who were your friends. Right, right.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, friends from elementary school that were now in middle school, and they were shocked. They were shocked that a student was requesting to take an exam. I'll never forget their faces because it was ... They had never been asked by a student, I remember them telling me that.

I passed the exam, so I was in gifted in middle and in high school and that really changed some of my trajectory, and now, in hindsight, it also meant that I went on another track. The high school that I went to that had about 6,000 students did have a gifted track, a general education track, a magna track, honors track. There were a lot of tracks.

Tanya Domi: Sure.

Jose L. Jimenez: And I'm sure-

Tanya Domi: And all of that would entail college prep, obviously, for you.

Jose L. Jimenez: Right.

Tanya Domi: In that situation. You understood at a younger age that you just were not going to accept that definition of you. You resisted that.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, I felt ... One of the reasons why I think I resisted and I had that drive in me was also, I had a role model, my sister, who kind of paved the way for me, as well, which is very important when you can see somebody else do something, and then feel like, "Well, if they can do it, I can do it, too."

I felt like my early education was not limited just by ...

Tanya Domi: Where you were from.

Jose L. Jimenez: Where I was from or what other people thought, but having someone close to me achieve great things did make me feel like it was for me, too.

Tanya Domi: That's really wonderful, that you had your sister. So, you're a young person, have adjusted to America, were succeeding, and of course, when did that point come that you realized you were gay?

Jose L. Jimenez: When I was 17 I came out to my peers and I was well-received. I had been struggling with it for a long time, I feel like I've known for longer than ... You know, before 17. But that's when I publicly, with peers, came out. A few months later, then also to my family; first to my sister, who again, has always been a good support system, and then to my mother and father.

Tanya Domi: And what was their reaction?

Jose L. Jimenez: Their reaction ... So I come from a very Roman-Catholic family, my mother always thought if there was one thing that she could leave with us was faith, and a sense of belonging to the church, so this was a blow; to her, to her sort of vision of what I would be. I think a lot of things, or this persona died, for her, that I would maybe not have children ever ... never have children, never have the wedding, never have the family or success that she had imagined-

Tanya Domi: That she attributed to a heterosexual lifestyle.

Jose L. Jimenez: Right. And my father, we have the same name and he sort of just was a little disappointed when ... That was one of the first things he said, he was like, "You have my name. You're just like me." So yeah, it was a rough time, I was young, I had just been accepted to New York University so there was also a ... I knew I was leaving, felt like I'd dropped a bomb on them and then left; but I also then carried that sort of baggage with me, to New York.

Tanya Domi: And what was the process with them? I mean, you said they didn't accept you, but how did that play out?

Jose L. Jimenez: I think a lot of what ended up happening is that I resisted. I continue to resist this idea that I've meant ... something that people thought or sort of ... I felt like I needed to reimagine what a gay Latinx man is for my mother and for my father, and as I grew older, they now had a sense of what that meant.

And it meant success, it meant working hard. I've worked full-time while going to school, actually, I've never known anything but that.

Tanya Domi: I can relate to that, I can relate to that.

Jose L. Jimenez: My life here in New York at the age of 18, I moved here two weeks before September 11th, definitely has not been easy. It definitely gave them an understanding that there was nothing wrong with me, but that my life could still be what they imagined, just a little different.

Tanya Domi: Right. But you came to New York when you started your education here. I mean, it is the home of Stonewall, the Stonewall riots, which we are now commemorating 50 years later. You came to the city of, essentially gay liberation, so to speak, so there must have been some feelings of thrill about coming here, too.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, I'll never forget that first week of being here, and NYU had sort of a gathering for all new students. We went to the Statue ... The ferry, the Statue of Liberty, some dinners, and just being around New York, that energy. I felt like my life was starting, that I was able to finally be among community. I met a lot of other students that were my age at the college that were just like me, had

different stories, some of their coming-out stories were ones that I could only dream of. You know?

Parents being extremely welcoming to the idea or supportive, and sometimes that was a difference, but there was solidarity in the fact that we were kind of exploring and growing here in New York, where, as you mentioned, it's the Stonewall uprising, where history was made, and so much activism around equal rights has really been at the forefront.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, there's something very comforting about being in New York. Sometimes people are intimidated by the huge population, but sometimes there's a comfort in the anonymity, that one can be whoever they want to be, and it's not going to be a big deal. I mean, we have to negotiate our personal relationships and our professional relationships, but I found it to be very liberating to be here.

So, you're in university and perhaps these early life experiences of you being like shoved into this program that you're not going to go to college shapes, actually, your ... How did it shape you as you now entered university education and you made some big decisions about what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, I think in my early 20s I hit sort of a crossroads. I had been here now for a while and really wanted to stay and have a career, and when really looking at what made sense to me, I wanted to be what I didn't have, for other kids. I wasn't an education major at NYU, so I went through alternate pathway, I was a New York City teaching fellow, and I was really drawn to this ... entering a school, trying to make an impact, and so I became a teacher. Just like that. Add water, and you have a teacher.

Tanya Domi: You did the fellows program.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: And that put teachers in really challenging schools. Right? These were schools that were considered challenged by the population, perhaps.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, typically hard to staff in communities where, as we know, New York City is the most segregated urban school district.

Tanya Domi: School system, yeah, that's right.

Jose L. Jimenez: So, typically, in schools with-

Tanya Domi: Drowning black kids.

Jose L. Jimenez: Right, and I'm, as a brown person, a person of color being in this school and school community, I also thought that I would be able to be a role model as

somebody who ... Actually, my first year teaching I taught children that were fourth and fifth grade, the same age that I kind of ... around the same age as when I arrived here.

And they were newcomers to the country, so there was this-

Tanya Domi: So you could really connect with them.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Relate to them.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, they were from all over Latin America and South America, and there was definitely a connection and I knew that I was in the right place early on.

Tanya Domi: But you weren't just satisfied with being a teacher, you now sought to be really a school administrator, you're a leader in public education, you're a school principal. How did that come about? I want to hear about your experiences to become an administrator.

Jose L. Jimenez: I definitely did not think this would be me, being a school leader. It was something that, I think there were seeds that were planted, a lot by other people and the schools that I worked at, sort of seeing or showing me that I could have more influence, more impact with others, that what I was doing should be shared, should be seen.

So a lot of encouragement from folks, really became then me being able to see it as a possibility for myself, and really how it happened, sort of taking that leap and becoming a school administrator, had to do with somebody believing in me that was a school leader, and sort of mentoring me and sort of paving the way.

This person, [Maja 00:18:09], who was the founding principal of the school that I'm now the principal of, really sort of guided me in my thinking of myself as a leader. Definitely influences from others, but then also I had already been thinking about it and I wanted to take that leap; and so, when opportunities come, my thought has always been, "Then you walk through that door."

Tanya Domi: Oh, absolutely. When a door opens, we should walk through it. So here you are, you're in New York City, you're a now school principal, you're a leader in public education, and you're gay. What is that all about? Because, as we all know, one of the big right-wing baiting strategies is gay people around children is a really bad influence and you know, "They're bound to do something terrible."

As a matter of fact, we have a government in Moscow that says you can't even say that you're gay because if you say that you're gay, you're actually damaging children, in the Russian Federation, that's an extreme example of that. So here

you are, even in New York City, there's sensitivities around that. Talk about your role as a leader and contemplating about coming out.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah. I'll first start by just saying some of the ... That I didn't always think, but this idea that straight people also come out in schools. They come out to their students in a variety of ways, whether it's saying, "My husband or my wife," very nonchalantly as they talk to students or having a picture on their desk, or telling them about their newborn, and who their wife is.

Tanya Domi: Sure.

Jose L. Jimenez: But, for queer people on the spectrum, it definitely becomes a ... Thinking about it. "How should I do this? How's this going to be perceived? Do I need permission? Will I be forced to leave this school?" These are real concerns.

Tanya Domi: Sure. I mean, let's be clear with our listenership. It's obvious that student rights to be LGBTQ is pretty well-respected by the school system and by the State of New York, actually. We have a civil rights law here, which is an exception in the country, because a vast majority don't.

But, it's not so clear when you're a teacher or you're a leader and you're debating, "How could this affect my career?"

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, and with a lot of legal protections, there are still people that ... These will be natural fears that ... Because, it's also, in the school setting, when you come out, you don't just come out once. You have to keep coming out, so you have a new core of students. Every year it's different, and every year you have to keep doing it.

That brings about a lot of ... For many of us that might have not had the best experience coming out, there's also some emotional-

Tanya Domi: History there.

Jose L. Jimenez: History there of what it's like to come out. I'm part of a group, of a network of educators, and a lot of this discussion around the topic of self-disclosure in schools, we get a wide range of stories and narratives around the reasons why people struggle with it, once they do, what happens, their impact.

For the beginning of my career, I did have a sense that I needed to prove myself as a teacher, I needed to be a really great teacher, and that if I had that, then if I came out-

Tanya Domi: You would have some protection, you would have some protection.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, from the community, from those that would then stand up and say ... If there was any pushback or, as you mentioned, anyone talking about, "Well, this is influencing children negatively," that there would be this sort of historical impact that I had had as a teacher that would counter that narrative.

Tanya Domi: Sure. And let's give a shout out to the Proud Teacher Initiative and Wayne Reed at Brooklyn College for this great organization. Why don't you tell us how the Proud Teacher Initiative supported you in your process of dealing with, "When do I come out? And how do I come out to my ... " Not only your students, but also your peers, too, perhaps.

Jose L. Jimenez: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I don't think I would be here speaking about this if it wasn't for the Proud Teacher Initiative, which again, Wayne Reed gathered students to talk about these topics. He's a teacher of teachers, and wanted to sort of support LGBTQ educators that were walking into classrooms with the tools to have these discussions.

So far, we do a lot of work with getting teachers to tell their stories. Recently, we had a story night, which was about seven people told their stories to about 60 or 70 audience members that came out to sort of hear the experiences of queer educators in classrooms, in schools, and many left very empowered. Some had not considered the ramifications of staying invisible. They might have, you know, be out in their whole life with even staff members, but the idea when they heard stories of impact with students or families and just other educators that struggled or didn't think about as much, what opened up for them.

Tanya Domi: Well, isolation also creates separation. It could advance depression, it could really be damaging, really quite frankly, to hide in their closet from others.

Jose L. Jimenez: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So the Proud Teacher Initiative became the support system of hearing stories and the power of stories. It just reminds me of Chimamanda Adichie's TED talk of the danger of a single story, how you ... You know, where she illustrates how she had not seen herself reflected in literature. She's from Nigeria, and all the literature was not reflective, and that comes out in the stories that we hear.

When we talk about our own role models, or people that we knew when we were younger in schools that weren't out and what that meant for us, not having someone that was out, how it could have potentially alleviated some of those challenges, because we would've had someone that represented us.

Tanya Domi: Well, that's really wonderful. So what was the situation that presented itself to you when you did in fact come out?

Jose L. Jimenez: I came out to my school community on a bulletin board, and-

Tanya Domi: How classic. Classic, a school bulletin board.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, it was my first year as a school leader, I wanted to celebrate pride. One of the things that, again New York is a very special place where the month of June ... A lot of visibility happens, and I wanted to bring that to the school, so we were putting a bulletin board together, some students and teachers, and there was a role models or influential LGBTQ-plus activists and writers, and artists, and when they were putting it up I was watching do it, taking pictures, thinking it was great, and the gym teacher says, "Mister Jimenez, we left the middle for you."

I thought, "Wow, this is it. This is where ..." Because I had struggled as someone who doesn't have class, you know a class of students.

Tanya Domi: Class students, yeah.

Jose L. Jimenez: "How do I do it? Is it an assembly? Do I put it on the newsletter?" How do you do that when you are in that position? And this was just an organic way that it happened, and it was ... The fear in that moment, it's like anything that you do for the first time. All the thoughts come through your mind, what could happen? And then you say, "But I'm going to do it anyway," and it was amazing.

Tanya Domi: That's wonderful. So here you are now, you're not only a proud teacher and a school leader and a principal, but you also, unbelievable, are a PhD student here at the Graduate Center in urban education, and it's a very long lookback to that little boy who was told, "Oh, you know, he should just do some physical education and gardening."

And here you are on the precipice of becoming a doctor of philosophy and urban education. Tell us about your research interests, and that'll, I think, really inform people about your experience, too.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah. This program has really solidified a lot of ... some of my frustrations, and made me more engaged with academia and also education, so I'm very happy to be part of the Urban Ed program here at the CUNY Graduate Center. My research is around this topic. It's around queer educators and breaking the silence, and when they do that, what impact it has on the individual students, the community, as a means for having representation, being valued.

Particularly, I'm interested also in how leadership plays a role in that. Also, looking at queer educators of color, because there is very little known about the experiences, and as we know, the experiences of white educators versus people of color in education is going to be different, and I think worth documenting and exploring.

Tanya Domi: That's wonderful. So here we are, it's 2019 and it's pride, it's world pride. We're celebrating Stonewall riots that kicked off the modern LGBTQ civil rights movement in America and around the world. How do you plan to celebrate pride this year, special pride?

Jose L. Jimenez: Yes. I've celebrated before by walking with the New York City Department of Education, I plan to do that this year, too. I think it's a momentous occasion. The DOE has been making a lot of strides, and I think with this current chancellor, Richard Carranza, doing ... they're making the invisible visible, making strides. I'm going to walk with them, I'm going to celebrate with some friends. We get together every year. Families with their kids.

And yeah, I'm going to be proud and open and authentic and enjoy, and celebrate those that came before us that made this happen and possible.

Tanya Domi: Happy Pride, Jose.

Jose L. Jimenez: Yeah, happy Pride.

Tanya Domi: And we will have you back to talk about your research.

Jose L. Jimenez: Excellent. I can't wait, I'm very excited.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Jose Luis Jimenez, a New York City school principal and a PhD student at the Graduate Center CUNY.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.