

Esperanza's Lessons: Learning about Education through the Eyes of the Innocent

A. Y. "Fred" Ramirez

Esperanza Marquez, an El Salvadorian immigrant, exclaimed "All I want to know is when my child will be able to receive ESL and special education services!" She made this statement when I interviewed her regarding her experiences with her children's schools.

Throughout the nation, Latino immigrant parents like Esperanza do not only have to adjust to a new life in the United States, but to the educational culture as well (Ramirez, 2001). They are also experiencing the realities of cultural miscommunication and isolation when trying to find answers for themselves and for their children.

This article specifically highlights the realities of Esperanza's plight as an immigrant, single-parent Latina, living in an urban community in Southern California.

How I Became Involved

Much of my educational career commitment has been toward assisting schools, students, families, and the community. Part of this commitment has focused on assisting parents with school issues as well as working with schools to work with parents in a positive way. Esperanza received my telephone number through a community representative with whom I worked while conducting a study on Latino immigrant parents and their association with schools.

When Esperanza first contacted me she first apologized for taking up my time with her dilemma, but felt there was not another person she could have spoken to. As she began to tell me her problems with her daughter's school, you could tell Esperanza (which means "hope" in Spanish)

really cared about her family but felt she needed to do something more to ensure that her daughter received the instruction that she needed.

As Esperanza continued with her story, she began to pause, sniffle, and then apologized for becoming "emotional" because she started to weep. At this point I asked if she wanted to meet to discuss this further, so we did.

Esperanza Marquez

When we met on a clear day in the fall at a cafeteria near her home, she again apologized for having me come out to meet with her. Although I informed her that meeting parents to listen and work with schools is what I do, she insisted that she buy me lunch. I thanked her for her generosity then told her for our next meeting she could bring me some cookies. We then ordered some refreshments and began to talk about schools.

She was very excited to tell me her story. She spoke in fluent, accented English, and wanted to know about my research, what schools could do for parents, and whether I could make changes within the school district where she resided. I felt as if I was swallowed up by a tornado, and felt upset that I didn't bring my list of references on parental involvement with me. You could tell by listening to her that she was passionate about the plight of parents, their children, and what was occurring with parents within other districts.

Before we started to talk about the issues regarding her daughter, her face became sad as she told me the story of her parents, and how she wanted to go to their funeral back in El Salvador but was prevented from doing so because of lack of money. Her parents meant everything to her, for they supported everything that she did as a child and as an adult. Her mother was a strong woman who dedicated her life to her children, and although her father was a strong person, her mother was

seen as the head of the family. Her father worked long hours to provide for the family, and by the time he would return home he was tired, so much of his time at home was spent resting, reading, and making sure the kids were alright.

Esperanza's mother, she said, was the "backbone" of the family. She was the person who kept the children out of harm, and in school. She went on to tell me stories of her mother, and how her mother was a proud person with limited education, but pushed her children to perform better in school, and to never accept "no" as an answer. When Esperanza heard of the passing of her parents (she didn't want to discuss how they passed away) she couldn't turn to anyone and ask for monetary assistance to travel for the funeral. In addition, because of lack of funds and being a single mother, she did not have anyone else who would be able to care for her children while she would be gone.

She shared that it had been over 10 years since she was able to return to El Salvador. Her face began to brighten when she shared stories about her brothers and sisters and how they were able to collect money in order to visit Esperanza in a couple of months. She felt her siblings' visit would enable her to refocus her energies on her family and not dwell on the death of her parents.

She then focused our conversation on her immediate family (her two sons and one daughter). When I tried to ask about her hardships raising a family as a single mother, she immediately shifted the conversation to her children, her children's schools, or another topic. She was very private throughout our conversations about her life, but did manage to share some details. She told me a little about how she arrived in the states, which then lead to the many issues she confronts as a Latina immigrant single-mother.

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A Brief History of the Marquez Family

When the Marquez family came to the United States from El Salvador in the early 1990s they settled in an urban community in California and wanted to provide a quality education and a better way of life for their children than they had in El Salvador. When they arrived in the United States, they received financial and other supportive assistance from a Catholic organization which enabled them to establish a residence and to find Mr. Marquez (Esperanza never shared his first name) employment.

After receiving this assistance, Mr. Marquez wanted to provide for his family on his own, so he cancelled further assistance because he felt he needed to be the person who would provide, and that "handouts," in the words of Esperanza would "make me look like I wasn't doing for my family." Mr. Marquez first found work as a day laborer, then full-time work with a local company as an assembler.

Esperanza, growing weary of not having enough food, clothes, and supplies for the children, then asked her husband if she could go to work. In the words of Esperanza, Mr. Marquez refused to let her work. She wanted to return to school, but was prevented from doing so by her husband. Her husband, in Esperanza's words, just wanted her to stay home and take care of the kids. Since Mr. Marquez was working as an assembler, Esperanza was left at home tending to the needs of her children, and feeling that her marriage was suffering as Mr. Marquez was becoming more distant, was less forgiving of the children, and quickly agitated over the most minimal things.

What started out to be a new life in the United States for Esperanza became more of a struggle when Mr. Marquez unexpectedly left the family. Esperanza was stunned and was left to raise their two adolescent sons and little girl on her own.

Esperanza's New Path

Being a single parent, living in a new country, with no educational or job skills was difficult for Esperanza. She was able to again gain assistance through the Catholic Church, which provided support, food, clothes, and soon found her work as a house cleaner.

During this time her sons began to have a difficult time adjusting to the new situation at home and their grades started to slip. Esperanza shared that her sons

Alejandro (8th grade) and Jesus (7th grade) did not understand English well, were misbehaving, and were not receiving good grades. At the time of their arrival within schools, Alejandro and Jesus were placed in ESL courses where they showed some improvement in learning English.

Although the boys were increasing their understanding of English, they still felt devastated over the loss of their father. Evidently their father was no longer a part of their lives physically or monetarily. Nights passed as Esperanza comforted her boys (Audriana, her girl, was in the 2nd grade) and reminded them not to say anything against their father, and to "remember to do well in school."

The pain of losing a husband was a great loss for Esperanza and her family. However, the pain of fighting a losing battle over the education of one of her children became even greater.

The Battle

When Esperanza's daughter began school, she inquired about ESL services for her daughter. The teachers and administrators at the school stated, "You know, it would be best if your daughter just learned English" and immersed her daughter within an English-only classroom. Although Esperanza's boys had done well within ESL, and were now excelling in school, Esperanza felt that the school knew best.

Before her daughter started school, the girl was outgoing, assertive, and enjoyed speaking with her mother. The enthusiasm within Audriana soon changed after two months of school. Esperanza began to see her daughter become more introverted, and when she inquired at the school, the teacher and vice principal stated her daughter was going through a "phase." Esperanza believed the teacher and vice principal, for, in her own words, "They are the experts regarding children and learning." Because her sons were doing well in school, Esperanza tried to spend more time with her daughter and her daughter's schoolwork.

However, when Esperanza began to spend more time with her daughter she found her daughter unwilling to engage in conversation, and questioned her mother regarding her lack of English ability. Her daughter was now becoming confrontational and stated, "Mommy, how come you don't know English and I have to learn it?" Her daughter also said, "I was told by a teacher I have to know English or I'll be sent home."

When I heard this, it reminded me of the stories my father shared with me regarding language minority students in the 1940s here in California and how students were placed in slower and special education classes because they had Spanish-speaking parents (personal conversation, Ygnacio Ramirez, 2004).

In my mind, I questioned if whether our educational system was harking back to a time when "separate but equal" status was still very much in vogue. Esperanza then shared that her daughter's grades were below grade average, and she was beginning to suspect that not only was the lack of English a barrier for Audriana's learning, but something else was wrong. Esperanza then shared it was at this time she began to contact her daughter's school more often.

Esperanza's Communication with the Educational System

Up until the point when Esperanza contacted the school, there had been no communication from the teacher or school regarding Esperanza's daughter. When Esperanza scheduled an appointment to speak to Audriana's teacher, the teacher was willing to schedule a time to meet, but the time was during the teacher's 4th period preparation period. This posed a problem with Esperanza's work schedule, and it continued to be a problem throughout the year for Esperanza.

The year was spent trying to meet with the daughter's teacher, but the teacher would not be willing to meet at a time that was convenient for Esperanza. Esperanza needed to work during the day cleaning houses or she would not be paid. Her rent, food, and limited budget for her children's clothing were dependent on being able to work everyday... and this conflicted with the teacher's available times for meeting with parents.

Esperanza spent evenings at home with her children, to make sure they were being well cared for. Esperanza had a fear of the gangs within her apartment building, and didn't want her sons to fall prey to them. Also, Esperanza wanted to be home to "protect" her daughter from boys that would whistle at her.

She asked the teacher if they could meet on the weekend, but the teacher responded that the weekend was "her personal time" and "all meetings are conducted at the school during the hours of 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m." During this time, Esperanza tried in vain to place her daughter in

ESL and to have her evaluated for special needs. It was Esperanza's contention that if her daughter would be able to go through ESL like her sons, her daughter would not have difficulty speaking in English or Spanish.

Esperanza never received any response, other than a note from the teacher that stated, "Mrs. Marquez, there isn't much we can do for your daughter does not want to participate in class." The frustration that occurred surfaced to the point where Esperanza tried to contact the district superintendent. When the superintendent's secretary spoke to Esperanza, the secretary was defiant and told Esperanza that "issues like that are to be taken to the school principal."

Esperanza felt lost and confused. She felt she was not gaining ground with anyone at the school or the district. She didn't know what she could do and was anxious to meet with the principal and the teacher on their time, so she finally took the needed time off of work.

The meeting with the principal and teacher did not go well. Although Esperanza showed up at the right time, the meeting was postponed due to a "clerical" error. Esperanza brought a note stating the date and time for the meeting, but the secretary had scheduled the meeting for another day. The school did not phone Esperanza about the mix-up, so she missed a day's wages and would miss another day's earning in order to come again, but was told by the school secretary regarding Esperanza's dilemma of missing another day of work, "Mrs. Marquez, you should be able to make a meeting that concerned your daughter ... and as far as I could tell, your daughter needs a lot of help."

Esperanza felt as if someone had punched her in the stomach. She would have to miss another day of work, plus, the secretary seemed to indicate that she knew what the meeting was about. This breach of confidence and trust from the teacher and administrator made Esperanza even more frustrated. Esperanza shared with me that in her culture, matters concerning education and a student are kept confidential between the teacher and the parent. Personal histories or stories are never to be shared nor discussed with others, unless there has been permission to do so.

Esperanza eventually did meet with the teacher and principal. During the meeting, the teacher and principal told Esperanza that her daughter was "not following directions," "turning in incomplete work," and "speaking to her friends in

Spanish" after the teacher had told them not to speak in Spanish.

When Esperanza tried to ask for reconsideration of placing her daughter in ESL to see if that would work, the principal stated, "Our ESL programs are filled to capacity, and we feel your daughter would benefit from immersion." When Esperanza asked for her daughter to be evaluated by a special education counselor, the principal told Esperanza "We don't feel special services are warranted for your daughter."

And thus, the meeting was over. Unfortunately Esperanza had hit a roadblock with her daughter's school. This would continue for another year, until Esperanza decided to attend a school board meeting to see if she could speak and tell the board about her plight as a parent, about wanting only to put her daughter in ESL and to have her evaluated for special services.

Esperanza contacted the district office to find out the protocol regarding speaking at a school board meeting. She was told what to do, but when she arrived for the meeting there wasn't an interpreter to assist her, nor to translate what she wished to convey (this is a district that is primarily a second-language community). Although Esperanza knew English, she did not understand much of the language being used during the meeting and felt awkward.

Esperanza then shared, "When I got to the meeting, there were people there that I didn't recognize. I didn't know anyone. I was ready to plead my case for my daughter. I sat during the entire meeting, and then was told there would not be any public statements. The meeting ended and I went home."

She then contacted the school board president to discuss her daughter, but was told by the secretary that all board business must be conducted at the monthly meetings. So, Esperanza went the following month to the board meeting, but was told she would only have three minutes to speak, for "there are many public speakers" that evening. Esperanza found there were many parents who were concerned about the education of their children, and like herself, felt frustrated with their children's schools. She also noticed there still was not an interpreter at the meeting, and raised the issue with the school board when her time came to present her and her daughters predicament.

Following her time to speak, Esperanza introduced herself to each of the other parents, and asked if they would be willing to give her their phone numbers so they could keep in contact. The group

of parents met twice that year as a support group to discuss what was occurring in their children's schools. The parents became more active in their school's PTA, and offered to assist new parents who were unaware of written and hidden school policies.

When asked what she meant by "hidden policies," Esperanza shared with me that within her school there were the written policies and also unwritten policies. These unwritten policies were the ones that were meant to "silence parents by not returning phone calls, by scheduling times for meetings that were not convenient for parents, by making parents feel they are the reason why their children are underperforming, and ostracizing parents should they become too active in pursuing items for their children."

At this point I felt that Esperanza had become a spokesperson for not only the parents of the school community, but also for the students. This activism proved both beneficial and detrimental in the eyes of Esperanza. After Esperanza's insistence, the school board hired an interpreter for each school board meeting. The parents were thrilled that an interpreter was hired for the meetings, but Esperanza then felt the schools were not welcoming her based on her involvement with the group of parents for she was beginning to educate these parents to become more proactive in the education of the children by asking teachers and the school administrators questions. What began as a crusade for her daughter had now turned into a crusade for many parents.

Teaching the Teacher

Esperanza and I met many times after our first meeting, and each time we recounted what was occurring with her and the other parents. She then asked if I wanted to speak to the other parents who wanted to talk with me about their children's school. Evidently she had spoken to the parents about me, and some were excited at the prospect of meeting me and letting me hear their stories.

Esperanza coordinated a meeting with over 40 parents who immigrated from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Esperanza provided snacks and a comfortable setting for the parents. Before the meeting, Esperanza personally contacted each parent to reinsure them that I would not report anything to their children's principal or the district.

During the conversation with the

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parents, I needed to reinforce that I came from a university and wanted to hear their stories due to my research about parents and schools and I would not report them to any school, state, or governmental agency. Some of the parents were here illegally, and wanted to make me aware that their children were born in the United States, thereby making their children naturalized citizens. I came to find out that many parents wanted to be a part of this forum, but were reluctant to do so out of fear that I would report them to the authorities.

The parents recounted many issues regarding their unrest with the schools and the school district. Parents were crying, boisterous, but were pleased that a “teacher” wanted to hear their stories. Esperanza acted as the interpreter, but also as the counselor, family friend, sister, and minister for all these people. There was a trust built between Esperanza and these parents, for she had helped them find answers they were seeking about their own children.

During the conversation, I realized my preservice teachers needed to learn what these parents were sharing, and wondered to myself if Esperanza would coordinate such an exchange. When I relayed this idea to Esperanza that I was interested in having my students interview parents, she took it upon herself to find parents willing to be interviewed, then sent me a letter detailing the parents’ names, phone numbers, and addresses.

Immigrant Stories and Preservice Students

To gain an insight into the lives of parents and their working relationships with schools, I instructed my multicultural education students to interview parents that were part of Esperanza’s group. The parents came from the same school district as Esperanza, and many of my students were very apprehensive to interview parents from this district. The district is an urban community where many of the residents come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and speak Spanish.

Some students even pleaded with me to reassign them another project and one suggested that he was willing to turn in a comprehensive research paper on the history of multicultural education complete with a literature review and interviews with leading multicultural educators. I rejected his offer based on my understanding that the problems of parents will be a problem for my students when they become teachers.

The parents were excited to hear from the students, and one parent stated, “No teacher had ever asked me about what I think about the schools.” Through Esperanza’s assistance, the preservice teachers were able to interview parents from this urban district and find out firsthand what the parents’ stories were regarding their children’s education.

After the experience, the students expressed a groundbreaking phenomenon—that, as one of my students exclaimed, “these parents do care about their child’s education.” We had an in-depth discussion regarding why my student referred to the parents as “these parents” and we were able to decipher that her inexperience and prejudice of parents from this lower income community assisted in her stereotype and had caused her to misrepresent the parents from this experience.

It was also established that many of my students believed that urban parents did not care, or were ambivalent toward their child’s education. Further examination revealed that the students’ preconceptions came from the news media, and stories from the very teachers they were observing as part of another course. Because of the parent interview experience, the students desired to learn more about how to develop stronger parental involvement strategies and practices when they became teachers.

Esperanza, upon hearing this feedback, was delighted that she was able to be of service, but also wanted to know if I wanted to meet with other parents that heard about the interviews and my session with the first group of parents. I accepted her invitation.

During this second round of interviews, I learned through Esperanza and the families that research needs to be much more than detailing what parents were saying. I came away realizing that as a researcher I could discuss stories but also become a spokesperson as well. I found that this second group of parents shared many of the same stories as the first. These themes included: (1) apathetic teachers, (2) lack of school-home communication, (3) school prejudices toward immigrant and low socioeconomic parents, and (4) the feeling that parents do not have power over their children’s education.

As a teacher educator, I also found it necessary to develop within my own students strategies to develop stronger school-home communication as well as how to ask parents questions without compromising their cultural mores, but

also teaching the families the educational culture of this country so they, the parents, may feel empowered.

What I also learned reinforced that the cultural distance within schools and the possible lack of respect given to families from differing cultures are a significant problem, but that the cultural capital that schools could benefit from by changing their approach is apparent within all cultures.

Update

Esperanza and I have been in contact now over several years, and I contacted her recently to find out what was occurring within the district and her the status of own efforts in support of her children. She shared that a state representative contacted her regarding the prospect of special education training for her daughter, and then contacted the school district. The representative was not pleased with the progress that the district was making regarding Esperanza and her daughter and decided to conduct a full investigation into the district’s special education program.

At this point, the school contacted Esperanza and inquired as to whether she still desired her child to be evaluated. Her daughter at this time was moving into high school. Esperanza stated she wanted the evaluation. She was not given a copy of her rights as a parent, told that her child’s IEP would be during school hours, and was not told of the results of the evaluation.

She then contacted a colleague of mine in special education who shared with her a copy of her rights as a parent with a child in special education, and the IEP was switched to an hour that suited Ms. Marquez. She found out that her daughter was recommended for special education due to her daughter’s “inability to speak English properly.” The district was then placed on probation until the special education program can come into compliance with many issues that the state requested.

Esperanza then shared that she is still working with other parents and teaching them about the politics of schools. Her two boys graduated from high school with honors and one went on to Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the other to Harvard University. Both expect to graduate within four years.

This is a success story in many people’s eyes, and Esperanza is very proud of her sons. However, she is still in a battle over finding additional training for her daughter, who is still struggling to learn both academic English and academic Spanish. To

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this date, Ms. Marquez is still trying to get her daughter into ESL, since the school has insisted that because of Proposition 227 in the State of California (the anti-bilingual education bill passed in 1998), there is a

lack of funds for ESL and bilingual education.

Esperanza does know, however, that Proposition 227 in California states that should a parent request bilingual educa-

tion for their child, bilingual education must be given. Her fight continues.

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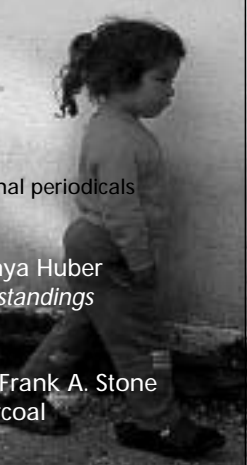
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