

Chapter 13

Transformative Forces for Education: Linguistic Diversity, Identity, and Community

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author discusses the power and possibilities that linguistic diversity, identity, and community have for the education of Latino and immigrant children. To do so, she shares her experiences conceptualizing and implementing Familias Aprendiendo, a series of workshops designed for families whose dominant language is Spanish and who have children in early elementary school. The author starts by offering a reflection on the role of family engagement in advancing equity practices for children and families who are linguistically diverse. Then, the author dedicates the second part of this chapter to describe the family workshops as well as some of the resources used in the workshop's implementations. The chapter closes with a note on the idea of transformation in education.

INTRODUCTION

There are moments of clarity, moments of realization, moments that come like that perfect word we were struggling to find to name a feeling. Once those moments come everything becomes neater, better defined, easier to see and understand. I had one of those moments short of two years after I came to the United States, it was a difficult moment where I found myself having to translate words that I would never want to say. It was a moment where my understandings of the complexities immigrants may face when navigating spaces of formal schooling in the United States altered, materializing the experiences and questions I been having into new meanings.

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This moment of clarity came during parent teacher-conferences. As part of the process to become certified as an elementary school teacher, I had been working with a third grade classroom. When the last parent-teacher conferences of the year happened, I took the role of an observer as different families came to discuss their hopes and concerns about their children's education. Jorge¹ was one of two students who were Latino² and bilingual³ in Spanish and English. Jorge's mother and baby sister were one of the last families to come for parent teacher conferences.

As the classroom teacher and I got ready for the conference, I casually asked if a translator had been requested for the meeting. The teacher mentioned that no translator had been requested as it was not necessary for this family. When Jorge and his family came in greetings were exchanged, I quickly introduced myself in Spanish and turned my attention to Jorge's baby sister getting her to smile. Jorge's mother asked me where I had learned Spanish and I mentioned that I had only been in the United States for a short time and that I had grown up in Colombia, so I had always spoken Spanish. She jokingly commented that I did not look as someone who spoke Spanish and I jokingly commented that coming from so many different countries and with so many different histories there probably was no certain way people who spoke Spanish looked like.

Once greetings were done everyone sat around a table the classroom teacher had organized for the conference. The conference started with the teacher taking the lead, going over required forms, and giving information about Jorge as a student while his mother nodded and tried to take care of her baby who was now walking around the room. After a while I moved to the floor to play and draw with the baby while the classroom teacher continued to talk. When the time came for Jorge to share his work, the teacher invited him to read a long essay he had written about Cesar Chavez. Jorge stood as he read the words he had written in English, speaking them in Spanish, while glancing at his mother who sat next to him with her arms around him. His mother lovingly scolded Jorge in Spanish for not keeping his paper clean and having eraser smudges and creases in his paper. The classroom teacher commented that the essay was very good. After Jorge finished reading the teacher collected and organized the different papers and asked Jorge's mother if she had any questions.

Jorge's mother knew that she was being asked a question but unsure and unable to answer in English, she looked at me as I sat on the floor playing with her baby. I smiled back and asked in Spanish if it would be helpful for me to translate. She nodded and I repeated the classroom teacher's question in Spanish. She responded in Spanish and I began to translate for the teacher and Jorge's mother, who had questions about his behavior and academic performance. After translating couple of exchanges, Jorge's mother finally asked if there was anything else that she and her husband could do to support Jorge's success in school at home. In response the classroom teacher re-iterated that Jorge was an excellent student, she then moved on to explain some of the syntactical and grammatical errors in his writing. The teacher advised that if English was more frequently spoken at home then Jorge's Spanish would not interfere, and he would not make mistakes in his writing.

As I listened to the teacher and played with the baby, I struggled. I was floundering to find a way out of the dilemma of having to translate something that I fundamentally disagreed with, that I knew was wrong, and that put Jorge's mother in an impossible position. The classroom teacher's incorrect and subjective interpretation of Jorge's linguistic abilities required Jorge's mother, who clearly wanted to do everything for her son to do something she could not and should not do. It was a moment of clarity. A moment that allowed me to signify and bring to the surface all of those intangible feelings and thoughts that had been with me for a while. I had taught Jorge long enough to know that he was an extraordinary third grade student. Jorge was bilingual and his academic performance was above anything that was

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