

Untitled

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A teacher's responsibilities include being available to meet with parents. Some limit themselves to scheduled appointments and formal conferences, but I was usually also available to talk with parents before or after school on a daily basis. Some of this was due to the fact that I would normally spend time on campus before and after the official school day. There were only one hundred seventy-six students where I taught in Glendale, which allowed all seven teachers to get to know all the students and their families. However, the defining factor was my ability to speak Spanish. People are more likely to share their concerns if they can talk to someone directly rather than having to rely on a third party for translation. Over the years, parents divulged more personal and academic information to me than to their other children's teachers. Even so, most discussions dealt with discipline issues, homework confusion, or occasional playground conflicts. Now and then, another topic would present itself. The following three conversations have made a lasting impression on me:

José was in my class in 1992. He was a well-behaved, conscientious student who worked to his potential in class. Although his father's English was quite limited, he reviewed Jose's homework assignments and they were always complete and handed in on time. Dad was diligent in attending scheduled parent conferences and asking questions whenever necessary. Since we enjoyed ongoing communication, I wasn't surprised when he approached me before school one morning....but I was instantly alarmed by the anguish on his face and the distress in his voice.

<Sra. Thomas, puedo hablar contigo?>	<i>"Mrs. Thomas, can I talk to you?"</i>
<Sí, como no; ¿cómo te puedo ayudar?>	<i>"Of course; how can I help you?"</i>
<No quiero hablar aquí. ¿Podremos entrar al salón?>	<i>"I don't want to talk here. Can we go into the classroom?"</i>
<Sí. ¡Pásale! ¡Siéntate! ¿Qué pasa?>	<i>"Yes. Come on in! Have a seat! What's up?"</i>
<Las autoridades dicen que hay la posibilidad que tendremos a regresar a México. José no sabe nada de allá. No habla mucho en español. Prefiere usar su inglés. Ni sabe algo de la educación o cultura mexicano.>	<i>"The authorities say that there is a possibility that we will have to return to Mexico. Jose knows nothing about that place. He doesn't speak much Spanish. He prefers to use his English. He doesn't know anything about Mexican education or culture, either"</i>
Although he fought back the tears, he could not mask the desperation in his voice as he continued.	

<¿Puedes ayudarme? El abogado me avisa que necesito averiguar que mi hijo va a sufrir si está obligado a salir. ¿Puedes escribir una carta para el corte que describe el carácter estudiantal de José y como él, en realidad, se porta como un americano, con el reconocimiento de toda la historia y cultura de los Estados Unidos?>

“Can you help me? The lawyer advised me that I need to verify that my son will suffer if he is forced to leave. Can you write a letter to the court describing José as a student and how, in reality, he acts like an American with an understanding of all the history and culture of the United States?”

The years drifted by. By 1997 I was working with a high-achieving, rambunctious third-grade class at a different school. Liz seemed to be the peer leader, both academically and socially. But why wouldn't she be? Her mother took an active interest in Liz's education. She understood that her daughter had a strong tendency to skew instructions in order to complete assignments as she saw fit, so we worked together to insure that Liz understood whether it was appropriate or not to revise given assignments. Mom also attended parent meetings on campus and provided academic enrichment at home. Since we were in the habit of chatting, I was not surprised when she approached me one day as I was dismissing students in front of the school.

<¡Buenos días! ¿Cómo se portan los niños?>	<i>“Good afternoon! How are the kids behaving?”</i>
(This was a normal conversation starter.)	
<Todo está bien. ¿Cómo estás?>	<i>“Everything's fine. How are you?”</i>
Her total demeanor changed the instant I uttered that bit of civility.	
Her voice was now filled with raw determination. <Necesito pedir tu ayuda.>	<i>“I need to ask for your help.”</i>
<¿Qué necesitas?	<i>“What do you need?”</i>
<El abogado nos avisa que necesitamos una carta escrita por cada uno de los maestros de nuestros hijos que describe su desarrollo académico.... Hicimos todo posible para asegurar que ellos les identifican <americano.> Les llevan a museos y eventos culturales. Les mandan a hablar inglés todavía. Comimos platos tradicionales en los Estados Unidos. No hay nada más que hacer. ¿Podrás escribir una carta para explicar que todo que te dije cuenta la verdad?>	<i>“The lawyer advised us that we need a letter written by each one of our children's teachers that describes his/her academic development. We have done everything possible to ensure that our children have American identities. We take them to museums and cultural events. We make them speak English all the time. We eat foods traditionally served in the United States. There isn't anything else we can do. Will you write a letter explaining how you know that what I told you is true?”</i>

Another year, another school—this time it was 2006; and I had a mixed bag of second-graders, including five students who had transitioned from a full-day special education classroom to my regular education class where they would receive daily support from their assigned paraprofessional. Samantha

was one of these students. A modest, but delightfully adorable seven-year-old, Samantha was a diligent worker. Her parents' unwavering support gave her the confidence to apply herself to each and every lesson, even those that were difficult for her. Her parents, although humble, were determined to do everything in their power to help their daughter reach her potential. It was an unusual day when they failed to ask me how she was doing or if they needed to do anything at home to help; and so it was no surprise when they walked into my classroom after school one day.

<Sra. Kiwerski, ¿Tienes un momento?>	<i>"Mrs. Kiwerski, do you have a minute?"</i>
(They spoke in soft, hushed voices; but their tone screamed with insecurity.)	
<¡Por seguro! ¿Qué pasa?>	<i>"Of course. What's up?"</i>
<Samantha está afuera porque queremos que ella no sabe nuestro problema. El corte nos obliga a entregar evidencia que ella no se queda en los recursos especiales y que ella demuestra el propio desarrollo académico. No podremos quedarnos aquí si no entrega un papel. ¿Puedes escribir una carta para averiguarlo?>	<i>"Samantha is outside because we don't want her to know about our problem. The court is obliging us to bring in evidence that she is no longer in a special education class and that she has demonstrated appropriate academic development. We can't stay here if we don't bring the document. Can you write a letter to verify her success?"</i>

These three families were instrumental in forming my awareness of an aspect of immigration that is so often overlooked. We acknowledge the existence of undocumented, permanent residence, and naturalized citizen populations; but not much is mentioned regarding those who have visas allowing them to be here. In my opinion, they are most at risk of being deported. While the undocumented population attempts to remain anonymous to retain their status, those holding visas choose to abide by the legal terms inherent to their residency, including visa expiration dates. To remain in the United States, most will willingly submit to renewal proceedings through immigration court; even though it means risking their permission to stay here. Because they have "come over legally;" they can be more readily located by INS, which again targets them as the most vulnerable of immigrant groups. Perhaps the risks are too great for some. These honorable parents were willing to take those risks in order to ensure that their children would have every opportunity to reach their potentials and become successful, productive members of society and make a positive contribution to life here in the United States, the place they call "home." I didn't hesitate to write the requested letters—from my perspective, there was no other choice!