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VOCES: COMMUNITY, PARENTS, TEACHERS,  
AND STUDENTS

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## Lessons From the First Grade

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The case study of a child of biracial, bicultural, and bilingual heritage is told in narrative form. Issues of race, class, gender, culture, and ethnicity are examined within her 1st-grade bilingual classroom, which utilizes a pedagogical and curricular approach based on a transmission model of instruction. The child's attempts to make meaning from her 1st grade experiences are illuminated within this powerfully told story.

Key words: qualitative research, narrative, case study, bilingual education, pedagogy, issues of race, class, culture, gender, and ethnicity

It is 9:00 p.m. I nestle beside my 5-year-old daughter's bed. The outline of dozens of books lined up neatly on shelves are still visible in the softly darkened room. On another wall are shelves containing cassettes of children's music and dolls from around the world. A stuffed toy parrot from Brazil dangles against the backdrop of a child-size Tahitian skirt hand fashioned from dyed Hibiscus bark. Clothes hang over the side of an overflowing laundry basket. The Venetian blinds are drawn; the lacy curtains over them form decorative patterns in the half-light.

My daughter Glenna and I converse softly, discussing what she wants to be "when she grows up." To her previous list containing ballet teacher and art teacher she has now added a third option: nurse.

"Why not be a doctor instead of a nurse?" I prod.

"I can't be a doctor."

"Why not?"

"Only boys can be doctors."

"But what about your doctor? Dr. Cohen is a woman."

"No she's not. She's a nurse."

"She's not a nurse, Glenna, Josie is the nurse. Josie helps Dr. Cohen. Dr. Cohen is the doctor and Josie is the nurse."

"No, mommy, Dr. Cohen is a nurse."

"Why do you think she is a nurse?"

"Because only boys can be doctors!"

"Well, then why do we call her Doctor Cohen?"

"She's not a doctor, she's a nurse!"

Nothing I say can convince her. I give up on this night's attempt to expand her horizons, kiss her good night, and sadly leave the room.

Later that evening I wonder what has caused my daughter to believe that Dr. Cohen is a nurse and that only boys can be doctors. Something here does not fit. I am an elementary school principal. Since the age of 3, Glenna has seen me address assemblies and meetings full of people, visited me in my office, heard my voice travel school hallways over the intercom, and seen me preside over social and cultural functions. I had believed that she understands that I am in charge of a large school, that I supervise the men as well as the women who work there.

I am a principal and I am Glenna's mother. Her most intimate human relationship is with me, a woman responsible for the welfare of others in a school with almost 700 students and an active extended community. Yet Glenna believes only boys can grow up to handle such large-scale responsibility and power; that girls are nurses.

I question my own parenting style. Where did I go wrong? What hidden messages have I been sending to my daughter? How may I have inadvertently inhibited her developing self-concept? Where do I go from here?

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The noise is overwhelming but surprisingly refreshing. Seated in the rear of the school auditorium, I watch an unending rush of activity. Teachers are busily seating classrooms full of students. Children are electric with anticipation of their upcoming debut on the large proscenium stage, as parents socialize in the back rows of the assembly hall, cameras and video equipment in hand. In front of the stage curtains, teachers and upper-grade students ready microphones and audio equipment. Everything suggests that this is going to be an important and significant event in the life of Lincoln Elementary Magnet School. Although I noted in the program that this spring's assembly theme is the music of Walt Disney, I am hopeful. I want to be hopeful. This is my daughter's school.

Glenna has spent her preschool and kindergarten years in Spanish-dominant classrooms. As a biracial (black and white) child coming from a bicultural (Jewish and Puerto Rican) household, I have felt that it is important for her to feel comfortable in two worlds. Language and culture are intertwined, and for that reason I have sought experiences for both of my children that stress learning in two languages.

At the age of 4, Glenna was enrolled in a Spanish immersion preschool and did remarkably well while beginning to acquire a second language. Due to her linguistic success and budding interest in Latino culture I had her placed in the Spanish-dominant kindergarten when she entered Lincoln Magnet School. Glenna seems happy under the kind and watchful eyes of Mrs. Herrera, her teacher. She is now seated with her classmates at the front of the auditorium.

The lights dim. The “color guard,” armed with drums and the United States flag, march fiercely down the aisles. The children and adults rise and recite the pledge of allegiance and sing the national anthem. The school administrators extend greetings to the audience and to the participants both in English and in Spanish.

The long velvet curtains are drawn and a hush overtakes the audience as the stage backdrop is finally revealed. There, larger than life and in vivid color, the images of Ariel, Beauty, and Jasmine leap forth. The audience oohs and aahs, but I gaze with horror on these Disney fantasy creatures. Ariel, enraptured, is in the arms of her prince. Beauty’s delicate, lily-white hand is held lovingly by the Beast, as the two gaze deeply into each other’s eyes. And Jasmine, whose pet tiger is nowhere to be seen, is being swept off on a magic carpet ride by the handsome and bold Aladdin.

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In autumn, Glenna entered first grade. Disney characters painted on large panels hanging on the hallway walls hid only a small portion of the brown chipped paint. The brown flakes seemed to be suspended by invisible threads, perhaps waiting for a whirlwind of children to provoke a breeze strong enough to send them fluttering down. But the whirlwind would not come from room 110. Inside, the first graders had placed coats and backpacks on coatroom hangers, and were sitting dutifully behind their desks, waiting for the cue from Mrs. Gomez, their teacher, to begin their daily routine. I sat at the back of the room, ready to begin a study of gender relations in my daughter’s class.

“Buenos días,” Mrs. Gomez said, standing in front of the four tables, each made up of six sets of student desks. Behind her, underneath the date, the morning lessons were neatly printed on the blackboard. The *noticias* was followed by the morning story and then a phonics lesson.

“Buenos días, Señora Gomez,” the children responded in a chorus, as if being conducted by a composer.

“¿Cómo están?” Mrs. Gomez continued.

“Bien, gracias,” the chorus of voices responded.

The children began their first lap in the daily ritual of seatwork. The boardwork, completed in 20 minutes, was followed by “round robin” reading of a text; *Cataplum*. The children, who had so far remained perfectly silent and obedient, shifted about in their seats when their slower reading classmates struggled through the book. A soft murmur passed through the room.

After 8 minutes, perhaps sensing their growing restlessness, Mrs. Gomez began to ask literal comprehension questions regarding the text. She asked the children sequential questions about the events in the story they had just begun to read. For the first time since they were seated I noted a few smiles on faces, and some animation as a number of hands shot upward. After 4 minutes, Mrs. Gomez told the children to take out their notebooks and draw a picture of the story.

As the children sat silently, drawing their pictures, Mrs. Gomez called on them, one at a time, to sit with and read to her at the back of the room. With close to 30 children in the classroom, I wondered how long this would take. The children finished up their drawings as the teacher's assistant, Miss Salazar, circulated among the tables, distributing ditto sheets for them to color. The pile of identical sheets all contained a picture of a girl with Caucasian features and long straight hair holding a trick-or-treat bag and looking at a ghost. Miss Salazar gave instructions on how to color in the picture. "Háganlo así" she ordered, demonstrating on the chalkboard with neat lines going in the same direction, "así no." She demonstrated the incorrect way with a series of horizontal lines crossed by a series of vertical lines.

Glenna, like all of the girls in room 110, is of Latino heritage. She has brown skin, wide lips, and short curly hair. The store-bought and teacher-made displays that decorated the room portrayed smiling faced Caucasian children.

After 45 minutes of drawing and coloring in dittos it was time for a bathroom break. The girls were instructed to line up behind Miss Salazar. They marched silently down the hallway. The boys went permitted to go unescorted, three at a time.

I walked down the bare corridors to an equally bare bathroom without soap, paper towels, or toilet paper. Miss Salazar silently handed each girl a few sheets of toilet paper when it was her turn to go inside of the bathroom. I created quite a disturbance when I passed "soap leaves" to the girls as they washed their hands. Interaction with an adult and the novelty of the soap leaves caused a reaction like a ripple flowing through a stagnant pond. Miss Salazar shot a loveless glance in my direction.

"Apúrensen, vamos a estar tarde para la proxima lección." The girls scrambled out of the bathroom.

The day droned on. I wondered how the children could remain so still and so silent for an entire day. There were more phonics drills and a science lesson taken from a book. With the exception of lunch, recess with Miss Salazar, two bathroom breaks, and a 2-minute game of copying the teacher's motions, the children remained seated all day. The only verbal communication between students that was allowed occurred in the lunchroom and on the playground.

At 2:15 p.m. the children lined up for music. I asked Miss Robbins for permission to observe. The children beckoned me inside. I found a seat in the back while Miss Robbins took her place at the front of the five perfectly straight rows of desks and chairs that filled the room. No space remained for physical activity. No instruments were visible.

Miss Robbins put the children through their paces in much the same manner as Mrs. Gomez. They sang songs in English in sequential order from a cassette tape. Throughout the session, Miss Robbins spoke to them in cold, stern tones. "I really don't like all this noise. I want you to settle down and be quiet. I can't start with all this talking." She sent a child to the back of the room for speaking. He sat underneath the table where I was seated and remained there, forgotten, for the next half-hour.

A song incorporating hand movements ended. A low murmur flowed through the room. "We can't do songs like this if we can't quiet down afterwards," Miss Robbins snarled.

I left for the teachers' lounge, where I sat and waited for the school day to end.

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Dinner is finished, and we sit around the table talking and laughing.

"I was very good in school, right mommy?" Glenna declares. "I'm always like that. I know the answers, and I do what the teacher says. But Mario is very bad."

"What do you mean? How is he bad?" I inquire.

"He talks and he doesn't listen so he doesn't know what to do."

Awake that night, unable to sleep, I think about what I have seen. I know that ethics can be an important question in qualitative research. I ponder what for me has become the ultimate ethical question: Can I leave my daughter at Lincoln Elementary School?

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Visiting room 110 was becoming increasingly difficult. Little had changed in the classroom. The prefabricated Halloween decorations were replaced by similar images of Thanksgiving. The daily regimen of teacher-directed activities continued, as did the daily marches to the girl's soapless washroom. Nonetheless, I forced myself to return each week, although my visits were increasingly shorter. One November day Mrs. Gomez led a discussion, an event that occurred rarely. The level of excitement escalated as hands flew up in the air and children vied for the opportunity to participate. The discussion wended down, but the children did not. Mrs. Gomez walked over to a girl and forcefully closed her book, slamming the pages shut. The girl was silent. Mrs. Gomez faced a boy nearby who was talking. She placed her hand on his upper arm and visibly tightened her grip until he, too, became silent. Order was restored.

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Glenna has returned from school intent on doing her homework. It is her first order of business; it has even taken precedence over the afternoon snack. She has

informed me that if she finishes her assigned work she can move ahead and do extra pages in her workbook. She is proud that she is further ahead in her workbook than any of the other students. She is good. She listens to the teacher. She is not like the bad kids who talk.

"You don't have to be good all of the time. Sometimes it's okay not to be so good."

She looks at me quizzically. I have the urge to tell her to talk in class, to get some answers wrong on her paper, to speak her mind. But I recall how Mrs. Gomez ensures obedience, and I am silent.

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That evening I try to forget the images of my afternoon in room 110. I pick up a book that Glenna has brought home from the school library, *El Viaje de Babar*, and begin to read to her about Babar's journey with Celeste in a hot air balloon. The unfortunate couple is stranded on an island after a violent storm brings them down where they are attacked by "feroces salvajes canibales." Images of half-naked, spear-carrying Black natives seem to jump off the pages before us. Their lips are thick and red, their large eyes are white, and they struggle to figure out how to use the clothes they have just stolen from the elephants. Although fierce, they are amazingly weak and ignorant, for the two elephants easily trounce the invading Black hordes.

I discuss the book's images with Glenna. I am sure that the librarian is unaware of its existence in the school collection and will remove it once it is brought to her attention.

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I returned to room 110 for a final opportunity to gather information, but after an hour or so of viewing the backs of children's heads, I escaped to the book fair being held in the hallway outside of the library. Among the displays I found one pile of picture books in Spanish. Always looking for an opportunity to supplement Glenna's dry Spanish workbooks with quality literature in her second language, I picked up the whole pile.

"I see you found the Spanish books, Sharon." It was parent-volunteer Janice Pacione. "Kids have been asking for books in Spanish all day, but we just don't have enough."

Mrs. Cramer, the school librarian, emerged from her room across the hall.

"I still have that book Glenna owes the library," I told her. "I was waiting for the chance to show it to you in person. It's one of the Babar books, in Spanish. Babar and Celeste take off in a hot air balloon that comes down and they get stranded on an island where savages attack them. You should see these savages! They're

Black, half naked, and carrying spears. All the White people in the book are very proper and civilized looking. I'll bring it to you tomorrow so you can take it off the shelf."

Mrs. Cramer frowned. She recited how she could not censor a book without putting it through a process. Because the school had no guidelines on this, she would first have to establish a committee, let the committee do its work, and then judge the suitability of the Babar book against the school's guidelines for censorship. In the meantime the book would have to remain.

"But this is a picture book! Kids may not even read the text, they may simply flip through the pages and look at the images. Look at the student population of this school. It's probably 90% non-White. What if a Black child takes this book home?"

"See it through my eyes. I have to think carefully about censorship."

"But you're only seeing it through the eyes of a White woman!"

I wanted to continue the debate but could not. The silence of room 110 had taken me over, as it had the children. Mrs. Cramer requested that I return the book so she could take a look at it. Again I said nothing. Mrs. Cramer returned to the library.

Janice, however, who had overheard the entire conversation, had plenty to say. "I agree with you. This reminds me of something that happened last year with some eighth-grade girls. These girls were really into reading those 'American Girl' doll stories, you know, the books that come with dolls. Well, they wanted to buy the dolls that went with the books, but they were too expensive. I suggested we have a doll-making workshop, and I would teach them how to make their own dolls. We started making those dolls, and those girls started to make them white. I had to say, 'Hey, stop for a minute and look what's going on here. Are any of you white? Why are you making your dolls white?' So then they started to make the dolls brown. But somebody had to point it out to them."

I was happy that someone understood. Unfortunately, that someone was not an employee of the school. I walked slowly back to room 110.

The children were returning from lunch. Boys were lined up along the wall next to the door; the girls lined up beside them. The boys began to enter the room.

"¡Muchachas primero!" Miss Salazar called out, reminding the boys that girls go first. The boys stopped in their tracks, and the girls entered.

Miss Salazar instructed the children that they would have 10 minutes of free time in the room, because it was too cold to go outside. They would remain in their seats, however, where they could read a book or draw a picture. As there were no books available for independent reading in the classroom, I offered Glenna one of my recent purchases. Immediately a crowd of eager children clustered around me, each one begging to borrow a book. I started to distribute my riches, but Miss Salazar angrily shoed the children away, telling them that they would have to sit down and wait for me to call them, one at a time. I smiled cheerily and chatted with the children, but beneath the surface I was

churning. Why were there no books available? Why were they not allowed to talk or move about, even during recess? What is my daughter doing in this classroom? What is my daughter doing in this school? Who in this school is here for the children?

With the return of Mrs. Gomez I collected my picture books and left the room.

I went to the office and leaned over the counter. Leticia Alvarado, the school clerk, left her desk and walked over to me. From the other side of the counter she asked softly, "Sharon, what's wrong?"

A tear slid down my cheek. Then another. I dabbed away at them with the backside of my hand.

"Isn't there anybody who is here for the children?" I asked quietly, almost in a whisper.

Leticia, whose son also attended Lincoln Magnet School, shrugged sympathetically and whispered, "I know." She stayed near me as I struggled for composure.

Frank Walters, the school principal, walked out of his office to greet me. He began to tell me about some curriculum guidelines that, after 5 years, he had finally had translated into Spanish.

I couldn't look at him. I couldn't smile. When I had alerted him to possible problems in room 110 last spring he had ignored my concerns. In September, when Glenna had some initial problems adjusting to Mrs. Gomez' teaching style, he continued to ignore the situation. It was now late November. He had not visited room 110 once.

I spoke in a low, emotionless voice as Leticia leaned over the counter, still as a statue.

"I'm depressed, Frank. I don't like what I've been seeing in this school. I've seen some things that are so bad that I wonder what my children are doing here."

Mr. Walters exploded in a rare display of emotion. "Oh, come on Sharon," his words boomed over the counter and into the air. Leticia jumped back, stunned. "How can you say that? You've been a principal, you've fought bureaucracy, you know what it's like!"

"That's just what I mean, Frank," I said, trying not to cry. "What kind of an answer is that? Why don't you ask me what I've seen that's making me so upset?"

"Things are fine here. Things are better than ever."

"If you can't even see the problems, how can you address them?"

"Then tell me what is so horrible around here."

Leticia was motionless again, actively engaged in listening.

"Why are there no literature books available to the children in Glenna's room?"

Frank was silent.

"Why is there no play in her room? Why is there no active learning? Why isn't it acknowledged that children learn through play?"

More silence.

It was three o'clock. The school day was ending.

"I need to get my daughter."

I left the office and headed toward Glenna's room. In the doorway of room 110 I could see the front of both the boys and the girls' lines. A few of the boys were bunched up together at the front of the line, singing, surprisingly synchronized and on key. I paused a moment, listening to the sweetness of the boys' song.

Miss Salazar appeared from inside. "¡Callense!" she snapped. The boys were silent.

I led my daughter toward the office to meet my son. Mr. Walters stood in the doorway watching the commotion in the hallway. I relayed the scene I had just witnessed. "Try to see it through my eyes, as a parent," I concluded.

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I end where I began. I sit with my daughter in her bedroom. Here, far from the reach of Mrs. Gomez, I wonder what all of this has meant to her.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, mommy."

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Without a moment's hesitation my daughter responds, "A teacher."

Here is the disconfirming evidence. Or perhaps this is the evidence that I went searching for. Has my daughter internalized her lessons from first grade just as she has internalized messages of female helplessness? Or are these lessons one and the same? Has her experience in room 110 taught her both conformity and vulnerability? Has she learned that girls are good and do what they are told, and that boys are bad and talk out of turn? I have not found clear answers, but I have found clear problems. My project as a researcher may have come to a conclusion, but my work as a parent has a long way to go.

## EPILOGUE

The day after my interaction with Mr. Walters I brought the book *El viaje de Babar* to Lincoln Magnet School. When I pulled the book out of my bag, he said "I already know about it." I showed him the objectionable images, contrasted them to the illustrations of White people, and explained my reasons for requesting that the book be taken out of circulation. He responded dryly, "I see your point, but the process is also important. What do you want me to do about it?"

"Take it off the shelf, Frank. My children have African ancestry and I don't want them looking at this book without supervision!"

Again, silence.

I brought the book to Mrs. Cramer and turned to the pages in question. She explained that after her initial reaction she had given my words serious thought.

Now, viewing the illustrations, there was no doubt in her mind that the book needed to be taken out of circulation. She would not throw the book away. Instead she would comb the shelves of the school library looking for similar books. It was her intention to keep them in a collection that could be checked out by teachers who wanted to critique them with their students. Remembering my observations of former administrative colleagues, I speculated that Mr. Walters would soon change his mind.

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By November 28th I found a better placement for Glenna. I arranged for her transfer to Washington Elementary School, which highlighted a two-way bilingual immersion program. My visit to her future classroom had featured an energetic and friendly teacher surrounded by active children exploring a classroom environment full of books, manipulatives, and art materials.

Glenna expressed no remorse at the prospect of leaving her school. As we left Lincoln Magnet on her last day, she spotted Miss Trujillo, the school disciplinarian with an almost legendary reputation for being mean tempered.

"Adios, Señorita Trujillo," Glenna called out lovingly. Then, as Miss Trujillo was swallowed up inside her room, Glenna muttered under her breath, "You mean witch!" She paused, then switched back to a sweet tone, and said, "Mommy, can I go and say good-bye to her?"

I nodded my consent, and followed her into Miss Trujillo's room with great curiosity. Glenna ran over and threw her arms around her. Miss Trujillo awkwardly returned the embrace and wished Glenna well in her new school.

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Although I entered room 110 with a clear focus on gender, I soon discovered that this focus could not be so clear, that issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and class intersect and are not easily separated. An institution that has no school wide plan to deal with negative racial images could hardly be expected to have one dealing with negative images of gender. I had no reason to believe that the images of Ariel, Beauty, and Jasmine would be removed from the walls of Lincoln Magnet School nor from the psyche of its female students. Neither could I feel optimistic that the predominantly working class children of room 110 would be able to escape this year's routine of mindless conformity. In their classroom they would be harnessed and deprived of their childhood. In their music room they would be constricted; their cultural heritage erased and their native language forbidden.

My daughter would escape, but they would not.