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# *Carrying the Weight of a Nation: The Story of a Guatemalan Boy*

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*Produced in Vanessa Calkins' Spring 2020 ENC 1101*

As I sat amongst the never-ending line of family at my graduation “party”, that is, if a group of adults in their 40s sitting around and drinking Coronas is considered a party, I began to ponder over the journey that led me to this moment, a few days from heading to college on a full ride. It had never crossed my mind that these 13 years of American education would result in me being the first person in my family to attend college, much less a university that is hours away from home. Nonetheless, during the exploration of my scholastic memories, no other subject was quite as synonymous with the word “hell” than language arts, or really anything to do with the English language.

It goes without saying that the solo expedition I unknowingly took on as a six-year-old to become a “smart American” was a constant uphill battle. I say “solo expedition” because as a first-generation college student, my immigrant parents knew little-to-no English (and still struggle with it to this day), so I had no help with my path to learning the language along with other subjects. My parents made the life-changing decision to leave everything in Guatemala in pursuit of a better life (the typical reason), in the year 2000, at the age of twenty. Months later, a soon-to-be introvert was born – me. Now, despite the fact that I still stubbornly disagree leaving was a good idea due to the mental strain I have been through in the educational system, I am proud of my parent’s bravery to leave in order to fulfill a dream of seeing their kids have great jobs. I want to see that dream come to fruition so I never have to see my parents bake in the Florida sun for 10+ hours a day cutting grass, or stand for even longer hours in a freezing factory while the feet pain grow worse and worse, again.

Highly educated people in Guatemala are scarce due to the fact that very few people are financially stable enough to send their kids to school *and* feed their family at the same time. Sadly, my parents fell into that pool of people. Although mostly uneducated, they still journeyed to the U.S and worked hard and continue to do so in order to provide my siblings and I with the basic needs to survive. I grew up watching how despite the poverty and odds they faced, my parents exuded nothing but sheer will and determination that I will always use as motivation whenever I feel like giving up. This is one of the many reasons why I consider them to be literacy sponsors. The term is described by Deborah Brandt in “Sponsors of Literacy” as being “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way” (72). While my parents could not physically provide help in teaching me English, or really any subject matter, they made up for that in other ways. Their encouraging words such as, “*No seas pendejo. ¿Por qué estás estudiando entonces?*” were sufficient

enough for me to continue pushing up that metaphorical hill, which according to Brandt's definition, makes them a sponsor. Although their ways of encouraging me may seem harsh to others and even myself when I was younger, I would have never kept trying to learn if it were not for those comments. Looking back on that time as a six-year-old trying to learn English, I realize and now understand that the reason my parents were so hard on me was because they wanted me to be educated and have a future, unlike my cousins who chose popularity over studying. My parents believed the language barrier they faced would be "resolved" if I was able learn to speak, read, and write English. This is exactly what I did.

While most kids entering my elementary school were already grasping the English language, I entered my predominantly white school introducing myself to our teacher with, "*Hola, me llamo HP*", so it's safe to say that I was behind from the start. Since most kids already knew some English, nearly everyone was expected to be able to at least speak it. With the bar set so high from the beginning, I quickly fell behind and was deemed "that Hispanic kid" shortly after by peers. As I mentioned before, since my parents did not understand the education system nor English, crying from stress due to not understanding how to spell "table" were met with scorns, because I am clearly not "studying enough" and that was why I was not learning. While some might expect me to say that I finally found my stride and quickly caught up, that was sadly not the case. I struggled with English for three years before I met someone who would help me.

In those three years I did manage to learn some words and how to form a barely coherent sentence; however I was still behind in terms of the standard of what a third grader should know. Life then decided to throw me a bone (one of the very few) in the form of my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Judy. For the first time in my four years of schooling, someone made the effort to help me out rather than let me crawl along. She noticed on the first day that I was lonely, due to the fact that I could not communicate with the other kids effectively enough to make friends, so she took the initiative and sought out to help me. It's something I will always be grateful for. To briefly explain, rather than stick me in ESOL, a program to help non-English speakers, where I would never learn, she asked the school principal and my parents to be allowed to personally come to my apartment in her free time to tutor me in English. She made the effort to communicate with me in Spanish, which shows how determined she was to help this little Guatemalan boy, and she went as slow as humanly possible until I understood how to form sentences correctly. She didn't stop there, and rather went above and beyond in continuing to teach me "advanced" English, which included an introduction to commas, contractions, and how to pick apart texts to find the meaning of certain pieces of it. She was the catalyst to my future academic success, solidifying her position as my most important literacy sponsor, because without her I would simply be another stereotypical product of a poor immigrant family.

Soon after "mastering" English, everything fell into place. I began to understand math since I could finally understand what the teacher was saying (I realized I am pretty good at math), I understood science, and slowly became the best writer in my English class. I no longer stressed about failing my parents and taking all the work they put in for granted. So, to show everyone what I was capable of, I began to study more, and took on the hobby of reading harder books to improve my reading comprehension skills. It all soon paid off as I won my first award at my school's annual award show, coming home with the "Most Improved" and the "All-Star" that year. Academics aside, this

spike in my English allowed me to finally be able to help my parents out with translating papers and anything people said to them, which was a big reason for them pushing me to learn.

This carried forward to the next year, in which I was placed into the “advanced” classes. I was doing amazing and became one of the top students in the class. However, it is important to keep in mind that it is not about how one starts, but how one ends. I continued with the lessons from Mrs. Judy and often came to her for help since the rest of the teachers at my school were relatively useless and provided no real support for students. However, this success story soon came to a halt in a life-changing way.

In early December 2010, our apartment was raided by police officers looking for someone who had not lived there in years. The officers decided to make up for their mistake by taking my dad away and “returning” him the next day. As much as I wish that was all that happened, my dad came home with tragic news – he was being deported even though he had a clean record for the decade he had been in the United States. Both my parents are immigrants and still had not managed to acquire papers (the **sole** fault of the U.S. immigration system, where mistakes affect lives), so simply not being in the U.S legally was reason enough to deport him. This tore apart my family, and, unknowingly, my own mental health. Losing someone that early in my life has the implications that one might imagine, but it also affected me in the sense that I lost a part of my primary Discourse. A primary Discourse is described by James Paul Gee in his article “Literacy, Discourse and Linguistics: Introduction” as being “the one we first use to make sense of the world interaction with others” (7).

My primary Discourse is my home, and my parents are a part of that. Losing my dad so early into my youth was such a big physical and mental setback, as he was the biggest supporter of my education, always pushing me to become the best and instilling his “#1” mentality into me. He was the person who turned my reading into a passion. Soon after getting the news, my mental health deteriorated – increasing each day after he was gone, due to the newly instilled sense of responsibility that I put on myself. With no father figure in the picture, I quickly took on that role for my siblings and became their example of a primary Discourse. I passed down everything my dad had taught me, along with the lessons I experienced on my own. Although I gave up the majority of my childhood, I am proud of what my siblings are becoming – kids with an enhanced sense of their surroundings, social people, passionate about what they want to do with their lives, and even smarter than I was at their age. I gave them everything they needed to be better than me. While some may disagree with the role I took on and argue that my mom should have done the things that I did, they simply do not understand what an immigrant family is like. My mom is our role model; she now had to work three times as hard to support three kids, but also had to face the stress and discrimination that society had towards her.

With this new sense of responsibility, I was no longer able to mentally balance my schoolwork anymore, so I began slipping and falling on the metaphorical hill. I spent less time studying in exchange for more time helping and raising my siblings. Thankfully, by the time my grades began slipping, it was towards the end of the fifth grade, so I ended elementary school with an impressive record. This is when the next and worst chapter of any kid’s life began: middle school. Although some may acknowledge middle school as their literacy sponsor and a secondary Discourse, or a place outside of home where one learns to socialize, that was the opposite in my experience (Gee 8). I believed, and still do, that my experience in writing and English during that time was quite lackluster to say the least. The school itself was not considered the “best” school in the county, so that same

label and attitude carried on with the teachers. My writing and reading ability did not get exponentially better, but rather my growth followed a subtly sloping linear path like most of the other students. Everything we were taught was simply a continuation of what we had learned in elementary school; we used the same format for writing essays, but now with transition words and some form of structure that made our essays weaker in my opinion. Each following year added little bits of “technique” to our uniform, bland, and quite frankly unappetizing style of writing.

My middle school is not and never was considered a positive sponsor in my eyes. However, Brandt’s definition does not state that sponsors must be positive ones, but rather just have to have an influence on our literacy. This school provided me with a lot of slang and overall a “ghetto” way of speaking that I adapted to in order to have better communication (ironically) with the other students. Although I saw no bright side to this school in terms of academic learning, I did not mind the easy work it gave me since I could manage schoolwork and my home responsibilities. I lost my interest in writing and later detested it. Every writing assignment that was given to me was simple and seemed basically the same, so writing similar content over and over without any sort of challenge became a chore to me. Rather than inspire creativity, the teachers produced a robot that wrote everything the same way, which gave me a false sense of confidence since I only got A’s on my writing. This was thankfully challenged during the best chapter in my life: high school.

Since my middle school work was relatively easy, my GPA was quite high, and it led to my eventual acceptance in a nationally ranked high school. The difference between the difficulty of my middle and my new high school became apparent quickly, especially in writing. The second day of school, I walked into my English class and there was already an essay due that week to test our ability, and we were also introduced to rhetoric for the first time. I had no idea what that was, but I was confident (falsely) in my writing and tackled it head on. I got a D. Normally, one would start thinking of changing their style in the face of a poor grade, but I was stubborn and simply blamed the grade on lack of writing while on break. I got the same feedback for the next few assignments until I finally decided to change something. I got rid of my original format for writing and began adopting new ones specifically for the types of prompts that were given.

Obviously, my writing did not improve instantly, but rather took most of high school to be able to switch between styles. I lacked the vocabulary and structure that was expected by the difficult level of classes I was taking, and that led to quite a few failures. However, due to the challenge that AP and IB classes posed, I was forced to learn a variety of writing styles (Chemistry, Physics, Economics, History, and English) and therefore walked the stage during graduation with an arsenal of writing experience. For this reason, I consider high school to my only institutional literacy sponsor. Thanks to that school, I was able to shed my old mediocre self and reach a level writing that I did not think I could achieve. I am also grateful for this school because it served as my secondary Discourse. Though it may seem strange to claim a secondary Discourse this far into one’s life, I stress again that because I lost my dad and took on responsibility for my siblings, I had no social life in middle school. I became introverted and made few friends, and on top of that I was bullied for being chubby and a “nerd” (being ‘smart’ was not very popular characteristic to have). This led me to create a shell around myself and rarely speak to others. However, upon entering high school, I realized that the people there were different in the sense that everyone was there to study and challenge themselves.

I stayed in my shell for most of my freshmen year. One day I just happened to stumbled into a classroom during lunch and met a group that would provide me with something I had not had in a

long time: friends. They let me into their small group, and slowly we grew until we became a community, a conglomerate, a real *family*. Everyone in that group came from a different background, a different program (my high school had four programs that students could apply for), different hobbies, and different levels of popularity. We all learned from each other, whether that was how to study better or how to talk to people (maybe it was just me that learned from that, but that's okay). I mirrored a lot of things they did until I eventually found myself and no longer needed to follow anyone. Although I still tend to hide in my shell, I am slowly beginning to break out of it.

I am proud of my journey as a writer and reader; however, I have always believed everything great comes at a cost. That cost was my own identity as a Hispanic student. This concept is best explained by Vershawn Ashanti Young's idea that linguistic code-switching, a type of double consciousness, is simply discrimination hidden behind laws. He explains, "What's so strange about the present circumstances of double consciousness is that it has been adopted and translated into an instructional strategy that is used, like legal segregation, to govern blacks' social interactions in public" (326). Young implies that the use of double consciousness is a way of getting rid of the cultures that make up the melting pot that is the United States, and the way that they are doing this is through the concept of linguistic code-switching. It is explained as the educational system teaching minorities that they need to use the standard English language when in professional settings. Young explains this as being a form of discrimination because it implies to the multilingual students that their native or foreign languages are not valued, or inferior to the standard English language. I resonate with this as I believe that the reason I lost touch with my foreign roots is due to years and years of being taught to only speak English everywhere. I was born being taught Spanish, so I was almost fluent in the language. However, since school did not provide effective Spanish classes combined with every other class that continuously forced me to write and read in English, my tongue shifted from speaking Spanish all the time to slowly replacing it with English.

The result of this "replacement" is that I do not have the same level of fluency in my native language as I used to. Since I was discouraged from speaking Spanish, I shy away from doing so even with other Hispanic people. Another consequence I faced due to my pursuit of education rather than the "street life" is that because I am more well-spoken in English than the rest of my family I am often labeled as "white-washed." Over the years I have slowly lost relationships with the majority of my American cousins because I speak nothing like them, nor do I live the same lifestyle they do, which does not include an engagement in education. While they have expressed how proud they are of me for doing something great, they still do not interact with me and instead hang out with one another. Obviously, I understand why I am excluded from their "group", but it still hurts to not feel like I belong in my own family. Of course, this has had negative effects on me in the forming of my identity.

For years now, I have had trouble telling myself that I am still Hispanic, since I no longer speak Spanish aside from communicating with my mom and uncles, and I no longer enjoy the Guatemalan things that I used to due to hanging around with my new group of friends, where not many are Hispanic. The educational system forces young kids to forget their native tongue in favor of the American language, creating a choice for those who are pursuing a good future: either push aside their culture in order to appease the big CEOs that will hire them, or fall behind the rest. Although controversial, I truly believe in Young's idea, and I can see this progression from Hispanic to "white-washed" American in my siblings. However, I can see a solution to my own problem with my identity in the form of my university, the University of Central Florida.

One of my deciding factors for choosing to apply (UCF was the only school I applied to) is because of the diversity present here. So far, UCF is proving to be the best decision I ever made. While I do still struggle with my identity as a Hispanic and American, seeing the expression of culture throughout my first year here has shown me that being “smart” does not mean that I have to leave behind everything that made me who I am – a proud Guatemalan. While I can acknowledge that I am an above average writer, I still struggle with my confidence since I believe I am still learning. This can be seen in my writing as I often overthink and rewrite something that was good from the start, disrupting the flow and thus weakening my essays and papers. I am hoping to fix this through the adaptation of my old reading hobby again, which I hope allows for more creative thinking and ensures myself that what I am doing is fine, to believe in the skills that I know I have.

While I am proud of where I am as an English speaker, I am far from finished; I plan on pursuing Spanish literacy to better keep in touch with my roots and pass on the culture to my future kids. With very few Guatemalans in the United States, and even fewer attending colleges and universities due to poverty, I am proud of being the first of my family to make it this far. With all of my family knowing where I am today and rooting for me to leave a legacy, my friends and I make the joke that I am carrying all of Guatemala on my back through college. Even though it is a little joke, I use that phrase as motivation to never give up and make sure everything I went through was worth it.

## Works Cited

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