

CASE STUDY**Yolanda Piedra**

“Once you get the hang of it, you’ll start getting practice with people and teachers, no matter if you talk English or Spanish.”

Yolanda Piedra¹ did not learn English until she was 7, but at 13 she is equally comfortable with both Spanish and English. She and her family speak mostly Spanish at home, although, according to Yolanda, sometimes they speak English to help her mother “practice.” Born in Mexico, Yolanda remained there until after completing kindergarten and part of first grade, after which she came to California. In this, she and her family are typical of the immigration wave since the 1980s. The 2000 Census documented that the foreign-born population in the United States numbered more than 28 million, an increase of almost double from the 15 million just ten years earlier.² Not surprisingly, California has the largest language-minority population in the schools, numbering nearly one and a half million students.³

Yolanda lives in a midsize, low- to middle-income city in southern California. The primarily one-family houses, most of which are rented, hide the poverty and difficult conditions in which many of the residents live. This is an economically oppressed, largely Mexican and Chicano community, although there are also smaller numbers of White and Black residents in the city.⁴ Until a few years ago, it was primarily a rural area, and farm work was one of the main reasons that Mexicans first came here. Gangs were unknown just a few years ago, but, as gangs spread from the Los Angeles area, they are now involving more and more young people, especially boys, who sometimes join as young as 11 or 12 years of age. The need to deal with the growing gang activity is recognized by residents as their major problem.

Yolanda’s parents are separated, and Yolanda lives with her mother, 12-year-old brother, and 3-year-old sister (both of whom she describes as “wild”). Her brother is what she calls a “troublemaker,” frequently getting involved in problems at school. He is beginning to get into trouble in the community as well, which may be a sign that further problems, particularly gang activity, will follow. Yolanda’s father lives in Mexico, and she rarely sees him. Her mother works in a candy factory. From what Yolanda says, her mother is strict with the children, limiting their social interactions and expecting them all to take on family obligations. She is a single parent struggling to survive with her three children in what can best be described as adverse conditions. Her constant message to all of them concerns the importance of getting an education.

Even though she spoke no English and the transition to a new school and society was difficult, Yolanda recalls mostly positive experiences during her elementary school years. She was in a bilingual program when first entering school and is now in the general education program. Currently an eighth grader in a primarily Mexican American junior high school, Yolanda is by all accounts a successful student. She is enthusiastic about school and becomes noticeably enlivened when talking about learning and wanting to “make my mind work,” as she says. She uses English, her second language, in beautifully expressive ways, making unusual and

descriptive constructions, probably influenced by her bilingualism. Yolanda consistently gets high grades in most of her subjects. Her favorite class is physical education, and her least favorite is English, although she manages to get A's in it as well. Although still young, Yolanda has narrowed down her future aspirations to two (one not at all consistent with her scholastic success, but very much related to the limiting societal expectations based on gender). She would like to be either a computer programmer or a flight attendant.

Yolanda's city contains one of the largest elementary school districts in California. About 60 percent of the students are Hispanic, Whites make up the majority of the remainder, and the Black community is small but growing. Her junior high school is situated in what is acknowledged to be a tough *barrio* and is beset with the same kinds of problems of most inner-city schools: gang activity, drugs, and unmet family needs that may interfere with learning. Nevertheless, in both her elementary and junior high schools, there is a feeling of community support. The school is successful with quite a number of its students, but it also faces a great many problems. The school's success may in part be to the credit of the staff, who are attuned to what is going on in the community. Most teachers seem genuinely concerned about their students. This concern is reflected, for example, in the great number of workshops on issues ranging from gangs to cultural diversity. The Spanish class recently given for staff had a full enrollment, including some high-level administrators.

The number of Latino professionals, however, was very low when Yolanda was first interviewed, although an effort was being made to recruit more; a Latino psychologist had been recently hired. There was also a Latino community liaison, and the principal had an open-door policy for staff, students, and parents, which helped to create a feeling of engagement and support. Staff members in both of the schools Yolanda has attended made a conscious effort to include and affirm aspects of the Mexican culture and experience in the curriculum and in extracurricular activities. Yolanda's positive feelings about her school experiences are in part a reflection of the environments these schools have tried to create.

One of the youngest students involved in this project, Yolanda Piedra is nonetheless a mature young woman who is certain about many things: the value of communication; the benefits of being Mexican and speaking Spanish; and the necessity of surrounding oneself with support from teachers, family, and peers.

Communication

My mom . . . takes really good care of me. . . . She talks to me [about] problems and everything. . . . My mom says that they want me to go to school. That way, I won't be stuck with a job like them. They want me to go on, try my best to get something I want and not be bored . . . to get a job that I like and feel proud of it.

She wants everything kind of like good, perfect, not perfect, but kind of like the best I could do.

I feel proud of myself when I see a [good] grade. And like I see a C, I'm gonna have to put this grade up. And I try my best. . . . When I get a C, my mom doesn't do anything to me 'cause she knows I try my best. . . . Well, she tells me how to work it out.

[Is your mother involved in school?] [No], first of all, 'cause she understands English, but she's just embarrassed, shy to talk. . . . And 'cause she's always busy.

Like when it's something important for me, like, "Mom, I'm gonna do this, I want you to be there," she'll be there no matter what. . . . [But] if she takes too much care of me when I'm at home, now at school [too] I'll be dead!

[When I'm older, I want to] take my mom places and just be with my mom all the time.

[What advice would you give teachers?] I'd say, "Get along more with the kids that are not really into themselves. . . . Have more communication with them. . . ." I would get along with the students. 'Cause you learn a lot from the students. That's what a lot of teachers tell me. They learn more from their students than from where they go study.

I would help people get along with each other. 'Cause actually what they do around here, is that they see them doing trouble and everything, what they really are is suspending them. . . . They're really pushing them to do it again.

Surrounding Oneself with Success

Actually, there's one friend of mine . . . she's been with me since first grade until eighth grade, right now. And she's always been with me, in bad or good things, all the time. She's always telling me, "Keep on going and your dreams are gonna come true."

Actually, when I got here, I didn't want to stay here, 'cause I didn't like the school. And after a little while, in third grade, I started getting the hint of it and everything and I tried real hard in it.

I really got along with the teachers a lot. . . . Actually, 'cause I had some teachers, and they were always calling my mom, like I did a great job. Or they would start talking to me, or they kinda like pulled me up some grades, or moved me to other classes, or took me somewhere. And they were always congratulating me.

[What do you remember about Cinco de Mayo?²⁵] That's my favorite month, 'cause I like dancing. And over there, in [elementary school] they had these kinds of dances, and I was always in it. It's kind of like a celebration.

Sometimes you get all tangled up with the grades or school or the teachers, 'cause you don't understand them. But you have to get along with them and you have to work for it.

So, actually, I feel good about it because I like working, making my mind work.

I'm in a folkloric dance. [Teachers] say, "Oh, Yolanda, this is coming up. Do you want to go? I know you dance."

They brought a show last time, about air and jets. . . . And some lady was working around there. . . . The vice principal came up to me: "That's a good chance for you, 'cause I know you talk Spanish and English. . . ."

They just really get along with me. They tell what their lives are . . . and they compare them with mine. We really get along with each other. . . . Actually, it's fun around here if you really get into learning.

My social studies class is kind of like really hard for me. But some of the things, I don't know, I find really interesting. . . . I like learning. I like really getting my mind working for that.

[My English teacher] doesn't get along with any of us. She just does the things and sits down.

[Classroom] materials are too low. I mean, they have enough materials and everything, but I mean . . . the kind of problems they have. . . . They're too low.

We are supposed to be doing higher things. And like they take us too slow, *see, step by step*. And that's why everybody takes it as a joke.

[Education] is good for you. . . . It's like when you eat. It's like if you don't eat in a whole day, you feel weird. You have to eat. That's the same thing for me.

The Benefits of Being Mexican

I feel proud of myself. I *see* some other kids that they say, like they'd say they're Colombian or something. They try to make themselves look cool in front of everybody. I just say what I am and I feel proud of myself. . . . I don't feel bad like if they say, "Ooh, she's Mexican" or anything. . . . It's like you get along with everything; you're Spanish and English, and you understand both. . . . Once you get the hang of it, you'll start getting practice with people and teachers . . . no matter if you talk English or Spanish.

For me, it's good. For other people, some other guys and girls, don't think it's nice; it's like, "Oh, man, I should've been born here instead of being over there." Not me, it's okay for me being born over there 'cause I feel proud of myself. I feel proud of my culture.

COMMENTARY

Communication emerged as a central theme in Yolanda's interview. Whether discussing family, school, or friends, Yolanda sees communication as crucial for success. Given the primacy of the family in Mexican and Mexican American culture, this consistent communication has had a positive influence. Yolanda sees it as one aspect of her mother's care. She and her mom "communicate," she says, because they talk to each other about many things, including "girl stuff." Grades provide another topic of conversation for Yolanda and her mother. Although grades are meaningful to her, it is only in the sense that they motivate her to work harder. "You feel some of your body falling off when you see F's around your grades," she said dramatically during one of her interviews.

Yolanda's mother is typical of other Mexican parents in her desire to have her children succeed in school. She talks to them about the importance of school and supports their accomplishments, but she may be uncertain about how else to help them succeed. This is confirmed by Guadalupe Valdés's research with Mexican immigrant families to determine how they defined success. She found that success was based on how they defined "the good life" in Mexico as well as their desire to prevent their children from experiencing the same kind of oppression they knew. But in the U.S. context, these families were unaware of what was needed for their children to succeed.⁶

Given the great emphasis in middle-class families on developing the attitudes and behaviors that lead to academic success, families such as Yolanda's are at a distinct disadvantage. Yolanda's mother has been very successful at imparting certain values and goals to her children. The fact remains, however, that European American, middle-class parents, given their own experiences and exposure to the schools, are much more aware of those activities that lead to academic success than are poor and working-class parents from linguistic and cultural backgrounds different from

the mainstream. Although Yolanda's mother has been able to give her great motivation and discipline, she has been unable to give her the actual tools or to engage her in some of the activities she may need for further success in school. Imbedded in this situation are implications for the responsibility of the schools to assist such parents. The interaction and support between home and school in affirming the messages and activities each values become consequential for ensuring the success of all students. Still, in spite of some families' inability to prepare their children for learning academic skills, communication is at the very least a necessary first step. Yolanda seems to understand and appreciate this fact.


Yolanda also talked about communication in school. She thinks carefully about the advice she would give teachers for providing a better education. She wants teachers to try to understand all their students, but especially those who need extra help and who hang out in the street, "like people that dress kind of like weird, if you know what I mean."

Gender expectations, including the traditional roles assigned to women in her culture as well as the mainstream culture, have left their imprint on Yolanda in ways that can be considered both limiting and affirming. She is adamant, for instance, about not wanting to get married. This may represent a liberating decision, given her analysis of marriage ("It's cause I've been having so many experiences by my family," she explains). However, she has tentatively selected at least one prospective career (i.e., flight attendant) that reinforces women's role as servers. Interestingly, she herself describes attendants as "kind of maids" on airplanes. She is still young, and these plans are likely to change, particularly given Yolanda's great determination and strength of character. In any event, she describes her future as "working, being happy, having fun and freedom," and knowing she is doing the best she can.

Young people succeed when they surround themselves with people and an environment that supports their success. It can almost be described as a cloak for success, keeping out the negative influences and corralling the positive ones. Yolanda has done this in several ways. For example, she talks about her best friend, the one who "helped me grow up," as the most significant person in keeping her motivated. Contrary to conventional wisdom, most adolescents have internalized the values held by the adults who surround them. In looking for friends, therefore, they seek those who voice the same values.

Although the junior high school environment makes her feel both "comfortable and afraid," time and again Yolanda mentioned teachers as pivotal in helping her succeed in school. Teachers who "care" have made the difference. Yolanda's articulation of this factor reinforces what national commissions have been reporting for some time.⁷ Teachers' caring makes a difference, for example, when children first enter a new school. Yolanda remembers the trauma of moving to California as a first grader. It was tremendously difficult adjusting to a new culture, community, and school, although she has always been a good student. Yolanda's positive perceptions about learning are linked with the environment that has been established in her school: one that emphasizes learning. She is enthusiastic about learning, and this eagerness is especially reserved for her challenging classes.

Whereas Yolanda is quick to ascribe her success to teachers, she has also given some thought to what might be holding her back. She cites "problems at home" and



not having her father around as two barriers. At school, she believes that teachers create barriers, too. She criticizes attitudes or practices that she feels detract from a positive learning environment. One of these is the low expectations teachers have of some students (materials are “too low”). Yolanda has put her finger on a theme that has emerged in the educational literature concerning the schooling of other Mexican American students. In tracking the progress of 100 “at risk” Mexican American students in Austin, Texas, Harriet Romo and Toni Falbo found that many of them dropped out because they correctly perceived that the education they were getting was at such a low level that it would not give them the kind of life they wanted after graduation. None of the students dropped out because they felt the classes were too difficult, but because of boredom or lack of motivation. In one case, the researchers document how a teacher directly told one of the more promising students, “Well, you’re not college material.”⁸ Unfortunately, such attitudes are more common than they should be.

Yolanda wants teachers to understand that, unlike some of the stereotypes about Mexican American students, “they try real hard, that’s one thing I know.” However, in spite of the criticisms she has of her school and some teachers, Yolanda clearly loves learning. The metaphor of “education as nutrition” is a good example (“It’s good for you . . . It’s like when you eat”).

Tied to her positive feeling as a student is an equally positive self-concept. Yolanda is certain that being Mexican is a good thing. Her culture is important to her. She compares herself with other Mexican American children who deny their background, and it is clear that she feels sorry for them. Her attitude about the benefits of being Mexican can probably be traced to several sources. One is her family, which reinforces cultural pride in the home. Even when this pride is conscious, however, it often is insufficient to counteract many of the negative messages young people pick up about their devalued status in society.

Frequently, the school is what makes the difference in whether students accept or reject their culture, as seen in classic research by Iadicola with sixth-grade Hispanic students in selected California schools.⁹ He examined the relationship between power differences and curriculum factors in schools to explore the “symbolic violence” suffered by the students. “Symbolic violence,” as used by Bourdieu, refers to the maintenance of power relations of the dominant society in the school.¹⁰ It is evident in such concrete factors as the presence or absence of specific people, topics, or perspectives in the curriculum or through the power differences among students, staff, and parents. In the curriculum, for example, how “knowledge” is defined, who are portrayed as “makers of history,” which heroes are acknowledged and celebrated, and so on, determine whether groups of people are either valued or devalued in that environment.

In the case of the Hispanic students he studied, Iadicola found that, “symbolic violence is performed through curricular choices and pedagogical techniques which impose within the school the power relations of the larger society.”¹¹ Such a process has succeeded when those from culturally dominated groups learn to view their own culture as unworthy and to regard themselves as “culturally deprived.” They begin to identify only with the dominant group. Iadicola found that the higher the level of Anglo dominance in the school, the higher the level of symbolic violence as

measured by Hispanic students' attitudes toward their own group. In contrast, the higher the level of Hispanic presence in the curriculum, the higher the level of ethnic salience in self-identification. The school is crucial in giving students information, both formally and informally, about what knowledge is of most worth. As a consequence of this information, at least partially, students develop either pride or shame in their background.

The fact that she began her early schooling in Mexico, where her culture was affirmed and valued, cannot be dismissed as a contributing factor in Yolanda's sense of worth and pride. Matute-Bianchi, for example, in an ethnographic study in California, found that many of the Mexican American students who were doing well in school were born in Mexico.¹² Nevertheless, the role of Yolanda's first elementary school and of her current school in accepting and reflecting at least some aspects of Mexican culture is probably a contributing factor in her academic success. The fact that the culture of Hispanic students is at the very least acknowledged in the educational environment seems to have made a difference in how Yolanda and some of her peers react to their ethnicity.

Yolanda Piedra has several more years of schooling to complete. She is a fortunate young woman in the sense that both her elementary and junior high schools have affirmed her culture and language. It is unclear whether the high school she attends will be the same, but she has gotten a good start: She knows what it is to be a successful student, and her track record may be enough to keep her going in the same path. Also, in spite of many messages to the contrary in the larger society, she has learned the benefits of being Mexican. It is doubtful that she will lose this sense of self in the years to come. Yolanda has also learned to enjoy learning, to make "her mind work." At this point, probably nothing can take away that now ingrained zeal for education.

TO THINK ABOUT

1. Many of Yolanda's teachers are resolved to provide a productive and positive environment for her and the other students in her school. Besides the examples given, think of other ways in which that type of environment could be achieved in this particular school.
2. Yolanda says that, when kids are suspended from school, it is "pushing them to do it again." What does she mean? What are the implications for school disciplinary policies?
3. When Yolanda says of her English teacher, "She just does the things and sits down," what does she mean? What can teachers learn from this?
4. Yolanda has criticized materials in her classes for "being too low." Why do you think she says this? What kinds of practices can schools develop to counteract this perception?
5. Yolanda was selected "Student of the Month" for her academic success. Some would criticize this practice because it alienates and excludes a large number of



students; others believe that it helps to motivate all students, not just the most accomplished among them. What do you think and why? What other approaches might you recommend?

6. Yolanda's decision to be either a computer programmer or a flight attendant sounds like a contradiction. What factors do you think influenced Yolanda in this? What can schools do to help students make good decisions about their future?

Notes to Chapter 6

1. Henry T. Trueba, "Culture and Language: The Ethnographic Approach to the Study of Learning Environments." In *Language and Culture in Learning: Teaching Spanish to Native Speakers of Spanish*, edited by Barbara J. Merino, Henry T. Trueba, and Fabián A. Samaniego (Bristol, PA: Falmer Press, 1993): 26–27.
2. Exceptions are James Banks and Cherry McGee Banks, eds., who include attention to language issues in several chapters of *The Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) and Donna Gollnick and Philip Chinn, who include linguistic diversity as a separate issue in their conceptualization of multicultural education. See Donna M. Gollnick and Philip C. Chinn, *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*, 6th ed. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 2001).
3. By *linguicism*, Skutnabb Kangas means "ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and nonmaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language." See Tove Skutnabb Kangas, "Multilingualism and the Education of Minority Children." In *Minority Education: From Shame to Struggle*, edited by Tove Skutnabb Kangas and Jim Cummins (Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 1988): 13.
4. Thomas D. Snyder and Charlene M. Hoffman, *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).
5. Anneka Kindler, "Ask NCELA No. 1: How Many School-Aged English Proficient Students Are There in the U.S.?" (Washington, D.C.: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2002). These and other data are available from NCELA at www.ncelea.gwu.edu/askncelea.
6. Anneka L. Kindler, *Survey of the States' Limited English Proficient Students and Available Educational Programs and Services 1999–2000 Summary Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students [NCELA], 2002).
7. See link in Note 5.
8. See Anneka L. Kindler, *Survey of the States' Limited English Proficient Students and Available Educational Programs and Services 1999–2000 Summary Report*.
9. National Center for Education Statistics, *1993–94 Schools and Staffing Survey: A Profile of Policies and Practices for Limited English Proficient Students* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997).
10. National Center for Education Statistics, *Indicator of the Month: Teachers' Feelings of Preparedness*. Available at nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/qrtrlyspring/4elem/q4-6.html.
11. Joel Spring, *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).
12. James Crawford, *Hold Your Tongue: Bilingualism and the Politics of "English Only"* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992); see also James Crawford, *At War with Diversity: U. S.*