

Hilda Flores
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Dr. Gen

Ethnography

The elementary school studied is a kindergarten through fifth grade public school located in Compton, California. The school is located along a popular and congested boulevard near two busy freeways. The school was built during the mid 1920's and the original buildings are detailed with art deco accents. Eight new classrooms and a slue of bungalows have been added to the campus in order to accommodate the over one thousand kids currently in the attendance area. The elementary school serves an urban community of minorities that is comprised mainly of people of Hispanic origin.

The community is most often recognized in the media as an amalgamation of unfortunate circumstances. This synopsis fails to acknowledge the complex cultural and sociological perspectives found in the community. A prominent and salient value is preservation and survival of the family. Family structures are specialized to allow for flexibility in caretaking roles. Families are protective of the children in the

family. Clear consistent communication is necessary when interacting with Hispanic families.

A young Hispanic, third grade girl escorts her little brother by the hand and enters the school at 7:00am. They walk together at a leisurely pace along the cement path that will ultimately lead them to the open playground area in the center of the school. The playground is a large expanse of asphalt with two modern play gyms and a large set of swings. Two very old and overgrown trees sit at the center of the playground. Dead braches hang perilously overhead. Just beyond the tall chain link fence to the South is a small park, covered in lush grass. There are five other children already on the playground near. They congregate on one of the play gyms.

The young sibling is a kindergarten student. He carries a large laminated manila envelope to transport materials to and from school. The girl carries a purple nylon backpack that appears to be lightly loaded. Both students are neatly dressed in the mandatory school uniform of navy blue pants and white shirts. The two students wear athletic type sneakers and because it is cold out the kids both have on sweaters.

The third grade girl is looking after her younger brother. He tugs her toward the swing set. She lets go of his hand and allows him to run ahead and choose a swing. He smiles widely as he calls to his sister in Spanish to

push him on the swing. She obliges his request and gives him a few pushes to get him started. When he achieves a bit of momentum she quietly retreats to a close bench and watches him play on the swings. After a few minutes the young boy signals his need to use the restroom and his big sister leads him by the hand to the closest facilities. She releases his hand at the door and allows him to enter the restroom alone. She waits patiently just outside the door until he returns. Upon exiting the restroom he stops in front of his older sister and sticks his belly out at her, without a word she proceeds to tuck in his shirt for him and fasten his belt. They finish up and once again return to the playground together.

Early in the morning students can commonly be found on the playground a full hour before the school day is set to begin. There is no adult supervision on the playground during that time. The children arrive at school at such an early hour because their parents must drop them off at school before they commute to work. Without any adults available to care for the children the oldest sibling assumes the role of caretaker. In this community families struggle to make ends meet. Many times parents have multiple jobs in order to provide the most basic care for the family. Older children are left to care for their younger sibling. In the absence of a parent the older sibling steps into a parental like role assuring that the siblings in their charge remain out of harms way. In this community it is

necessary that all family members share the responsibility to care for the family. [good descriptions](#)

This specialization of family structures allow for flexibility in caretaker roles. This situation has evolved out of a need for preservation and survival of the family. This situation is not an ideal but circumstances make it unavoidable. Without this adaptation the family would not function.

In my experience both as a child as an adult it was very uncommon for siblings to take on such a responsible role in the care of young family members. My sister is a full 10 years older than I am yet she never had the primary responsibility for caring for me or any other child in my family. This situation was possible because my mother was a stay at home mom for my entire childhood. She was available to care for every need me or my three siblings might have. My parents were fortunate to have the financial stability to afford such a lifestyle.

My parents valued individual happiness for each child. In my home it was believed that caring for a sibling would stifle individual freedom and limit time that could be dedicated to more productive pursuits. The parents were the only family members that could take on a caretaker role.

As the morning progresses groups of children and families flood into the school. The two resource teachers are stationed on the playground

and make every attempt to maintain student conduct until school begins. Parents accompany their children to their respective lines and wait patiently nearby. The parents will stay on the playground until the teacher arrives to escort the line to the class. The parents gather together in small groups and have private discussions. Most of the discussions are inaudible due to the hushed tones.

One group of parents has gathered behind the first grade lines to discuss the upcoming first grade field trip to the Los Angeles Zoo. They share the information they have gathered and call me over to clarify what the students need to bring that day. I am the only first grade teacher that speaks Spanish so many parents rely on me to provide guidance on school issues in their primary language. The parents show their appreciation by thanking me and nodding vigorously. After their questions are answered I retreat back to my students who are assembled at our number on the playground. Two parents approach me and turn in field trip permission slips for their children before I escort my students to class.

The parents who wait nearby until the teacher arrives feel that the children are only safe after the teacher has taken full charge of the class. The teacher takes on the role of surrogate mother during school hours. According to Lisa Delpit, (1995), "To the parents, leaving children outside

without one of their 'mothers' present was tantamount to child abuse and exhibited a most callous disregard for the children's welfare." This is an important folkway in the culture of the community. The parents care is directly related to the overarching value of preservation and survival of the family that is prevalent in the community.

In my experience children are allowed to remain on the playground without their teacher or parents around. The teacher never really takes on a parental role. This could be because the schools I went to was in a suburban area populated primarily by white middle-class families.

I am fortunate to share ethnic roots with the largest population of students at my school, Hispanics. This allows me to interact with the families I work with in a profound way. A significant factor in my relationship with parents and children involved my ability to speak Spanish the primary language of most of the families I serve. I have first hand knowledge of the cultural traditions, lifestyle, and family structure of Hispanic families.

As a teacher I would relate to this group by providing ample information in the primary language. This information could be disseminated either orally or in writing. The more information provided to the parents the more comfortable they will become. As they become more comfortable they will begin to be empowered. With empowerment

comes essential parental involvement. Parental involvement will lead to an improved school environment and better educational outcomes. Most importantly is respecting the value of preservation and survival of the family.

Excellent writing. You have described a situation well... now you have good material for the final project. Describe the situation at your school from the 3 perspectives.

Good work.

Reference

Delpit, Lisa (1995) Education in a Multicultural Society: Our future's greatest challenge. In Strouse, J.H. (ed.), Exploring Socio-Cultural Themes in Education. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.