

Consejos: The Power of Cultural Narratives

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Consejos, cultural narratives, conveys the Estrada family's feelings, perceptions, actions, and responses to the educational system. The Estrada family's story of is one of persistence and love when dealing with schools. Their practice of consejos represents an eight-year span of time in which conversations with the Estradas illustrated the family's force in the power relations that exist between families and schools in Carpinteria. The concept of consejos spotlights how, in spite of the perceived powerlessness on the part of Mexican immigrant families against the schools, this cultural practice identifies the family's force and unity in support of one another while challenging the schools' notions of learning. The Estradas are empowered through their consejos, their collective work with other families, and school personnel advocates. MEXICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILY, CULTURAL NARRATIVES, FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

The Estrada family was one of the original 20 families in the Carpinteria literacy study that I initiated in 1985. Their story of unity and learning to do schooling is telling, not because it is unique, but because it is quite representative of the way most immigrant parents in Carpinteria have demonstrated their commitment to supporting their children's education.

Typically, "parent involvement" as a topic in academic research limits the meaning of participation by ignoring the broader meaning of "involvement" that transcends attendance at special events and improving grade-level achievement. Parent involvement spans the life of the student over the years. In this article, three stages of the Estrada family's story chronicles the ongoing account of the parental effort to support their children through *consejos* and their children's response to them. The concept of *consejos* here means nurturing advice.¹

Family conversations transmit people's voices and open a window into the family's perceived sense of power in their daily life when dealing with the educational system. The Estrada family conversations presented here show the parental use of *consejos* as critical tools to instruct their children in schooling matters. The Estradas impart *consejos* to their children to encourage them to be self-sufficient individuals. The act suggests an inherent intellectual force within the family that counters the school's hegemony. Involvement in parent groups and changes in the schools shape the Estradas' *consejos*. This suggests an

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"interlace" between the family and the sociopolitical arena. My previous work on family and community empowerment advances theoretical explanations of Latino culture as it relates to the schooling of Latino students (Delgado-Gaitan 1990, 1991, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba 1991). Cultural congruency between families, community, and the educational setting advantages student achievement. Beyond family and school continuity, I show how Latino cultural practices are valuable and identify them as strengths in the family and community. Latino parents build on their linguistic strengths and through their family bonds, become empowered to support their children in their schooling. The study reported here extends our understanding of empowerment by focusing on parent-child interactions, or *consejos*, which guide children across cultures.

Power in Context

The manner in which parents relate to schools becomes a cultural issue not so much because different cultural groups interact differently with the schools, but because the process of engaging with the educational system is bound by rules, language, and values that privilege some people and exclude others (Delgado-Gaitan 1990). Prior work on the Carpinteria, California, community has noted the importance of research on immigrant Latino family relationships with the schools. Poverty and racial and linguistic differences are cited as reasons for the lack of access to schools (Cochran 1988; Delgado-Gaitan 1991; Epstein 1990; Klimes-Dougan et al. 1992). Although structural forces preclude access to families from diverse backgrounds, I maintain that communication with schools is a cultural phenomenon that can be learned given the opportunity.

Major sociocultural contexts of learning (communities, schools, and families) in the Carpinteria study are imbued with power. Power, as a force exercised in interaction, favors some more than others. Systematic exclusion of groups from the educational process has been attributed to the exercise of power on the part of those in decision-making positions (Delgado-Gaitan 1990). Gore, basing her argument on her reading of Foucault (1980), contends that power is not a possession of a few but that instead it is a force actualized in action in a particular context (Gore 1992). That power is exercised in action as opposed to being an object that is dominated, and it locates the analysis in a specific context. Thus, the context circumscribes how people exercise power and delineates the ways that empowerment involves human and social action in a democratic community (Ellsworth 1989; Gore 1992). Context-specific interactions provide a setting in which power relations are challenged. However, individuals cannot so easily divest themselves from social status and roles ascribed by institutions. While power is negotiated in specific context, people's positions in society also complicate the interaction.

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Family-school relationships in the parent involvement discourse provide a context laden with power that is orchestrated by the actors in the particular event. The manner in which parents learn to relate to the school and support their children is often limited to the school-driven program. However, when parents organize support for each other, their families, and the communication process with the schools, the efforts are empowering because the parents not only influence the school policies but also shape their family and personal development (Delgado-Gaitan 1991, 1992).

The Estrada family is part of the larger Mexican immigrant community in Carpinteria. The immigrant experience has been the focus of harsh press relative to the expense of education, health care, and other public and social welfare services. Arguments in favor of education for a democratic society, however, counter attacks on bilingual and multicultural education (Aronowitz 1987; Merino et al. 1994; Nieto 1992; Olsen 1990; Ramirez 1991). The approach to schooling which is perceived in immigrant families like the Estradas is a corollary of the immigrant experience, in that access to better education, better health care, and ultimately a higher socioeconomic status are all reasons for their immigration to the United States.

Here, I present family conversations that focus on the Estrada family's experience with schools and their support of each other. The conversations unveil the family's subjective knowledge about learning, schooling, and their power through the parents' *consejos*.

The Spanish connotation of *consejos* extends the notion of the English language translation for the pragmatic purpose of solving a problem. In Spanish, *consejos* implies a cultural dimension of communication sparked with emotional empathy and compassion, as well as familial expectation and inspiration.

Collecting and Representing Conversations

Prior to recording these conversations with the Estradas, I had conducted a broader ethnographic study of literacy in the Carpinteria community with a specific focus on several families. When I first began collecting stories like the Estrada family's in conversation, I did not yet have a name for what I was doing. I asked myself, is it a case study? Is it a biography? I collected interviews with individual members of the family. I had also studied literacy in the community and the parents' workplaces and had videotaped literacy events in the home and in the classroom of the son, Carlos.

Ethnographers who have collected life stories of women describe the advantage they had in collecting their stories as a result of their fictive kinship relationship established between the researcher and the interviewees (Behar 1993; Gluck and Patai 1991). The fictive kinship category created in Carpinteria was that of *maestra* (teacher), which constituted an important authority relationship between the participants and the

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researcher with Latino families, including the Estradas. This relationship extended an invitation to represent their story with implicit faith of doing justice to their experience. However, as trusting as the relationship may be between the ethnographer and the participants, it does not eliminate the problematics of representation that haunt all ethnographers.

Translation of people's words can perpetuate the class hierarchy that is present even between people who come together to make an ethnographic representation, when the ethnographer and the participants are of the same ethnic group (Fregoso and Chabram 1990). An academic audience requires a translation of the text into English for professional publications. The question remains as to the integrity of the story told in the working-class vernacular of Mexican immigrant families in Carpinteria (and the Estradas, in particular), including the children's voice. By this I mean that, although what I translate from Spanish to English is accurate, the concept of *consejos* remains a far more profound construct for families (in this case, the Estradas) than is possible to convey with English vocabulary. However, my efforts to represent what *consejos* meant to the Estradas were comprehensive: I maintain that I represent the family's true meaning of *consejos* because I collected not only interviews but also systematic observations in and out of the household setting in which the Estrada parents and children played, worked, and attended school. In this article I interpret frames of the family's story relative to expectations of the children's mobility and the emergence of the family's voice in the schooling process. The story in the text is translated to English. Fregoso and Chabram mandate a critical reflection on the part of the ethnographer (1990): reflections on my role as ethnographer in Carpinteria raised cultural conflicts in my interpretation of the families interactions with each other, even though I speak Spanish and am a Mexican immigrant, as are the families in my study (Delgado-Gaitan 1993).

In addition to the problematics of representation due to language translation and ethnic and class differences, I maintain that another major problem involves context in representing a life story. The danger point exists in isolating the story from its respective social systems. When dealing with people's life stories, we are socially connected to others and to our environment with concern for the social and historical ecology.

The human connection with the social environment is a critical dimension deserving exploration because the quality of connections reveals the caliber of schooling offered to the children of different linguistic, ethnic, and cultural groups. Social and cultural continuities promote successful schooling for children because the connection between home and school values are reinforced through strong parental support (Coleman 1987; Delgado-Gaitan 1990; Heath 1982; Phelan et al. 1993). Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco argue that immigrant Hispanic students

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achieve best in the context of family and peer obligations rather than in the context of individualistic self-advancement (1993). Gender, country of origin, socioeconomic status, documentation, level of acculturation, generational differences, and psychological resources must all be considered in understanding responses to change. Individuals within immigrant families respond differently to schools, as we see in the Estrada case. Of the work on Carpinteria families I have described, of great importance is the pivotal role that parents have played as cultural translators between home and school cultures.

The school is, more than any other social institution, an arena in which many problems facing Latino families are played out. Educators need to consider the burdens that immigrant children bring to school. Thus, a need exists for family-school connections bridging generational discontinuities between immigrants and the dominant culture. Educators are placed in a strategically important position to capitalize on their dynamic of positivism, hope, and desire to succeed. Latino parents often play a pivotal role as brokers between their family and school even if they have limited knowledge about schools. Family cultural narratives including myths, folktales, *dichos* (expressions), autobiographical stories, and *consejos* serve as motivational strategies for children's educational efforts.

During the eight years I have known the Estradas, I have had an ongoing conversation with them together as a family. Through *consejos*, the Estradas present their story about their educational aspirations and the ways that they have sustained a vision of empowerment. Here I present three of the many conversations.

Consejos and Conversations

Parents gave *consejos* to their children spontaneously, although certain occasions like discussing reports from the teacher almost predictably signal a *consejo*. Mrs. Estrada's *consejos* to Carlos when he was in the third grade exemplify the interaction related to his experience in school. Early one Friday evening, Carlos showed his mother the weekly achievement report and heard her expected severe reaction. (From this point forward Mr. and Mrs. Estrada's name will be abbreviated—Mr. E and Mrs. E.)

Mira, Carlos, aqui dice la maestra que no pones atencion. Te he aconsejado mucho, mi hijo que tienes que poner atencion y hacer lo que diga la maestra porque es como tu segunda madre. Mira yo ni tu papa tuvimos la oportunidad de estudiar pero ustedes si, y esperamos que lo hagan con buena voluntad. Aqui estamos yo y tu papa para ayudarles en cualquier modo que podemos.

[Look, Carlos, the teacher says that you're not paying attention. I've told you many times, son, that you must pay attention and do what the teacher says because she's like your second mother. Look, neither your father nor I had the opportunity to go to school but you (and your brother and sisters) do, and we

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Delgado-Gaitan

The Power of Cultural Narratives

303

expect you to do it with a good attitude. Your father and I are here to help you in whatever way we can.]

Carlos stood quietly listening to his mother. She expected him to understand the importance of doing well in school by making an effort on his part. In this consejo, Carlos is held responsible for the "misbehavior" his teacher reported. Mrs. E laments her and her husband's missed opportunities for formal education as a way of impressing Carlos with the value of schooling. She wishes that she had been able to have that chance to study. Because her desire to study was so compelling, she seems to believe that the opportunity to attend school should be appreciated and that self-motivation is the necessary agent in learning. The remedy to Carlos's problem is placed in his hands by encouraging him to improve his behavior in the classroom. During my conversation with the Estradas I learned more about the role that consejos played in all the children's attitudes toward schooling.

The first conversation with the Estradas took place in their home, a modest three-bedroom rental that was one of several homes built for low-income families. Mr. and Mrs. E met in Mexico, married, and immigrated to Carpinteria to join his family after Marcos was born; Marcos is the oldest child. The other three children were born in Carpinteria. Except for Marcos, the other children attended bilingual classes from preschool to third grade in Carpinteria schools.

At the time of the first conversation, Marcos is in the seventh grade, Venesa is in the fifth grade, Carlos is in the third grade, and Lucy is in kindergarten. Mr. and Mrs. E are employed in orchid nurseries. Mr. E's job involves using chemicals to spray the flowers, which has resulted in serious health problems with his eyes. Mrs. E works indoors arranging flowers for wholesale. The first conversation reported here took place prior to the formation of the Carpinteria Latino parent group, Comité de Padres Latinos (COPLA).

Without a word from her parents, Venesa walked over to me and my assistant and asked us if we wanted coffee or a soft drink. "Yes, coffee is fine," I said, and Alina, my research assistant, asked for a soft drink. The family sat in the living room, both parents sat on the couch, Carlos sat on the floor next to Lucy, and Venesa and Marcos sat on chairs brought in from the kitchen. While I tested the tape recorder, I heard Mrs. E remind all of the children to behave themselves and emphasized her warning to Carlos. She told them to be sure and talk during the conversation, but to be courteous and not talk too much so that everyone gets a turn. I looked around and observed a hierarchical seating arrangement and I feared that it might bias the outcome of the conversation. I wondered how the conversation would ensue. Would the children talk only when cued by the parents? Although the parents, particularly Mrs. E, spoke more than the children, the children also expressed their views and feelings. Prior interviews and observations with individual family members had surfaced similar issues to those raised in the family

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conversation. Mrs E was particularly concerned that we discuss the family's struggle to motivate the children and instill the value of education.

Conversation 1

Mrs. E began the conversation, "I think that it's necessary to stay on top of what my children are doing in school. Right now they're all doing very well, but I've been getting a lot of calls from Carlos's teacher. They tell me that he is very restless. He doesn't like to stay in his seat. He likes to get up and walk around the room."

"It's that he likes to touch everything." Mr. E added. Carlos sat on the floor to his father's right side and lowered his gaze as both of his parents talked about him.

His mother continued, "Here at home we try to help him as much as we can, but it seems that sometimes he doesn't want to do his homework. I think it's more like he gets tired because it's a lot."

"I try to help Venesa sometimes so that my mother can help Lucy and Carlos," said Marcos, as he looked up at his father. For several seconds everyone just looked at each other, Lucy smiled and giggled with Venesa until Mr. E broke the silence.

"What I ask myself is why teachers don't have more control of their students."

Lucy joined in the conversation and agreed with her father. "That's true, because they've hit me at recess and the teachers don't do anything about it. They just say that they're having fun, but it's not true. Then I tell my mother, and she just tells me to tell the teacher."

"Well, of course. I tell them that the teacher is there to help them. I also tell them that they have to be respectful to their teachers because they are like parents. They [the teachers] spend many hours a day with them, and they [the children] should behave," insisted Mrs. E.

But Carlos differed about what constituted disrespect. "I like school but when I don't behave [in class], my mother punishes me at home and that's why I try to behave." His mother described her means of punishing him: "I make him kneel on rice in the kitchen for an hour or two so that he does not forget the sacrifice."

The sacrifice to which Mrs. E referred was both hers and Carlos's. She added, "I always tell them [the children] that we have made a great deal of sacrifice for them to have a good education here [in this country]."

Mr. E commented further, "They have many opportunities in this country. My wife had more education, and she knows more about the schools than I. But I too tell them that they should do everything possible to learn because that way they don't have to work as hard as we do."

The children sat quietly in their original places while Mrs. E asserted, "They can pursue a career. I would very much like to have them get a career that would make them proud of what they do." Venesa proudly

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Delgado-Gaitan

The Power of Cultural Narratives

305

added, "I want to be a teacher. I tell my mother that I like to help children."

Lucy looked around and smiled while her mother supported Venesa's wishes, "It's true; she is very patient with Lucy and Carlos, although Lucy does not have much homework yet because she's still in kindergarten. Marcos helps her, and he also explains things to Venesa very patiently, and neither one of us [the parents] understands English."

Mrs. E reiterated the theme that defined their session. "I don't know what to do except to give them consejos and to make them see that it is necessary that they study."

In this family conversation, the parents express an intent to teach their children the importance of schooling through examples of how necessary it is for them to do their best. Consejos are the most frequent informal narrative mode of supporting their children. In this stage of involvement with their children's schooling, the parents offered their children consejos that held them responsible for respectful and cooperative behavior and for good academic performance. They advised them to conform to family rules in school which demonstrated compliance with authority. The parents accord a great deal of trust and authority to the teachers. Carlos believes he is being misunderstood and that he tries hard, but he is only noticed when he stands up and walks around the room, in which case he is considered to be mischievous. Consejos from both parents transmit concern for their children's success in school, commensurate with their knowledge about the educational system. Issues of motivation discussed by Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1993) appear in this household through consejos, as parents strive to make their children recognize the value of an education. They utilize their personal experience as a lesson to impress upon their children how much they care that they succeed in school.

Conversation 2

Many conversations passed since the first time we talked with the Estrada family. A great deal happened in the Latino community in Carpinteria. The formation of a Latino parent organization, which became COPLA, was an important marker in the Carpinteria story of Latino family relations with the schools (see Delgado-Gaitan 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, for additional information). COPLA gave educators a key place to interact with Latino parents and to learn how they are at the heart of pedagogy affecting Latino student achievement in a culturally appropriate way. This second conversation that I report here took place in January 1989, when Marcos was in the tenth grade, Venesa in the eighth, Carlos in the fifth, and Lucy in the third.

Mr. and Mrs. E gave consejos to their children to praise and recognize good work and positive actions and to correct behavior that was perceived as a problem. In the case of Marcos, Mrs. E applauded his helpful and courteous behavior with his siblings and his excellent report card.

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However, in his sophomore year of high school, he had a conflict with a soccer coach who refused to let him play at games. In one *consejo* Mrs. E encourages Marcos to change his perception of the situation and instructs him to how to advocate for himself.

"Mama, que hago si este coach no me quiere?" pregunto Marcos.

"Mi hijo, no es que no te quiera. A la mejor tu le tienes que hacer ver que vales. Mira, hijo, ve a hablar con el."

"Mama, ell no se presta solo quiere a sus favoritos."

"Ve y dile que tu tambien sabes jugar y que estas preparado para ell juego lo puedes hacer con exito."

["Mama, what can I do if this coach doesn't like me?" asked Marcos.

"Dear, it's not that he doesn't like you; maybe you need to convince him of your worth. Look, dear, go to him and talk to him."

"Mother, he's not available. He just likes his pets."

"Go tell him that you too know how to play and that you can play successfully."}]

Regarding Marcos's relationship with his coach, Mrs. E stresses ownership of the problem to Marcos and guides him on how to approach his coach. She conveys to Marcos that the problem has a solution and that he should not focus on the negative attitude against the teacher. The message is that Marcos can help change his situation through communication. She stresses his strength in communicating his needs and makes him recognize that he can advocate for himself. Even though Marcos might have talked to his coach beforehand, after his mother's *consejos*, he is prepared to talk with the coach with more confidence knowing that his mother believes in him.

In the second conversation, *consejos* have evolved to more informed advocacy for the children. David, my research assistant, and I had brought some fruit to the family on the evening of this second conversation. Before our talk began, Carlos offered me a *licuado* (nutritional fruit shake). I was impressed that he would know how make a *licuado*. Mrs. E said that she had taught him to make it because it was his favorite breakfast. We all sat in the living room around the coffee table and drank orange juice that Carlos, with Lucy's help, poured for all of us.

Mrs. E opened the conversation by saying, "Well, thanks to God, everything is well with us. Thanks for coming to be with us again. It looks like we're doing about the same. The children are doing fine in school. The only problem is with Carlos. It's that his teacher keeps calling me because he's a behavior problem [in class]. I've been going to visit his class more frequently. When they call me from school, I ask permission from my job, and I go to visit his class without him knowing."

Carlos blurted into the conversation to explain how he felt about his mother visiting his class, "She comes in to class, and I get scared when I see her."

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Delgado-Gaitan

The Power of Cultural Narratives

307

Mrs. E turned to Carlos and justified her visits, "I don't do it to scare you. I go so that I can see how you're behaving. I want to know what you are studying in class so that I can help you at home. If I don't know [what you're doing in class], then how can I advise you as to what is best for you?"

Marcos defined the problem differently: "The problem is that some of the teachers in the high school are racists and they say that Mexicans don't know anything. It bothers me that they don't like us and then they say that we don't want to learn."

His mother did not accept his comments. She added, "I have told you that it's not that the teachers are against you. It's that they often have so much work and many personalities to teach."

"That's true," agreed Marcos, but his experiences told otherwise. "What happened when you went to talk to Mr. Garcia about the racism on the part of the soccer coach?"

His mother responded, "Yes, well he told me that the coach was not the problem. It was the fact that some coaches already had their teams set up from the beginning of the season."

Marcos continued disagreeing. "That's not true; it's that they don't choose me or other Mexicans. We spend every game sitting [on the bench] without playing. I get very angry."

Mr. E added, "My wife and I have told them that when he feels like that, that he should tell us and we will go investigate it, whatever it is. But there are times when we don't know because the teachers behave that way [badly]. We don't want to think that they have ill will toward us."

Carlos saw his opportunity to get support for his case, which was that he liked school, that he did not misbehave in class, but that he could not sit still for a long time. "I told you. But this teacher is different because she makes the subjects interesting. And she explains to me what I don't know."

"That's true, Mrs. Smith is a good teacher with them [the children]. It's just that Carlos talks more than he should, and that's when I have to go to the class." Mrs. E then directed her comments to Carlos. "They have told me that other students like you, but it's that you exhaust them [the teachers] because you're so restless."

Mr. E had a different perspective on their efforts to help their daughters in their schooling. "Our daughters, they're another problem. It's not that they're ill-behaved; it's that we have to be careful what time they leave [the home] and return."

Agreeing with her husband, Mrs. E expanded, "Daughters are in more danger. That's why we tell Venesa that she cannot have the same freedom as Marcos because he can defend himself. She tells us that some of her friends already have boyfriends, but we tell her that it's not good to have a boyfriend when they're so young because they have to study. When I go to conference with the teachers at the junior high school, I see

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girls with boys. But we don't allow Venesa to date yet. Another problem I see there [at the junior high school] is that none of the teachers or administrators speak Spanish. It's difficult to know how we can help [our children] because it's all in English. I go to meet with the migrant-education teacher assistant because he's bilingual. I tell him that he has to take care of my daughter [Venesa] and to give me a report about her behavior even if she does not have him as a teacher. I learned to do that because that's what they teach us to do in the COPLA meetings. Those meetings have helped me a great deal."

Marcos continued his complaints about the educational program, in reference to educational costs. "I want to be a lawyer or something like that, but I don't know if I'll be able to do it because they've told me at school that a career like that is very costly. Surely, there should be a way to study a career one wants, don't you think?" he asked, turning to his father as if to ask him the question.

"Yes, we can only encourage them, but when it comes to money, it's impossible," lamented Mr. E.

Mrs. E agreed with her husband, "Yes, what my husband says is true. I'm learning that there are resources in the school and students can apply for them if they have good grades. I tell my son [Marcos] to talk to his counselors to see if they can guide him."

Breaking the silence after several seconds, I asked Lucy and Venesa if they had any comments. The girls deferred to each other until Lucy offered her view, "No, I like school. I just get mad when the kids bother me. I tell my mother and she goes to talk with the teacher and then they stop doing it and then they start up again. But my mother and father always try to encourage me to study and to devote myself to my studies."

Her mother expanded on Lucy's complaint, "It's much less now. They don't bother her as much since I insisted on a conference with the school principal and the boy's [who was hitting her] parents. I had to do it because I didn't think that the teacher had much control and poor Lucy would come home feeling desperate and sometimes in tears."

Finally, Venesa entered the conversation, "I know the boy who was hitting her, and his sisters do the same thing. They're in my school. They don't bother me, but they do bother some of my friends."

Mrs. E's comments about the parents' responsibility to intervene in their children's schooling also revealed her knowledge about the system while summarizing the conversation. "It's like everything: when the girls come to me with a complaint, I ask them if they instigated anything. I tell them that, if I go to school to speak on their behalf and if they [my daughters] have lied to me, I'll punish them at home. And the truth is that almost always it's others who bother them. I think that it's everyone's responsibility. Isn't that right? I go to represent them because that's my responsibility, but they too have to take responsibility for their behavior. Teachers are there to help them even if sometimes we don't

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Delgado-Gaitan

The Power of Cultural Narratives

309

like they do it. They're in charge of their education in school, and we as parents coach them at home."

Some of the time, the Estradas addressed their conversation to me as they reported their events, but they also talked to each other and responded to respective comments. Consejos offered to the children matured from the previous conversations evidenced by the recourse that Mrs. E felt she had available at the schools. Mrs. E had learned that by visiting Carlos in class she could learn about the classroom curriculum and figure out how to help him to control his behavior. Consejos now seemed based not only on her good intentions for her children but also guided by her classroom observations and her participation in the COPLA organization.

Conversation 3

During the span of time between the second and third conversations, consejos continued to guide much of the Estrada children's educational pursuits. Through consejos, parents managed the children's schooling and reinforced cooperative and respectful behavior at school. This third conversation reveals still another element characterizing the nature of consejos: the parents' support for their children's independence and self-control. Through this self-critical instruction that Carlos, Venesa, and Lucy receive, they are able to make conscious decisions about their choice of friends and how time is spent on academic and social events while recognizing the consequences.

Carlos's behavior represented a challenge to the Estradas and the school. This interaction between Mrs. E and Carlos illustrates her connection with the school and her ability to assist him through consejos.

"Mama, yo no se porque dicen que a mi no me gusta la escuela. Si me gusta pero no puedo estarme quieto en la clase como quieren los maestros. Quiero pero no puedo. Ustedes creen que quiero ser malcriado pero no es cierto, lo encuentro imposible."

"Yo te he dicho que yo y tu papa tenemos fe en tie. Mi hijo, es que tu problema es dificil y quiero que vayamos tu y yo a hablar con ell director de educacion migrante porque ell nos puede dirigir a la agencia donde te pueden ayudar con tu problema. Yo se que eres buen muchacho pero tambien por eso te aconsejamos que no te juntes con esos muchachos que son vagos."

["Mother, I don't know why you say that I don't like school. I do like it, but I can't stay seated in class. I want to, but I can't. You think I'm a 'bad' boy but it's not true. I just find it impossible."

"I've told you that your father and I have lots of faith in you. It's that your problem is a difficult one and I want us to go and talk with the Director of Migrant Education because he can direct us to the agency that can help us with your problem. I know that you're a good boy but that's also why we advise you against keeping company with those boys who get into trouble."]

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Mrs. E attempts to keep Carlos focused on his patience with himself, which oftentimes wore thin. She had become aware that, after the many years of dealing with Carlos's behavior problems in school, his disability was possibly due to conditions beyond his control alone. That is, in this consejo she reiterates her and his father's faith in Carlos. She strongly encourages him to believe in himself by choosing friends who reinforce the positive in him. Furthermore, she now understands that there are other support systems such as COPLA and advocates in the school that they can solicit to resolve his problem. In this consejo we see that Carlos is no longer the sole source of his behavior problem. Although he and his parents continue to be frustrated in the negative way that his behavior affects his schooling, possible solutions to his problem are now informed by their social network with other parents and supportive school personnel.

At the time of this third family conversation, Marcos had enlisted in the U.S. Marines for four years, following his graduation from high school. He felt that it was the best way to get an education and to help his country. His decision to enlist was urged by the Persian Gulf War, which took some of his friends to the front lines. In this conversation, Venesa is in the twelfth grade, Carlos in the tenth, and Lucy in the seventh grade. Both parents are present with the three children, and only Marcos is absent and very much missed by his family.

As Mrs. E relates, "We're feeling rather alone without Marcos since he left for the marines. We're still getting used to being without him. We only see him once a year, because he's in South Carolina and they give him a few days vacation in January. He tells us that he's fine and that we should be very proud of him because he's studying to be some type of secret government official. Well, we've always been very proud of him because he's been a good son and willing to study. He has also been a good example to his brother and sisters."

Venesa proudly noted her accomplishments: "I've been working after school and on weekends so that I don't get bored with so much schoolwork and studying."

Mr. E further elaborated on Venesa's schooling plans. "She says she wants to be a teacher, and she'll start out at the community college when she completes high school this year. We [her parents] tell her that it's wonderful that she's decided on this career and that—"

Mrs. E jumped into the conversation to add, "—well, that she not get married until she finishes her career. I've told her that it's better to be educated before getting married. She tells me that I'm right. True, dear?"

"Yes, Mother," concurred Venesa. "I've told Daniel, my boyfriend, that I don't want to get married yet because I want to study and it takes a lot of time, plus I also want to continue working here at Foster Freeze to earn a bit of money. Maybe I'll find something that pays more."

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Her mother revealed more about Daniel. "Her boyfriend is older than she and he has graduated from high school, but he has not attended college."

Venesa elaborated further on Daniel. "Yes, but he too believes that it is good [for me] that I study and follow a career. I want a short career because I don't want to spend too many years in college."

Mrs. E stated her and her husband's position. "We've advised her that it [the career] does not have to do with how short or long it is, rather that it be a real interest to her. Nothing is gained by getting into a career that one does not like. Then one gets bored, and ultimately she doesn't benefit because she's bored. It's very important that she learn how to support herself because we never know what may happen after she marries. The economy is so bad now. Homeless people come by our house: They've lost their job. I am saddened because some are families. We've never seen that before here in Carpinteria. They ask for food or water."

Carlos must have been present when homeless families came to their door. "Yes, but some of them get angry if we don't give them something."

"Why wouldn't they get angry if they're hungry, son?" asked Mr. E.

Carlos responded, "Yes, but sometimes at night they scare us when they come near."

His mother took this opportunity to reinforce their advice to Carlos. "That's why we advise you not to be out late at night with your friends."

In his defense, Carlos countered, "My friends don't scare me; it's those strange people."

Mrs. E argued, "Yes, but your friends also behave very badly with people, and they walk the streets aimlessly. That's why we tell you that you have to leave those friends and to devote your time to your schoolwork."

Carlos responded, "I study, but it's that the teachers don't like me."

His mother reminded Carlos, "It's not that they don't like you; it's just that they want you to sit still in class and, when you get up and walk around the class, you bother others."

Mr. E added, "Even your uncle has advised you to let go of those friends because they won't help you pay your bills if you don't study. Dear, it's that you have to begin to act like a young mature person."

Carlos tried to assure him, "I try to do good but no one notices."

Sharing more frustration, Mrs. E detailed her ordeal with the school and Carlos's behavior. "There are some weeks when I'm at the school twice a week because they call me about Carlos's problems. One of the teachers has told me that I should take him to get an exam because he has so many problems staying seated [in class]. I'm urging the principal to help me with the cost of seeing this specialist in Santa

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Barbara. He tells me that they cannot pay for the exam, but I'm not convinced. I've asked people at the COPLA meetings to see if anyone can help me. They've told me that I should pursue the matter with the superintendent or the Director of Special Projects."

She continued, "The part that bothers me most is that this problem with Carlos not being able to sit still and arriving late to class has been going on for many years and the teachers all push the matter aside because they're tired of dealing with him."

Further, she commented on her consejos to Carlos. "I tell Carlos that he has to do his part to finish his homework and to get to class on time. But as long as he keeps company with those friends who are like Cholos,² he'll never be able to do anything good."

Again, defending his friends Carlos explains, "They don't keep me from doing my work."

His father reiterated his position. "It's true, son, but like we've told you, your friends don't have any guidance and they expect you to join them. Even though we've advised you well and encouraged you to study, your friends pull you in a different direction and you have to examine your intentions. You need to take control of your life, son."

His wife supported her husband's remarks. "Your father and I, and even your uncles, have tried to advise you because you are a mature young man. You can do a great deal with your life, and many people care about you. It's that we see that you have a great deal of ability."

"That's true, but almost everyone blames me except for Mom, who even when the teachers and others blame me, she always helps me and understands me," commented Carlos.

Once more, Carlos's father asserted his support. "That's true and that's the way we all care about you and that's why we expect much more from you and advise you in that way."

Mrs. E shared her perception of her needs. "What would help me would be to have someone in the school to help me with my children. Like at the junior high school they now have a bilingual counselor and teachers. The vice principal is also bilingual, and he calls Lucy to wake her up so that she can get to school on time. What happened with Lucy was that she was arriving late to classes and was receiving a lot of detention time [to do after school]. He [the vice principal] proposed a plan where he calls Lucy in the morning so she can get to school on time."

Lucy joined the conversation, "The vice principal is a very nice person because he's been helping me in a way that my science grade has improved from a C to a B. He has helped me get tutors for my classes where I have a C.

Unsatisfied with their coverage on the topic of wake-up calls, I asked, "Why can't Carlos or Venesa wake you in the morning?"

"They do wake me, but then they go to school and I fall asleep again and it gets late," explained Lucy.

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Mrs. E summed up their conversation. "As I see it, it's not possible to be on top of everything that has to do with one's children, but we talk with them every day and counsel them so they will know that we want the best for them and that we want all the best possible for them, but they too have to do their part."

Family members manifest their development on questions of schooling as this third conversation unfolds. Mrs. E has become more active in accessing resources to support Carlos, Venesa, and Lucy. Her participation in COPLA has obviously strongly influenced her direction in communicating with schools. Their new information about schools enabled the parents to intervene and advocate for the children. In Carlos's case, Mrs. E was able to assist him as much as she could, but his problems were chronic and they persisted. He, however, continued trying to overcome his conflicts, and for his perseverance he credits his mother most of all for her *consejos*. Notably, as Mrs. E learned to access more resources from bilingual personnel at school, she increased her expectation of her children to be responsible learners. Mrs. E's participation with COPLA helps her to navigate the school culture. I concur with Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco's 1993 thesis that family and school cultures must connect and provide bridges between family and school knowledge, such that home cultural strategies toward schooling are valued through participation with schools in organizations such as COPLA and Mrs. E's meetings with school personnel. Mrs. E's work also became easier when the schools (particularly the middle school) hired bilingual personnel. Mrs. E's increased participation in the school helped both her and Mr. E in their *consejos*, especially to Carlos.

On *Consejos* and Schooling

Conversation provides a specific context for the Estrada family to reflect on the power of *consejos* as a tool to deal with educational concerns. More than just a cultural strategy for learning to do "schooling," *consejos* bond parents and their children how to care for each other while sharing important experiences with each other. An element of critical thinking and independence to think for themselves underlies the instructive *consejo*. The mother's *consejos* become increasingly specific about ways to solve their schooling problems as she participates in COPLA and in the schools. Through her classroom visits she learns about the classroom curriculum and she informs her children better in their decisions.

The children, as well as the parents, were confronted with structural limitations in their struggle to succeed socially and academically in an antagonistic environment. Besides the English-only language issue, Mrs. Estrada found that the school had limited answers to her son's problems even when she cooperated with them and insisted on finding a solution. This points to the limited effectiveness of school remedies for chronic problems like Carlos's and exalts the family's *consejos* as advocacy tools.

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Choices of how to resolve schooling problem are constrained and permitted by the political context in and out of school. The Estradas illustrate the strength of personal voice through their support of each other's endeavors. Their case demonstrates the complexity and range of the empowerment process which develops over a long time and reminds us that it is not an expedient remedy for solving structural, social, or personal problems that have persisted over time. The Estrada parents became equipped to help their children in their school through their participation in the COPLA collective, but we must also recognize that *consejos* connect the family even when the parents are unfamiliar with operation of the schools.

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Notes

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1. *Consejos* in this article means nurturing advice. It goes beyond the notion of advice for the purpose of solving a problem, which is the direct translation. *Consejos* implies a cultural domain of communication, imbued with emotional empathy, compassion, and familial expectation.

2. Cholos are young/adolescent Chicanos/Chicanas who identify themselves through their dress and language codes. Boys wear baggy pants, long Pendelton shirts, and bandanas on their heads. Girls wear tight short skirts, heavy makeup, and flamboyant hairdos. Their resistance to middle-class norms is often evident in their school performance. Detachment from family and school life defines their behavior.

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