

Standing Up for a Son at School: Experiences of a Mexican Immigrant Mother

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This phenomenological study focuses on the interactions of a Spanish-speaking immigrant mother with primarily English-speaking teachers and a principal in U.S. schools attended by her son. The interactions around four disciplinary actions faced by her son disclose language and culture as barriers to the mother acting on her son's behalf. The essence of what the experience means to the mother is (a) "I don't understand what's going on at school," (b) "The school is difficult to deal with," and (c) "Others wonder what I am doing at school."

This is an account of a Spanish-speaking mother's experiences with the English-speaking schools her son attends. The mother's experiences, told from her perspective, disclose the barriers to parental advocacy that are created by language and culture. Why should this Mexican mother's experiences with her son's schools be of interest to us? Why does it matter? The answer is because the education of young immigrants in U.S. schools is one of the most important means of helping them to become valuable members of our society. Unfortunately, our schools are inclined to view immigrant

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parents as less able to prepare their children for school and to support their academic success (Valdes, 1996).

This narrative is part of a larger phenomenological study dealing with parents' experiences standing up for their children at school. A more detailed examination of this parent's story suggested itself, because the mother disclosed experiences that were unique and beyond what other parents talked about. The question this article explores is, What is it like for a Mexican immigrant mother to stand up for her son at school?

Studying a Mother's Experiences

Phenomenological research is interpretive research that seeks a deep understanding of what it means to be human. It is the study of everyday lived experiences and meanings we construct from them (van Manen, 1990). According to Polkinghorne (1989), the immediate purpose of phenomenological research is to produce clear and accurate descriptions of human experiences, but in a more profound way, "phenomenological research has, as its ultimate aim, to fulfill our human nature: to become more fully who we are" (van Manen, 1984, p. 39). By pondering and examining the small daily things—the things of everyday life—we better understand the world and ourselves.

Three important assumptions help characterize phenomenological research: humans seek meaning in their lives, there are multiple realities, and realities are socially constructed. The phenomenologist attempts to understand a research participant's experience from the participant's perspective, not objectively and not from the researcher's perspective. The researcher attempts to become aware of his or her own experiences and meanings and to set them aside to be open to learning from the participant.

What good comes from phenomenological research? van Manen (1990) notes that some would argue that it lacks practical value because nothing can be done with phenomenological knowledge. From the perspective of instrumental reasoning, this valuation may be true, but then van Manen paraphrases Heidegger, saying that "the more important question is not: Can we do something with phenomenology? Rather, we should wonder: Can phenomenology, if we concern ourselves deeply with it, do something with us?" (p. 45).

If we read carefully crafted phenomenological writing, we may better understand the nature of being in the world (Heidegger, 1962). Professionals might practice their professions more attentively (van Manen, 1991), and policy analysts might create policies that are more responsive to human needs (Polkinghorne, 1989) because such writing shows us the profound meanings of being human.

Phenomenological studies examine the lived experiences of individuals. I¹ requested help from a colleague who works in an adult education program to identify an immigrant parent who spoke little English and who was experiencing difficulties with his or her child's school. This colleague knew about a parent's (Magdalena's) concerns with her son's education. The colleague briefly explained the research project to Magdalena, introduced us, and became our interpreter. Magdalena agreed to participate and is the parent whose experiences are examined here.

I had four conversational interviews with Magdalena. Three were in the winter and spring of 1995 and one in the spring of 1996. They occurred around the dining room table at her home. Both the interpreter and Magdalena listened and responded patiently as I repeated, rephrased, and reframed questions and checked my understanding. The conversations were audio recorded. On the tapes, I am speaking in English, the interpreter is relaying my comments to Magdalena in Spanish, Magdalena is replying in Spanish, and the interpreter is relaying Magdalena's comments to me in English. The quotations included in this article are Magdalena's words restated in English by the interpreter.

A text was created by transcribing the English portion of the conversation. I used the holistic approach suggested by van Manen (1990) to uncovering themes as I both listened to the tapes and read the text over and over. In attempting to achieve intersubjective agreement with Magdalena about the meaning of her experiences, I asked her to let me know if my summary of the themes accurately reflected her experiences. She corrected one error: I had not sufficiently emphasized how quickly and stringently the school seemed to act against her son.

Readers of phenomenological writing are better able to judge its credibility if the writer discloses his or her experiences regarding the phenomenon under study. My personal experience as an immigrant was a temporary affair that was regarded as a scholastic reward and opportunity. I was an exchange student at the University of Oslo in Norway many years ago. My speaking and understanding of Norwegian was limited; in fact, I was barely able to read and comprehend the *AftenPosten*, Oslo's evening newspaper. Although most assigned readings were in English, I attended some lectures and one seminar that were conducted in Norwegian. I came to dread the Wednesday afternoon seminar because I feared I would not understand any comment or question that might be directed to me. I avoided eye contact and tried to make myself as small as I could in my chair. After the seminar, I would leave the room quickly out of embarrassment. I avoided seminars in the second term and spent most of my leisure hours alone or with English-speaking students. I lost the self-assurance I had taken for granted in the United States; instead,

I felt inadequate, marginalized, and foreign. This and other experiences have helped me to empathize with non-English-speaking women.

Before undertaking this series of interviews with Magdalena, I knew very little about Mexican women and their relations with schools. In planning the larger study of parents' experiences standing up for their children at school, I had been faced with making either a Type I or Type II error, to borrow a phrase from positivistic researchers. My Type I error would have been to include only those parents with whom I share culture, class, and gender. This choice would have permitted me to understand their experiences to the depth that I envisioned, but I would have had to be content with a narrow range of parents. The Type II error was to include more parents—men as well as women—from diverse cultures and socioeconomic classes and to risk some degree of failure in accurately and richly interpreting their experiences.

I chose to live with the Type II error. To minimize its effects with Magdalena, I relied on the adult educator, an expert interpreter from Colombia, and her debriefings after the interviews. I was fortunate, also, in having a colleague, who identifies himself as Chicano, generously help me further my understanding of Mexican families and multicultural classrooms.

One last note about phenomenological research. Because it seeks an understanding of people's lived experiences, this article is unabashedly and unapologetically subjective. No attempt has been made to recount the same events from the teachers', principal's, bus driver's, or son's perspectives; these important stories remain to be told.

To provide background for the meanings Magdalena constructed from her experiences, I first introduce Magdalena and relate four disciplinary episodes her son, Fabian, faced at school. The themes of Magdalena's experiences with the schools follow.

Magdalena

Magdalena completed 6 years of school in Mexico. Like other children in her small town, she attended school irregularly. One of a large family, she did not go to school on the days she was needed at home. When she was 17 years of age, her family left Mexico and settled across the border in Texas. Magdalena had not wanted to come to the United States, but her father insisted on the family staying together. In Texas, she married. Later, she and her husband joined some of her brothers in Minneapolis. Today, she lives in a tidy, clapboard duplex in a culturally diverse neighborhood with her husband, Fabian (the son), and three younger daughters. Relatives and friends with children in tow come and go frequently, so the house is full of Spanish chatter. Magdalena speaks only a few words of halting English.

When I asked Magdalena how she thought of herself and of her national and ethnic identity, she said, "Mexican. A Mexican person. I'm Mexican because I was born in Mexico. And my son was born on this side. Since his parents are from Mexico, then he's considered Chicano. He knows both languages." Her view of Mexican and Chicano identities does not seem to hinge on political ideology, as is true for some whose origin is Mexican (De Anda, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Nieto, 1996; Pesquera & Segura, 1993). Rather, language and place of birth (Menchaca, 1989) seem to provide the keys to her ethnic identity.

Fabian's Episodes at School

Kindergarten through third grade was a positive but largely uneventful experience for Fabian. The teachers were responsive to him, and Magdalena was not aware of any problems. The first episode occurred during the fourth grade, the others in the seventh and eighth grades. The problems illustrate the tension that developed between Fabian and Magdalena and the school: (a) A teacher insisted that Fabian be checked by a doctor, (b) Fabian was accused of smoking and suspended from school, (c) Fabian was suspended from school because of misunderstandings about detention, and (d) Fabian was expelled from school for fighting.

The fourth-grade teacher, an Anglo who spoke Spanish, told Magdalena that Fabian was talking and laughing a lot in class and was not listening to or minding her. Magdalena told me she had been puzzled. "I didn't know if I should support the teacher or my son," she said, "because I knew that that's not the way he is." At her first conference with the teacher, Magdalena said they got along well and they understood each other. The teacher suggested that Magdalena take Fabian to the doctor. As time went on, the teacher became insistent that Fabian be checked, but Magdalena said, "I didn't think it was necessary to refer my son to a doctor."

At the second conference, the teacher told Magdalena that she had sent her some papers and that she should be expecting them. Then the teacher followed up with four phone calls to see if anything was being done about the checkup. Finally, Magdalena said she took Fabian to the doctor:

I had his own doctor see him, and the doctor said that it wasn't necessary, that he was OK. I took him to the doctor, to tell the teacher, to let the teacher know, that I was following up, because every time I went [to school, the teacher] would bring it up.

Soon, school ended for the year and the issue faded away. Happily, things went smoothly during the fifth and sixth grades.

During seventh grade, more puzzles and problems developed. One day, Magdalena received a phone call from her son's bus driver who spoke only English. Magdalena said,

I couldn't understand, I could not comprehend on the phone, but my brother happened to be here [and he] took the phone. And they said that [Fabian] was suspended because he was smoking. . . . He had to go through a checkup, had to be checked, before he went back to school. But they didn't explain what kind of check, what they wanted me to do. So I took him to the clinic, and the doctor saw him.

Fabian told Magdalena that he had not been smoking, and she believed him. Understandably, she was distressed both about the allegation that Fabian was smoking and his suspension. She said, "I did not know what to do because, first of all, it was in English." Her brother accompanied her to see the principal the next day. But, she said, "My brother was not telling me. My brother was talking to the principal, but he wasn't telling me what was happening, so I wasn't happy."

On the third day, Manuel, the school's liaison with Spanish-speaking parents, interpreted for her and the principal as Magdalena quickly attempted to clear up the matter. She said, "I wanted my son to go back to school before the 5 days were over. And they wouldn't accept him back." Magdalena did as she was instructed by the principal and took Fabian to be checked. "I took him to the clinic, and the doctor saw him. I had the doctor give him a checkup, because I didn't want him to be missing school."

Manuel attended the meeting with Magdalena and the principal at the end of the suspension to reinstate Fabian in school. At the meeting, the principal revealed that children from another school had told the bus driver that Fabian had been smoking at the bus stop, and the bus driver told the principal. Magdalena sensed that the school did not know for sure whether Fabian had been smoking.

When Magdalena presented the doctor's report to the principal, she said,

He told me that they didn't want that medical checkup I had gotten from the doctor. They wanted a different one. . . . They wanted me to take him to another place, some type of counseling. And I say, "But why, if you're not sure of the [guilt of my son]? Why are you sending him to get another checkup? How come nobody told me in the first place what kind of checkup they wanted?"

So then the principal apologized and said . . . since I had turned that [doctor's] report in he was going to accept it, but it wasn't what they [were] expecting, wasn't what they wanted. . . . The principal only excused himself and that was it. But I wasn't happy with it.

I asked Magdalena why she was not happy. She said,

I don't know. Maybe it's because I didn't understand. Because of the language. And I think it [was] unjust. It was, the way they did it was very unjust, just saying "You're suspended for 5 days." And then after that happens, they just excuse themselves and it's over.

Magdalena explained that later she took Fabian to the second checkup, nonetheless: "They told me it wasn't necessary to take him. But I thought that so they know it's not true, the accusation is not true, for [the principal] to be sure, then I took him over to [the counselor]."

Perhaps for the principal and for the school, the episode was ordinary and they could put it to rest. For Magdalena, however, it had been distressing and unjust. She still felt bad. She said,

It was difficult. Because I tried to support him and then tell him that he knows what's right and what's wrong. And I was telling him "if you did something wrong, how come you haven't told me?" And he said, "No! I didn't." . . . Regardless of what I said and my son said, they punish him.

Also during seventh grade, Fabian did not finish some math assignments, and after one thing led to another, he was suspended. The math teacher, who spoke Spanish, called Magdalena to say that Fabian had not handed in his math homework. They were going to keep Fabian after school. Magdalena seemed not to distinguish whether this was to punish him or help him. She said,

But they did not tell my son about it. And when he came home [I] asked him, "Why didn't you stay at school? I thought you were supposed to stay at school." He says, "Well the teacher told me that he was going to call you, but nobody told me that I was supposed to stay." So I told him to stay the next day so he wouldn't have to go on Saturday. And then he wasn't told the next day or the next day that he had to stay. So, then on Saturday he left [home], but he didn't make it there on time. So now they suspended him for 2 days.

Fabian had gotten to school on Saturday to serve detention for not serving detention after school during the week, but he arrived after the school doors were locked at 8:00 a.m. The punishment for not attending Saturday detention

was a 2-day suspension. Magdalena felt that the teacher was at fault for not saying more clearly to Fabian, "Yes, you're going to stay today," on the day this episode started.

Based on her experience with reinstating Fabian after the earlier suspension, she saw little point in going to the school with Fabian on his first day back after this suspension. She explained,

I was told that I was supposed to go in so they would let him in school. And I called them yesterday and I said, "Why should I go there for? What is the idea for me coming to school? Is it just to drive him to school? Is it just to walk him to school? Because nobody is talking to me about what's happening." I told my son, "Let's call them. . . . I want to know why [the principal] wants me to go." And then [the principal] said that's OK, that I didn't have to go. That's OK because I had called. So I didn't have to go today.

This series of interactions with the school were puzzling. It is not clear what the school expects and why the school made the requests it did.

At the end of the eighth grade, Fabian was expelled from school for a year. Through tears, Magdalena explained,

This Black guy was laughing at [Fabian's] cousin who has a bald spot here [on the top of the head], so [Fabian] got upset and they started arguing, and pretty soon got into a fight. Because he was laughing at his cousin. [Fabian and his cousin] are about the same age, but [his cousin] can't defend himself. He's shorter and he doesn't see well. He has those problems. So then [Fabian] got upset, because that guy was laughing at his cousin who was in that situation so they got into an argument and a fist fight. . . . I don't know if that Black guy got punished the same. . . . I haven't found out.

Magdalena called one of the teachers who speaks Spanish. He referred her to someone in charge of the Latino affairs for the school, which Magdalena described only vaguely. But that person did not call back. Magdalena had only sketchy details about this more serious episode, which left her distraught and unsettled. She said, "They do not want to communicate with me. None of them has wanted to talk to me."

Magdalena did not have the information she felt she needed. A couple of weeks after school was out, she did not even know whether Fabian passed the eighth grade. What Magdalena did know was that her son was expelled from his school for 1 year for fighting. The school sent a letter, written in English, and a list of other schools she could contact to enroll him for ninth grade.

Through these episodes and others, Magdalena was responding to the school, attempting to help her son get an education, and standing up for him the best she could. What did her experiences with the schools regarding these episodes mean to her?

Considering What It Means

We turn to Magdalena's not understanding what was going on at school, difficulty dealing with the school, and feeling like a stranger at school.

I Don't Understand What's Going on at School

Not understanding what is going on at school has two intertwined aspects:

(a) Magdalena did not understand English and (b) Magdalena did not know what was happening at the school. Knowledge of both English and the culture of U.S. schools is easily taken for granted by native English speakers who have attended U.S. schools. But for a person who neither speaks English nor understands the culture of U.S. schools, the lack of knowledge is like two walls that keep one out. Robert Frost (1963) wrote in his poem, "Mending Wall,"

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down. (pp. 47-48)

The side from which we view a wall determines whether we see ourselves as walled in or walled out. Magdalena was outside two walls: one was language and the other was the culture of U.S. schools.

I Don't Understand English

English as a language form can be a forbidding wall. Not speaking English makes interaction with the school difficult for many parents (Cheon, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Valdes, 1996). Written, telephone, and face-to-face communication are variations of the same wall that exclude non-English-speaking parents.

Magdalena lamented her inability to speak English. She said,

What I don't like about [myself] is that I haven't learned English. And I don't know if I haven't learned English because I haven't insisted more, or is it me that can't learn English? But I'm going to try this year to study more. See what happens.

Had she not tried hard enough previously, or is she not able to learn English? The wall poses a formidable linguistic challenge, and in the face of it, she considers why she is failing. If only she learned English, she could breach the wall around the school!

When teachers and principals speak English, Magdalena must rely on others to interpret for her. Like other immigrants, Mexican parents often rely on their children to interpret for them (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Valdes, 1996), but this runs counter to the Mexican American family hierarchy (Finders & Lewis, 1994). Yet, sometimes Magdalena was forced to ask Fabian to call the school on her behalf or to interpret for her when she was at his school. Magdalena said sometimes she knew he did not translate everything.

[If] he knows I'm going to be unhappy, he's not gonna tell me. He won't tell me. If he tells me he'll tell me later, and I want to know right away, so we can do something about it. . . . And if I find out later on, then there's nothing to do. There's no point in doing anything, because it's already too late. I don't like the idea of having to depend on my son for him to tell me what's going on. I don't like to depend on him to find out. . . . Parents shouldn't leave our responsibilities as parents to the children.

Like children of other Mexican families (Tse, 1995), Fabian influences the message as he translates for his mother.

At times, Magdalena relied on her brother in communicating with the principal. This was not satisfactory because instead of interpreting, he spoke for her, excluding her from the conversation. She prefers to rely on Manuel. When he assists, things can go smoothly and benefit Magdalena. She said, "I feel more secure. I feel better that I'm going to be able to understand. I'll be able to understand what they say, and I'll be able to explain. . . . But not by myself."

The language wall excludes Magdalena from school. Metaphorically, she is outside, wishing she could enter the space called school, comprehend what is being said, and speak for herself. Until she can learn English, she will lack the equipment to scale the wall. But there is also a second wall that inhibits her full participation.

I Don't Know What's Really Happening

This second wall is knowledge of what school in the United States is like. Valdes (1996) argues that "Mexican working-class parents bring to the United States goals, life plans, and experiences that do not help them make sense of what schools expect of their children" (p. 5). They have no road map, instruction sheet, or manual for how to negotiate U.S. schools. At first, they may not even suspect that U.S. schools will differ from those they experienced as children in Mexico. This second wall may be a surprise, and it may become visible to them only gradually as their children progress through the grades.

Magdalena does not always understand what the school requires or why. Not once, but twice, the school insisted that Magdalena have Fabian checked. She was not clear why he was to be checked either time, but she cooperated with the school's request and took him to her doctor. Each time, the doctor said he was fine. The combination of the school's instructions, the interpreter's translation, and her comprehension of the message resulted in Magdalena not understanding that a counselor's report, rather than a physician's report, was being requested. Given the Mexican culture in which she grew up, Magdalena was puzzled by the message to have Fabian checked. Magdalena said that in Mexico, if there is a problem with a child, the teacher and parent talk to each other and do not bring in a third person to give an opinion. The following excerpt from our conversation is illustrative:

Jerry: When you were a child in Mexico, did you hear of people going to a counselor?

Magdalena: No. Never.

Jerry: Have you had experiences with counselors?

Magdalena: No. I don't know if it's right or wrong. I have no idea.

Jerry: Would it be shameful or shocking to go to a counseling doctor? A psychologist?

Magdalena: No. But it's not common. People don't normally do that. Here, for a little thing, they refer you. But not in Mexico. It's not usual.

What is the school thinking about when they say Fabian must be checked? Why involve an outsider? Fabian showed no signs of mental illness.

Magdalena was like the 10 Mexican immigrant families in New Mexico studied by Valdes (1996):

They expected [U.S. schools] to be like the schools they had known or attended in Mexico, and they were continually surprised and taken aback by the differences. Assumptions that they made about what the schools did, about what they expected of children, and about what they expected of parents were undoubtedly wrong. (p. 148)

Magdalena's reaction to four other protocols reflects a lack of understanding about school procedures: homework, suspension, reinstatement after suspension, and summer school. These protocols are like bricks in the wall of the school culture that separates Magdalena from the school. About homework, Magdalena said,

I don't hear any negative feedback from other teachers, only these two that are the only ones that speak Spanish. I say, "Well if they speak Spanish, why don't they send me a note saying your son has this and this and this assignment?" . . . I felt bad because, I said, "Why are they waiting until now? Why didn't they tell me before? Why didn't they tell me before so much work had been accumulated?" . . . They could have told me earlier, then I would have been able to speak with my son and help him out. And that's when I felt bad.

Why was Magdalena not informed by the school that Fabian was not doing his homework before the problem became so big? How do parents find out about homework assignments anyway? What exactly do schools expect of children and parents regarding homework?

In one case, incomplete homework escalated into suspension from school. What cues did Fabian and Magdalena miss? How do parents learn that not completing homework leads to after-school detention, not serving after-school detention leads to Saturday morning detention, and being late for Saturday morning detention results in suspension from school? Is there some way for a parent to learn this protocol other than by experience?

Magdalena also was not clear about the reason the school summoned her to reinstate Fabian after his suspension. She said, in part, "I'm supposed to go. . . . Why should I go there for? What is the idea for me coming to school?" Why does a school require a mother to accompany a son to school? What purpose does it serve? Magdalena perceived no benefit to her or Fabian from doing so, and the school did not explain. Fabian's school was several blocks away, and Magdalena does not drive a car. She had to ask a relative to take care of three preschool children or to take them with her. This ritual of

accompanying a child to school to be reinstated did not make sense to her, and it added to the hardships of the day. What was going on?

Magdalena was also confused in May of the year Fabian was in seventh grade when the school let her know indirectly that he needed to go to summer school. She said,

But we didn't know. And we had already planned that we weren't gonna be in Minnesota. So now I don't know what to do because we had already made the plan for the family to be away for the summer. . . . Nobody from school contacted me about summer school. Somebody mentioned it to my son and he told me.

That Fabian needed extended academic help and should attend summer school was a surprise to Magdalena. It was like turning a corner into another part of the wall. How is an immigrant parent to learn about unexpected obstacles? Being caught by surprise makes it difficult for a parent to accommodate one child's need for extra schooling in the summer when the family has planned to return to Texas and Mexico for the summer. What is one to do?

Magdalena sensed that important information about Fabian's school progress had not been communicated to her. Did she miss some cues? Why did she not get notes from school, at least from the Spanish-speaking teachers, before Fabian was so far behind in his schoolwork? Why was she not notified about summer school directly and early enough so that family plans and school plans could be coordinated?

The wall of school culture atop the wall of English form a formidable barrier for Magdalena. She is walled out, and it has significant consequences for her and her son.

The School Is Difficult to Deal With

Like many parents, Magdalena considers education to be important for her children (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Nieto, 1996; Okagaki, Frensch, & Gordon, 1995). School is a means to a better life for Fabian. She said,

I want Fabian to learn. Something that will help him in the future when he's older. For his children. I want him to have a good job, like every mother who thinks about their children, for them to be better. To have a better life.

She said, "There's more help for the children" here than in Mexico. "There's more help here in almost every regard." School is a great opportunity

and the wellspring of hope. If he goes to school and studies and learns, he will have a better life.

Magdalena's desire for Fabian to go to school is frustrated by the school's practices. It seems like the school acts hastily in disciplining him, and her attempts to support him are not enough.

The School Just Takes Action on Its Own

Magdalena seemed to find out about what was going on at school with Fabian too late to help matters much. Fabian's seventh grade science teacher complained that he was distracted, did not pay attention, and did not do his homework. Magdalena said, "She sent him to the office for like 2 months, sent him to the office, and I was not told." She found out about problems with math homework after he was far behind. She wondered, "Why didn't they tell me before so much work had been accumulated?" The suspensions for smoking and missing Saturday morning detention and the expulsion came as surprises.

Magdalena saw the school as acting hastily, with no warning. It was like a storm that suddenly begins to blow with no signs in the sky, no change in temperature, no drop in barometric pressure. She was surprised when she was told that there was a problem at school:

They do the things right away, violently, without thinking that maybe it wasn't the student alone. They just go ahead and take action without finding the facts. They make decisions without thinking. They just make a decision on the spot.

When the interpreter relayed Magdalena's torrent of words to me, she interjected, "She uses the word 'violent' in Spanish." In English, violent carries the meaning of extreme force or sudden intensity, furious or vehement action. And indeed, to Magdalena, the school did seem to act with extreme and sudden intensity. She was jolted—caught by surprise. She was unaware of a storm brewing until the school struck like a bolt of lightning. Why were the first indicators that Fabian may have been smoking or had been in a fight a message from the school saying that he was suspended or expelled? The school appears neither to investigate nor consider the circumstances surrounding a behavior. It acts suddenly, and the actions are extreme.

Despite Magdalena's desire for Fabian to go to school, the school seems to act unilaterally from time to time to exclude him. The school is so near—just some blocks away—yet so far, he is not allowed to attend sometimes.

I Feel Badly I Can't Support My Son Better

Magdalena bears the day-to-day worry about Fabian and school. Her husband blames Fabian for the problems. She said that her husband believes,

that [it] is my son's fault if he did something. . . . If my son did the things that he was supposed to do then he wouldn't be in this problem. He wouldn't have this problem. I'm the one who talks to my son and I'm always helping. You know . . . just pushing him along, helping him to do stuff.

Magdalena has been pretty much alone in supporting Fabian. Supporting him means that she has tried to get teachers to help him more, has tried to counter injustice at school on his behalf, and has assured Fabian that she will not leave him alone.

White working-class parents (Lareau, 1989) and Mexican immigrant parents (Valdes, 1996) understand that the school's role is to teach children academic content. Magdalena expects the school to teach Fabian whatever he needs to know, and she thought Fabian needed more help in the late elementary school grades. She said,

If the teachers had helped my son a little bit more he would be doing better in the classes right now. His . . . grades are rather low. . . . I had asked them if they could help me out and they said, "Yes," but they didn't do anything.

Our conversation continued:

Jerry: Do you feel you needed to do something to help your son at school?

Magdalena: Yes and I'm not able to.

Jerry: And why are you not able to?

Magdalena: Because I don't know English and sometimes [teachers] ask something and I don't know.

With a bit more help, maybe Fabian would be doing better. Magdalena lacks the leverage, the footing, the wherewithal to get the school to help her son more. When one does not speak the school's language and does not know what is happening at school, it is so difficult to support a child by soliciting teachers for the expertise and attention one thinks is needed.

Although Magdalena lacked language expertise and knowledge about what really happens at school, she went there to try to negotiate an early end to the suspension for smoking. In a quiet Spanish voice, she contested the suspension: "Why if you're not sure of the [guilt of my son], why are you

sending him to get another checkup?" She sensed that the punishment was unjust, but she could not stop it. She said,

He needed my support more, and I couldn't give it to him, because I, because I couldn't. . . . He was telling me, "No," he wasn't smoking, and they were saying, "Yes, he was." So regardless of what I said and my son said, they punish him.

What was she to do? She believed he was innocent, but when she tried to intervene with the principal, she was rebuffed. Magdalena said with a quiet voice, "I just felt bad because I didn't know what to do." Magdalena is not alone; some other Mexican immigrant parents feel unable to protect their children from maltreatment at school also (Valdes, 1996).

Magdalena also thought Fabian needed more personal support from her. She said,

I think that maybe my son needs more attention . . . more support so that he knows that he's not alone. Maybe he thought that I don't speak English and since I don't go [to school] very often, maybe he thought that I was just going to leave him alone, not support him. But I told him, "No, that if something happens again to tell me."

There is a constancy in Magdalena's commitment to Fabian even though she feels badly that she cannot support him better.

The school is like a magnet attracting Magdalena because of the great opportunities it offers Fabian and at the same time, it repels both of them with policies that make it difficult to keep Fabian in school. Magdalena believes there are better schooling opportunities for Fabian in the United States than in Mexico, yet his junior high school is difficult to deal with. Supporting him at school was complicated by Magdalena's feeling she did not belong there.

They're Saying, "What Is She Doing Here?"

I asked Magdalena how she felt when she went to school. She answered, "I feel like a stranger. I feel like they're thinking, 'Well, what is this person doing here? She doesn't even know how to talk or what to do. What is she doing here?' That's how I feel."

School is a space where Magdalena feels she does not belong. She is the "other," the outsider, the odd one, the stranger. She is unlike the others at school. Rodriguez (1981) wrote about poor, Spanish-speaking Mexican workers at a construction site in California. The Anglo, full-time carpenters,

plumbers, electricians, and painters worked side by side and moved with assurance as they worked. They were middle-class Americans who talked in English about football teams, vacations in Las Vegas, and the gas mileage of various makes of campers. He observed a small group of Mexicans. They worked alone, apart from the Anglos; ate alone; and spoke quietly among themselves. Only their leader spoke to the gringo boss and then it was in quiet, broken English. They came and went in an old truck, anonymously and silently. They were paid in cash and disappeared. They were, Rodriguez writes, "profoundly alien."

Like the Mexican workers, Magdalena was profoundly alien as a parent in her son's school. She not only belonged to another country, but she also felt different in nature and character from other people at school; the alienation was deeply felt. She stood apart in the space she entered somewhat reluctantly to support her son.

When she goes to school alone, Magdalena feels that others are saying that she does not know how to speak English. Speech may separate humans from other species, but it also separates people from each other. In the dominant, mainstream culture, English is the means of communication, the channel of understanding and being understood by others. At school, the teachers and other staff may think she does not belong there—should not even be there—if she cannot speak English. She senses that they do not think her capable of knowing what to do. Being stripped of the ability to communicate diminishes a person in trying to support his or her child inside the school. Magdalena said, "When they did not have an interpreter, they make me feel that it didn't matter if I went or not, because they couldn't communicate anyhow."

The language barrier was penetrated somewhat when Manuel, the liaison, accompanied Magdalena for appointments with the principal. Then, going to school was different. "I feel more secure. I feel better that I'm going to be able to understand. I'll be able to understand what they say and I'll be able to explain," Magdalena said.

Looking at the Walls From My Perspective

I acknowledge an unease about interpreting Magdalena's experiences. I sense that my inability to speak Spanish raises not a wall but a veil between us. Have I captured the essence of being "walled out" of the school by language and culture? Of the school being difficult to deal with and of feeling like a stranger in the school? How well have I understood her experiences?

During my last visit, I asked Magdalena if she would like a copy of the final version of this article, and she smiled shyly and shook her head no. Now I am glad she did not want to see it. Otherwise, I might lack the courage to disclose my despair with some of her experiences. Metaphorically, I want to avert my eyes so I cannot see Fabian being flung out and away from the school. I do not think Magdalena saw a pattern escalating from a teacher saying that Fabian was not listening to her, to homework not being done, to after-school detention, to Saturday detention, to suspension, and to his expulsion from school for 1 year. How much longer will he be willing to go to school? And if he is willing to continue going to school, how much longer until the school pushes him outside the walls that keep his mother out? I have a fatalistic sense that the momentum intensifying since the fourth grade will likely result in catapulting Fabian over the walls before he graduates. Certainly, many other students of Mexican descent drop out of school before graduation (Darder, 1991; Valdes, 1996).

Like Magdalena, I cling tenaciously to the belief that education is essential for a good life. But in one important way, my child is advantaged because I know the language of the school and I know a great deal about its culture. I feel like an outsider at my son's high school, but I am not deeply and profoundly alienated.

If teachers and principals were to practice their professions more sensitively, more attentively, what might they learn from Magdalena's experience? What does her experience of standing up for Fabian disclose about schools? What is going on at school, for a mother to stand up for a child? To stand up for a child is to defend, support, or take the child's part (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). If a child is to be stood up for, then he or she must be vulnerable in some way or in need of assistance from outside the school. When Fabian seemed to be unjustly accused of smoking, Magdalena was drawn into standing up for him. How might schools be changed so that parents do not feel their children are vulnerable to unjust accusations and to violent, rapid actions taken against a child? Schools are human made. They could be remade by humans.

What do Magdalena's experiences disclose about who belongs at school and who the school belongs to? Do they show us that certain people are excluded, disallowed a sense of belonging, and kept outside the walls? Magdalena felt like those at school were saying, "What is she doing here?" Why would our schools, created to educate all children, make a mother feel so profoundly alien? Are schools for some mothers but not for others? What kind of person must a mother be to feel welcome, to feel that she belongs at school and that the school belongs to her? Is it any wonder that a child might

feel uncomfortable in a school where a mother feels ill at ease? Indeed, how can a mother send a child into the care of people at school who make her feel she herself does not belong there?

What is so extraordinary about Magdalena's experiences is how ordinary they are. Thousands of children across the United States have parents who do not understand what is happening at school, feel profoundly alien in their children's schools, and have too little power or capabilities to adequately protect their children's interests at school. Magdalena's story is the story of many parents extending across cultural traditions.

Note

1. This article is written in the voice of the first author, Jerry McClelland, who did the interviewing and most of the writing. The second author, Chen Chen, contributed ideas, library research, and some of the written passages.

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