

THE UNTOLD STORY OF CHILDREN
WHO GIVE A VOICE TO GENERATIONS

TRANSLATORS



COMMUNITY DISCUSSION GUIDE

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LA HISTORIA AÚN NO CONTADA DE
LOS NIÑOS QUE DAN VOZ A UNA GENERACIÓN

TRADUCTORES

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A DOCUMENTARY SHORT DIRECTED BY
RUDY VALDEZ

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CHILD TRANSLATOR

BY GABRIELA GONZALES

Director of Promotors Programs, *Esperanza Community Housing*



Being a child translator and interpreter has shaped who I am today. This is how I see it: once a translator, always a translator. The film *Translators* beautifully and responsibly captures the experience of both the children and their parents, and the importance of language justice. The film took me back to my own childhood when I translated for both parents. Densel, the youngest child translator in the film, touched my heart. I identify with him because I became a translator very young.

I was not always bilingual as Spanish is my first language. I've lived in the United States since I was two years old. When I entered kindergarten at Breed Street Elementary in East Los Angeles, my teacher, Ms. Anderson, would pinch me for speaking Spanish. I caught on fast that speaking Spanish would get me pinched and in trouble, so at five years old, I decided to stay quiet and try to go unnoticed. By the time I got to first grade, I was fluent in English.

My fluency in English created a responsibility and an unspoken agreement with both my parents that I would be their translator. My childhood games included playing teacher and sitting with my parents or my dolls and teaching them English.

Growing up in South Central Los Angeles allowed me to interact with the Latino and African American communities. It might not be important to many, but I could appreciate the neighbor on the right blasting the music of Chalino Sanchez or Vicente Fernandez, and my neighbor on the left blasting the music of The Gap band or NWA.

As a teenager, being bilingual helped me to earn money from my mother's friends when they needed a translator. I am proud that, as a teenager, I helped my mother's friend fill out the application to become a U.S. citizen. Everything went smoothly and, with my help, she is a U.S. citizen today.

As a teenager, I regularly took advantage of being the family translator. Whenever I ditched school and the administrator called to let my parents know I had been absent, I would tell

my parents the school had called because I was doing an excellent job.

Today, the way we communicate has totally changed. I come from a generation that still remembers the typewriter. In high school, I took a typing class, and I learned to type without looking at the keyboard. Today we have repurposed words. A passing thought or idea can go viral, reaching millions. We have trending tweets when, back in the day, only the birds tweeted.

When I was in elementary school we were taught cursive writing. We learned the magic words: *please, may I, and thank you*. Today children are only taught to print. Who needs to learn cursive writing when everything is done on an electronic device – a cell phone, desktop, tablet. We can connect with the whole world in real-time. No matter how significant or ridiculous, our communication will go viral.

My children are third-generation Mexican American. They don't need to translate for me, so they have taken a different route. They decided to learn Japanese, and I would dare to say that their Japanese is better than their Spanish.

As a mother, I've been criticized for not teaching my children Spanish. I didn't plan it like this. It just happened. I support and enjoy my children's desire to learn a new language (Sergio, age 25; Kevin, age 21; and Nicholas, age 16). I appreciate that they had the choice, and not the responsibility, to learn and speak other languages, and that they are free to choose when to be a translator.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 What was your strongest emotion when watching the film? Who in the film caused you to have that emotion?
- 2 In your opinion, who should be responsible for translation at schools? At hospitals?
- 3 Does this film motivate you to take action? Have you ever considered volunteering as a translator or joining a language justice campaign?
- 4 How does this film create awareness about the 11 million children serving as translators?
- 5 The families in the film are from Latino communities. In your opinion, can other communities relate to the themes in this film? Why or why not?



STUDENTS AS TRANSLATORS AND WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

BY JOSE RODRIGUEZ

Director of Parent and Community Engagement, *UnidosUS*



Using students as translators may have long-term consequences for the student's family life, schooling, and social emotions. **Translators** illustrates a very common experience for immigrant families who rely on their children to serve as language brokers, helping to communicate with teachers, doctors, lawyers, or any business transactions that may require translation. This can include translating written text for the family or oral interpretation at a business or school meeting.

My own personal experience as a translator began when I was a child just learning to read. I do not know how effective I was, but as an adult, I still find myself translating. I remind people that I am not an expert, and I may not fully understand the context of the material, but I will try my best. When I worked in a school district, I often accompanied parents as their advocate and left the translating to the trained and qualified experts who knew the specialized vocabulary. It is not recommended that elementary or high school students serve as translators, but very often, they are the only English voice the families have, and this is why I highly recommend that families find an ally in the schools who can serve as their advocate. Schools can play a major role in the success of the students they serve when they provide families with the information and tools they need and empower them with strategies to help their children succeed academically.

Immigrant parents and their children are protected under the 14th Amendment, which prohibits states from denying a free public education to undocumented immigrant children regardless of their immigration status (Congress.gov, n.d.). The education of English learners (ELs) is grounded in important court cases that you can review at ¡Colorín colorado!, a bilingual site for educators and families of English language learners (¡Colorín colorado!, n.d.).

Upon registering for public school, the parents / caregiver / family is given a home language survey to determine if the student qualifies for language services, whether bilingual,

dual language, or English as a Second Language (ESL), sometimes called English for Students of Other Languages (ESOL; The U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Based on the home language survey, the student is then assessed to determine their English proficiency level and determine if the student qualifies for the language program. Parents have the right to accept or deny services, but the school is obligated to offer the program and explain the benefits of the program and how their students will be monitored throughout the school year. Parents/caregivers/families will also be kept informed of their student's English proficiency progress based on a yearly assessment. It is not unusual for parents to deny language services based on what others have told them about the school language program, or often the parents want their students to learn English as soon as possible since they will be the interpreters/translators for them. Even if the parents/caregiver/family denies the services, the student's language proficiency will continue to be monitored, and the family will be informed and offered the program yearly.

Families need to understand that translation requires many language skills that a student new to the U.S. school system is still learning and trying to make sense of. The student may have basic social language skills in English and is learning academic language skills in English. When translating a document or interpreting, a student may be able to translate the words, but not be able to understand the context. In one instance, a ninth-grade student was given the task of translating a legal document for the parent, but

the student did not understand the context of the document, and it caused frustration for both parent and student. The student kept explaining that he knew the words but did not understand what the document was saying. As the ESL coordinator, I had to intervene and accompany the parent to the business where the document was coming from so that they could explain to the parent in comprehensible language what it was that the document stated. During this time, I helped the parent understand the process of acquiring a new language and how daunting it may be for a high school student taking a full load of classes in a new language. The parent understood, was more cognizant of what to ask her student to translate, and learned to ask for help. This is why it is so important for families to work together with the schools so that the school can provide an interpreter or a person who can translate for them, especially during meetings with teachers and staff who may not know the language.

Research shows that Latino parents view teachers and school personnel as the final experts on education (Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008). They believe that their children's education is important and that they should leave it to the experts for whom, by doing this, they are showing respect. They believe their own responsibility is to:

- have high aspirations for their children;
- provide for the family;
- ensure that children attend school; and
- teach children morals, respect, and accountability.

The most successful schools consider these factors in their strategies for engaging Latino families in authentic, meaningful relationships as education partners. Schools can more effectively engage parents when they help them become knowledgeable about the school system and involve them in developing school programs.

At UnidosUS, we know that language and cultural differences keep many parents/families from becoming involved in their children's school, as does, for some of them, their economic background. Other parents/caregivers may have failed in school, and the inadequacy they feel is what keeps them away. Others may feel that the school has a negative perception of them, so they do not feel welcomed, and others simply do not know how to become involved in their children's education.

Schools can play a major role in the success of the students they serve when they provide families with the information and tools they need and empower them with strategies to help their children succeed academically. To this end, schools must strive to engage families and their communities as collaborators and tap into the values, history, and language that bind them. Schools that have successfully engaged parents as partners in their children's education have taught us that:

- engaging parents leads to increased student attendance and greater academic success;
- parents become involved in school when they are treated as true partners;
- parents feel respected when teachers take the time to share with them their children's challenges and successes; and
- parents become better advocates for their school and their children when the school takes time to talk to them about the importance of attending school daily, completing take-home assignments, and, in paving the road to college entry, the need to get good grades;
- parents need to receive orientation in a language other than English and, once they have received it, make sure their children are in school, follow the school's rules, and complete their work successfully;
- schools that integrate parents' and community's culture, history, and language are more likely to succeed in their family engagement efforts; and
- when given the tools, parents who do not understand the intricacies of standardized tests, academic exams, or academic requirements for college entry are better able to serve as effective support to both their children and the school.

Thus, UnidosUS's community engagement model brings parents, schools, and community partners—such as community-based organizations, places of worship, and local businesses—together as collaborators in their children's success. While students continue to serve as translators for the families, working in collaboration with schools and other local community-based organizations or universities provides parents/caregivers/families with a better chance of getting proper translation and interpreting services, which can help to alleviate the stress they may be experiencing as a family.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Do you know if your K-12 student receives language services such as Bilingual Education/English as a Second Language or in a Dual Language program?
- 2 If the school does not have translation services, can I still bring my son/daughter to translate? Who do I ask if the schools offer translation services?
- 3 I want to be more involved with my son/daughter's school, but how can I, as a parent/caregiver, be more engaged in the school?
- 4 Does the school offer English classes for adults? Where and is there a cost?
- 5 I know that my son/daughter feels overwhelmed or frustrated while translating for me. What can I do to help ease the stress?



REFLECTION

BY EFRAIN AGOSTO

Professor of New Testament Studies, *New York Theological Seminary*



Translators is a poignant film, and I could not help but cry while watching it. The three Latin American immigrant families and their children – particularly the older children (ages 11 and 16) who help their parents to navigate medical and educational systems, plus read business mail and the like – brought back memories of my parents’ struggles in the 1950s when they migrated to New York City from Puerto Rico. That was a long time ago, and my family’s story is from a different time period with different cultural and political dynamics. Yet, although the memories are long-buried, the film drew them out. The emotions rose to the surface, especially when watching the children trying to help.

My parents moved from Puerto Rico to New York City in 1951. I was born in 1955. My earliest memories are when my sister was born in 1958, and I was three years old. She had congenital scoliosis and was not expected to live long. She did, and my parents, especially my mother, navigated all the medical interventions without my help as I was too young. My mother must have had help at the hospital or friends from our church who aided with translation. My father worked restaurant jobs as a bus boy and short order cook, and he never learned much English. When I was older, he had some drinking problems that necessitated discussions with Alcoholics Anonymous personnel. I remember insisting for him, as a translator, that he didn’t need their help (it was an English-language program in the late 1960s, as far as I knew) because the church was going to see him through. I was wrong. But should I have been responsible for making those decisions for him as a translator? Clearly not. My father ended up having drinking problems for most of his life.

My mother worked hard to find help for me to learn enough English in my early schooling. We only spoke Spanish at home and church, and New York City schools had no bilingual education programs in the early 1960s like there are now. My mother solicited assistance from a downstairs neighbor to help me with homework in kindergarten and first grade (in 1960 and 1961). We lived on the fifth floor of a five-story tenement building in the South Bronx, and this particular neighbor was another Puerto Rican migrant who

had been living in the U.S. longer than my parents and thus knew English better. I don’t remember exactly how much she helped, but by second and third grade, I was flourishing in school. I remember getting good grades and praise from my teachers, including in reports to my parents. By then, my mother knew enough English to ensure I was performing well in school. But it never was easy for her. I remember helping her with translation when we had to seek help from New York City social services (“welfare”) when my father couldn’t work for a while. It was embarrassing enough for us both to ask for help. It was difficult when social workers were mean, resentful, or downright belligerent to us, especially to a child translator. The professionals in this film *Translators* – medical personnel and teachers – seem sympathetic and helpful to the children and families before them.

I have one memory that has stuck with me all these years. It was the first day of school in one of the early grades. My mother had purchased a notebook for me, but I wasn’t sure if I needed it for that first day. She handed it to me as she dropped me off at school in the South Bronx (we never owned a car and walked to school in those days). She kept taking the notebook back from me and then handing it back again, unsure if I needed it, nor was there anyone she could ask and understand. That went on for a few minutes. I can’t remember if I finally kept the notebook or not. But I do remember thinking, “My mother really cares about my schooling” and “she and I don’t really know how this works

REFLECTION

or what's expected." The incident in the film with the 11-year-old boy translating his assessments – great in math, improvement needed in reading – for his mother struck me as poignant. His honesty – and his mother's care – were powerful. Today, there would be a professional translator somewhere in the mix, or maybe even more Spanish-speaking teachers made available.

That brings to mind the geographic and cultural differences between my childhood and today. Today, in many areas of the country, immigration is a contested and politically charged reality, particularly in certain parts of the country near borders. Where immigrant families live makes a difference regarding the availability of professional translators and/or Latinx/bilingual professionals, including doctors and teachers. When my parents migrated from Puerto Rico in 1951 there were minimal resources. Yet,

perhaps because they were Puerto Ricans – and therefore U.S. citizens with some freedoms and acceptance, especially in Northeast urban areas – survival and even flourishing was more of a possibility, especially for the children (like me and my sisters). I don't recall consistently translating for my parents. They learned some English and found help from neighbors or the church. This reflects the political climate for Puerto Ricans in New York back then, as opposed to Latin American immigrants on the Southwest border, for example. In any case, to expect people so young to be translators of important matters for their parents, indeed matters of life and death in some instances, is ultimately sad and, at times, traumatic. My emotional pain is long-buried; this film helped bring it back. My parents' courage and determination, like those in this film, remains a constant. And the courage and determination of all child translators is both laudable and unjust.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 As shared in the above reflection, some memories readily come to mind as a result of watching *Translators*. Others are too hidden and may never be remembered. How do you connect to the issue of **memory** reflected in these comments? Why do you think we repress some painful and traumatic memories and recall others? What does this say about how we story our childhoods?
- 2 Dr. Efrain Agosto suggests **timing and geography** impact if and how children are expected to translate. Dr. Agosto was too young when a lot of English-learning and adjustment happened for his parents, although the language barriers they faced persisted well into the years when he could be helpful. Newer immigrants with older children, particularly those living in certain parts of the country, may undergo traumatic translation experiences in the same way today as 60 years ago. Is it ultimately a matter of specific family circumstances, or are there certain patterns that persist and repeat themselves across generations and places?
- 3 Why, in fact, do some regions of the U.S. resist supplying adequate adult translators and even professional educators and medical personnel to help newer immigrants with inevitable challenges to language and culture?



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THANK YOU

Thank you for screening the film and participating in the impact campaign!

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