

Citizenship: My Father's Way

Paula Carter

My father, Ralph Couso, was a first generation American. His first language was Spanish, but he could switch effortlessly to English. I did not master his bilingual skills, but I learned from him that overcoming language barriers is key to understanding people's thinking. His example also led me to believe that most individuals who come to the United States really do embrace the "American Dream"—they wish to improve the economic standing of their families and to contribute to their new country's well being.

Emigrating from Spain, my grandparents and their extended families arrived at Ellis Island. Other relatives immigrated to Cuba and countries in South America. My family settled in San Francisco in the 1920s. While the adults worked as bar tenders, waiters, hat makers, and house cleaners, my dad and his brother had free run of the city. When they were not in school, they played baseball in empty lots and, when times were good, attended organized games at baseball parks that dotted the city. They learned English by watching Hollywood movies that, they later joked, caused them to speak like James Cagney and other prominent actors of the time.

At seventeen, my dad dropped out of Galileo High to provide financial support for a struggling household. By the time my brothers and I entered the picture, his priorities had shifted to what we might accomplish rather than dwelling on his missed opportunities. Despite his lack of a high school diploma, his love of the democratic process resonated throughout our home. Election time was a big event in our community. My mother would set up a card table and chairs in the living room, and my dad's Spanish-speaking friends would gather to have their sample ballots translated, line-by-line. I heard a message loud and clear, "The first duty of a citizen is to participate!"

When I was eight years old, my father was elected to a four-year term to the county board of supervisors of our Northern California community. I vividly remember getting ready for school the morning after that first election. My parents explained that Dad was able to serve in this position because the majority of voters trusted him to make decisions in the best interests of the community. Over the next sixteen years, my brothers and I listened to discussions of local politics



Voting at Rita Cannan Elementary School.

at the kitchen table, distributed campaign posters, stuffed envelopes, and sat in on board meetings occasionally. After each election, my father was humbled by his victory. Even though many years have past, memories of my father with his friends define for me what it means to be involved in the life of a community as *un ciudadano de primera calidad* (a first-rate citizen)!

Teaching in Today's Schools

Growing up, my parents always stressed the importance of being a good citizen. It is because of my parents and my commitment to make a difference that I feel quite comfortable spending my days teaching in a first, second, third grade multi-age classroom with my bilingual team teaching partner, Theresa Crowley. We serve students and their families at Rita Cannan Elementary, in Reno, Nevada. More than seventy percent of our children live in homes in which Spanish is the dominant language. All of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Cannan Elementary is located in the older northeast part of Reno surrounded by low rent apartments, a large housing project, and single-family dwellings. (It's named for Rita Agnes Cannan, a beloved elementary school principal in Reno from 1931-1958.)¹ Adjacent to the school sits a nearly empty building which houses a program for young teenagers who are showing signs of gang involvement. A majority of our parents are part of the unskilled labor force that keeps the casinos, restaurants, hotels, and construction projects running smoothly and profitably. For families new to this country, this part of Reno offers an affordable place to establish roots and begin pursuing the American Dream.

Twelve years ago I left a teaching position in a school located in one of the highest income areas in Reno to teach in the lower-income northeast. Despite being a bit apprehensive, my teaching philosophy did not change. The students who come to Cannan are similar to other children; they are eager to learn if someone has the key to open their hearts. All children who enter our classroom can experience academic success. The key, in my opinion,

is a realistic view of teaching, based on these ideas:

- A. Discovering and encouraging student potential.
- B. Creating a relevant curriculum and,
- C. Identifying and using effective pedagogy.

Teaching All Students

Whether I am teaching at Cannan or in the Reno suburbs, I begin by learning about my students and their parents. The reality is that, at Cannan Elementary, some of our immigrant parents are undocumented. Last May, for example, when Bryan (a bright third grader) entered the classroom in tears, we discovered that his mother had been picked up in a routine Immigration and Customs Enforcement raid the night before and was being held by the authorities.² While his mother worked through the legal issues, we knew our job was not to judge her situation, but to provide a good education for Bryan and all of the children who arrive at our school. In social studies and in the daily activities of the school, our students learn about becoming productive citizens. "America is a work in progress," we tell them, "it is growing and changing as we speak. You need to become part of the process if you wish to make a difference."

Our students are very observant; they are watching, listening, and taking note of teachers' actions sometimes even more than our words.³ How we conduct business in our classrooms may say more about citizenship skills than the lessons we may teach.

Learning about Our Country

We rely on our social studies program to provide the students with background information about their community and country as we make connections to their home countries. While literacy programs facilitate the children's transition from their native languages to English with mostly fictional literature, we create a balance by selecting non-fiction material: poetry and short stories that describe American heroes, events, and issues from the history of Nevada and the nation.

We also make available plastic tubs full of non-fiction books and maps for the children to read along. We play games that allow them to learn about the world in a fun way. The questions they ask and their attention to detail tell us that they are fascinated by the idea of our country as a work in progress, and that there are many ways to reveal that story.⁴

Teaching students about specific events and personalities is a challenging task. But even more difficult is helping students understand that there may be more than one explanation for the occurrence of an event, and more than one scholarly treatment of a historical figure. A major component of our program is studying national holidays: Martin Luther King Jr. Day, President's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, and Veterans Day. We sprinkle a bit of song and celebration in these lessons to make history come alive and to reinforce the many ways we can learn. We also highlight the different ways that Americans celebrate national holidays.

Music and Social Studies

Each year our music teacher, Dawn Roskelley, invites children to audition and perhaps perform in the school's talent show. The "ticket" to attend is a food dish that represents a family's culture of origin. This annual event is the culmination of Dawn's behind-the-scenes interactions with the children and their families over the year. Dawn identifies both students and their relatives who are knowledgeable of their cultures of origin and interested in telling others about their family histories. She encourages these students to become performers and presenters in the class.

Dawn tells students and parents, "As you learn about your new country, do not forget your historical roots. Celebrate them! Together, they make you the American you are." Students practice their dances, and parents and community members share their cultural history. Each year the strength of the community is evident as audiences come together to watch dances from Mexico, Pacific Islands, and other countries. Last year, the

grandmother of one of the Pacific Island dancers just had to join in the motions at the side of the stage.

“The time I invest in them and the effort parents and children put in creates a bond between us all,” Dawn explains. “When they take the knowledge and the skills they’ve learned and share them with others, they are doing it as representatives of their cultures. In the end, what you get is each child saying, “Here I am! This is me. I’m valuable and special and I’m here to teach you about why that’s true!”

Dawn has shown us the value of incorporating music into our instruction. So, along with the textbook, literature, maps, and globes, we also use songs to help students learn about the history of their newly adopted country. We use *The Heritage Collection* (a CD of songs, lyrics, posters, and background information) for historical accuracy and to contextualize the lyrics and melodies.⁵ An added bonus is that many of the songs

encourage group singing and dancing. Older children help the younger ones learn the songs we introduce.

Changing Times

When looking at the development of the southwest, particularly the cattle industry, we locate the Southwest on a map, discuss the conflicts between those who wanted to raise cattle on fenced property versus open range, and the importance of resolving conflicts without violence. The lyrics of *Old Texas* always spark interest and discussion:

*I'm going to leave, ol' Texas now
They've got no use for the long-
horn cow.
They've plowed and fenced my
cattle range,
And the people there are all so
strange.*

We point out how differing opinions can help describe a nation’s history.

*I'll take my horse. I'll take my rope
And hit the trail upon a lope.
The hard, hard ground will be my
bed.
And the saddle seat will hold my
head.
I'll bid Adios to the Alamo
And set my head toward
Mexico.⁶*

Another reason we use *Old Texas* is because the children enjoy draping their arms around each other’s shoulders and swaying back and forth as they sing.

The physical and emotional components of this activity reinforce the content of the history lesson, but they have also evoked unexpected results. One day I asked, “I don’t get it. Why do you all love this song so much?” Writing in response, the children poured out their hearts. Some wrote about leaving their home country and the awkwardness of leaving loved ones and adjusting to a new home. Others associated the lyrics of *Old Texas* with the loss of a parent who was in prison.

To them it was a song about saying goodbye. Immigrant families know very well the pain associated with saying goodbye to the familiar in an effort to reach out for the new and unknown.

Rights, Responsibilities, and Critical Thinking

We often hear accounts from students and parents about domestic violence and gang activity in the neighborhood. We invite parents to participate in lessons on citizenship education that are part of our social studies program. We examine U.S. history, current events, and incidents close to the lives of our students to illustrate how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful and orderly fashion.⁷

Teaching the children to think critically when examining issues and incidents is a mainstay of our con-



The horse wrangler, Bonham, Texas, 1910.

Erwin E. Smith/Library of Congress

flict resolution component. We take students through the process of identifying a problem, gathering information, offering possible solutions, and selecting one.⁸ We typically begin social studies lessons around real-life problems that come up in school.

For example, when teaching a unit on “How to Behave in Different Public Places,” I recall Hamza, a student from my first year at Cannan Elementary. Hamza and his family had recently emigrated from Morocco. They spoke Arabic and French, but not English. The language barrier isolated Hamza who, to call attention to himself at lunch, would put food on his head, throw things, and jump up out of his seat, making other students laugh.

“How can you help Hamza learn the lunchroom rules and follow them?” I asked the class. The students responded: “Maybe he should eat lunch in the classroom until he gets used to the rules.” “He could sit in the office and eat.” “His mother should be asked to join him for lunch.”

I steered the students toward less punitive consequences by asking, “Wouldn’t Hamza benefit more if he was in a setting with other children?” After some additional brainstorming, an older student said, “Someone could sit with him and show him what to do while the rest of us follow the rules.” When I asked the students whether any of them would volunteer to be mentors, several raised their hand. The class decided that a mentor could demonstrate to Hamza the appropriate rules, while other students could exhibit happy and sad faces to communicate to Hamza as he made progress. The mentor would report progress, or the lack thereof, to the teacher.

“Too Much Liberty”

This approach, which focused on student leadership rather than teacher intervention, led to an improvement in Hamza’s behavior. When I told Hamza’s mother of her son’s progress in learning school rules, she told us that he had been strictly disciplined in Moroccan schools and was having difficulties learning proper

behavior in U.S. schools. “Too much liberty in America!” she told us. That was a lesson for all of us regarding cultural differences. Hamza felt lost in his new, less structured social setting. Receiving some special attention from his peers helped to establish Hamza’s new social behaviors.

It takes time to teach children self-discipline when they are confronted with new freedoms in the classroom and in society. That’s why we try to run our classroom like a democracy. We want students to learn the knowledge and practice the skills that will enable them to make the most appropriate choices.

By using school incidents as examples for discussion, students begin to use their critical thinking skills, asking probing questions to get to the heart of an issue. I push and probe and do not accept shrugged shoulders and rolling eyes as responses. When students do provide a response, I ask them to reflect: “What other response could you have provided?” The message we want to convey is an empowering one: be mature about the choices you make. If you don’t like a lunchroom rule, for example, you can respectfully disagree with it, but you need to develop a persuasive argument for any change. The principal would welcome a letter suggesting a change that might improve lunchroom operations!⁹

Conclusion

Denise Bryant is a colleague who immigrated as an adult to the United States from Lebanon. Her parents followed a few years later.

“I know that it was difficult for you and your family to come to this country,” I said to her one day. “Why do people make the effort? Why did your family come to the United States?”

“My father’s dream,” Denise said, “had always been to live in the United States and become an American citizen because he knew this as a way to guarantee freedom, security, and opportunities for his children and grandchildren. Today, his dream has come true. He is proud to say he is an American!”

As first or second generation immigrants, Denise, Theresa, and I also strive to be first-rate citizens, or *ciudadanas de primera calidad*, as my father might say. We make civic contributions daily through our efforts in the classroom. In a celebratory way, we convince our pupils to become participating members of our country. Then we help them understand that responsibilities come with rights. They must find ways to solve problems creatively and nonviolently if they are to maintain their rights and enjoy their freedoms. We challenge them to think critically, to monitor their own thinking and behavior.

“If you learn to be active, productive citizens in our country,” we say from time to time, “maybe you too can have a job that you love, when you grow up! Just like us.”

Notes

1. Guy Rocha, “Myth # 117—First Female Principal in Nevada,” nevadaculture.org/nsla.
2. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2008), www.ice.gov/about/.
3. Thomas Likona, *Character Matters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).
4. Lucy M. Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Reading* (New York: Longman, 2001).
5. *Heritage Collection*, vol. 3 (Chatsworth, CA: Singlish Enterprises, 2007).
6. “Old Texas” (The Cowboy’s Lament), traditional, in *Heritage Collection*.
7. Diane E. Levin, *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2003).
8. Gretchen Owocki, *Make Way for Literacy* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001).
9. I would like to thank Principal KayAnn Pilling; music teacher, Dawn Roskelley; teachers Theresa Crowley and Denise Bryan; and the students, parents, and other teachers of Rita Cannan Elementary School who were helpful in various ways as I composed this article.

PAULA CARTER teaches at Rita Cannan Elementary School in Reno, Nevada.