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# My Early Education

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**A**S A CHILD GROWING UP in a Spanish-speaking home, it never occurred to me that there was anything different about my upbringing. I didn't realize that not everyone spoke Spanish or that most of the outside world functioned in English. My parents had very little formal education. My mother spoke only Spanish and my father, even though he was bilingual, had only a middle school education. His family and my mother's family had no relatives who were educated. They all had survival skills, but were doomed to menial labor for a living. My father, though, had been in the military and had seen places his relatives could only imagine. I could sense from the beginning that they expected more from me. They wanted me to do more and be more than they were. Menial labor was not for me.

My introduction to the outside English-speaking world occurred when I entered first grade. My hair was combed, my face washed, and I was strongly reminded to behave and not embarrass myself or my family. I felt my family's honor was on my shoulders. My mother admonished me that "those white people are different." How they were different, I didn't ask.

I walked into the first grade class and discovered to my horror that I didn't understand anything that was being said. The teacher, however, had a kindly smile and welcomed me warmly. The other children looked as frightened as I did. The teacher escorted me to a seat and put a name tag on me. The bell rang and school began.

We were led to the bathroom and the water faucet, and shown where to go during a fire drill. That first day we also had recess, ate lunch, colored, and

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received our books. I was surprised that my classmates didn't know how to write their names either, but had to copy them from their name tags. Their advantage was they understood the language. Later in my life, I realized that my first grade teacher probably didn't have experience with non-English speaking students. Her common sense told her to show me what to do while telling me in English. If it hadn't been the sixties, I probably would have been put in an English as a Second Language class. But these classes were still at least 20 years into the future. Education at this point didn't make allowances for a different type of student. Everyone was expected to learn the same, taught by the same methods.

Academics weren't the only foreign ideas to me. The lunchroom menus were also strange. The food was different from what I was used to. At that time, Mexican restaurants were not popular; therefore, tortillas, tacos, and burritos were unheard of unless you were Spanish. On the reverse side, meat loaf, mashed potatoes, rolls, and fried chicken were quite different, though tasty to me. For a while, I refused to eat my mother's cooking, feeling it was below me, and insisted she learn American cooking. She, on the other hand, threatened me with starvation! Needless to say, my self-imposed fast didn't last long.

I also had to deal with recess. I found that the other little girls were excellent teachers. Even though they were familiar with the language, we were all on equal footing as new first graders. We were in awe of the older kids and kept to ourselves. The rope jumping rhymes, string games, and pretend games all contributed to my education. Most of us can remember the words to these games years later. I can remember them as teaching moments that furthered my vocabulary.

All the feelings I had at first about my strange new environment soon left me and I settled down to learn and succeed. I made friends with my classmates who never seemed to see anything different in my appearance, or my initial lack of understanding. They didn't even act shocked or put off when I spoke to my mother in Spanish when they visited my home. They also loved her cooking. On one occasion, my best friend ate half a dozen tortillas and several servings of *frijoles refritos* (refried beans), proclaiming the meal one of the most delicious she'd ever had, a fact that my mother repeated over and over again when, as a teenager, I refused to participate in anything Spanish.

In thinking about my elementary school years, certain aspects stand out: the two story red brick building surrounded by big leafy trees, the stone fence surrounding the building and schoolyard where children played. Certain smells evoke memories: the smell of freshly waxed wooden floors, chalk and crayons, hot buttery rolls, and the smell of the face powder which the teacher wore.

Some would think that having difficulties in school would make a person hate learning. To me as an adult, every learning success, no matter how small, is seen as a victory. My language difficulties were overcome. I became a voracious reader and I still am. I graduated with A's and B's and received a college scholarship. My love for learning has never ceased and my curiosity is limitless. My early difficulties have made my knowledge something to be cherished.