

Children's Section on the Educational Impact of Youth's Immigration Experience

Bridging the Gap

In this issue, the Children's Section focuses on the educational experience of youth immigrating to the United States. Interviews with two individuals who immigrated to this country as young children provide first-hand perspectives on how to effectively integrate immigrating youth into the American educational system. Drawings depicting immigrant youth's experience in the American educational system are also featured in this section.

According to the 2000 Census, 11.1% of people living in the United States are immigrants.¹ If not immigrants themselves, most Americans have family or friends who have come from other parts of the world for many reasons, including economic hardship, religious persecution, and racial strain. Problems in their home country coupled with the continuing vitality of the "American Dream" bring many people to the United States.² Many come hoping to protect or

¹ Mae M. Cheng, *Data Tell of Rise in Immigrants*, NEWSDAY.COM (June 5, 2002), at <http://www.newsday.com/news/local/longisland/ny-nycensvr2733000jun05,0,1862750.story>. In larger cities, this number is usually higher. In New York City, for example, 39.5% of the population is foreign-born, and 48% of people over five years old speak a language other than English at home. *Id.*

² Inscribed on the Statute of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door." LegalNews.net, Selected Quotations, Statute of Liberty, at <http://www.legalnews.net/quotes/liberty.htm> (last

acquire personal freedom. Freedom to live where one desires, to own property, to participate in the democratic system and to live the American Dream are factors that draw many to the United States.³

Once immigrants reach the United States, however, the experience of acculturation can be just as difficult as the journey itself, if not more.⁴ One of the difficulties immigrant children and their families face is adapting to the American school system. Language and cultural differences, as well as disparities in educational achievement, can create a division between immigrating families and school staff.⁵ According to the Department of Education, “[P]arents who do not speak English at home are less likely to participate in school-based activities, and . . . participate in fewer activities over the course of the school year.”⁶

In the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the United States Supreme Court recognized education as “perhaps the most important function of state and local governments.”⁷ The Court noted that school attendance laws

modified May 25, 2003); *see also* CARLOS BUOSAN, AMERICA IS IN THE HEART 326-27 (Univ. of Wash. Press 2000) (1943) (“[America] was something that had grown out of my defeats and successes, something shaped by my struggles for a place in this vast land . . . something that grew out of [my] desire to know America, and to become a part of her great tradition, and to contribute something toward her final fulfillment. I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had sprung from all [my] hopes and aspirations, ever.”).

³ See Robert Marshall Wells, *Ukrainian Family Working Toward Their American Dream*, SEATTLE TIMES (June 26, 2003), http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/education/135091817_ukraine26m.html; *c.f.* BILL O NG HING, MAKING AND REMAKING ASIAN AMERICA THROUGH IMMIGRATION POLICY, 1850-1990, at 5 (1993) (“But at the same time [Asian immigrants] have become the target of racist hostilities, which are sometimes physical but more often sociopolitical and economic . . . ”).

⁴ See, e.g., Kevin R. Johnson, “Melting Pot” or “Ring of Fire”? : Assimilation and the Mexican-American Experience, 85 CAL. L. REV. 1259 (1997) (discussing the difficulties and costs of assimilation).

⁵ U.S. Dep’t of Educ., Family Involvement in Children’s Education, *at* <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/FamInvolve/local5.html> (Oct. 1997).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Brown v. Bd. of Educ.*, 347 U.S. 483, 493 (1954).

and expenses put into education reflect the importance of education in a democratic society.⁸ "It is the very foundation of good citizenship. . . . In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education."⁹ Though these remarks about the importance of education in our society were made almost fifty years ago, they continue to resonate today.¹⁰

The Court in *Brown* also noted that education "is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment."¹¹ For immigrant children, or children of immigrants, the cultural values taught to them in school may be very different from the ones they learn at home. Given the considerable presence of children from immigrant families in our education system,¹² schools need to be equipped to meet the needs of a diverse group of students and parents. Staff need to be educated on how to overcome the language barrier between English speakers and those whose primary language is not English. Teachers need to learn how they can effectively bridge the gap between school and home.¹³ According to the people we interviewed,

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Indeed, the Court recalled this passage in *Brown* when it recently upheld a law school's affirmative action policy. See *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003 WL 21433492, at *16 (June 23, 2003).

¹¹ *Brown*, 347 U.S. at 493.

¹² "In California, nearly 1.5 million children are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). This is not only an urban or southwestern phenomenon; schools across the country are encountering growing numbers of children from immigrant families. Even in places like Dodge City, Kansas, more than 30 percent of the children enrolled in public schools are the children of immigrants." Carola Suárez-Orozco & Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, *Looking at Immigrant Children, excerpted from CHILDREN OF IMMIGRATION (THE DEVELOPING CHILD)* (2001), <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~drclas/publications/revista/food/Orozco.html>.

¹³ In *Wygant v. Jackson Board of Education*, the United States Supreme Court struck down a collective bargaining agreement that extended "preferential protection against layoffs to some of its employees because of their race or national origin." 476 U.S. 267, 269 (1986). As a result of the agreement, less senior minority teachers were retained while more senior non-minority teachers were laid off. *Id.* at 272. The district court and the

some creative solutions to this gap include: parent workshops to promote literacy and English-speaking skills, bilingual services for communicating with families about school programs and children's development, and workshops for teachers and policy makers that educate them on how to be culturally sensitive to immigrant children's needs.¹⁴

This section's topic was inspired by the challenges that immigrant youth experience and the belief that we can make a difference in the lives of children, who need only the opportunity to succeed. The individuals we interviewed for this section discussed the journey from their country of birth to their immersion into the United States education system. Both stories uniquely depict the experience of an immigrant youth when he or she enrolls in school in the United States. Our interviewees' stories emphasize a common belief that we must strive to design programs that foster a child's mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual development as well as teaching them the skills needed to succeed academically. By incorporating these elements, the American educational system can bridge the cultural and linguistic gap, and provide our youth the opportunity to succeed and to live out an American Dream of their own making. Following are their stories and perspectives.

Court of Appeals had upheld the agreement, reasoning that the school board had an interest in providing minority role models to minority students to help alleviate the effects of societal discrimination. *Id.* at 274. The Supreme Court, however, rejected the role model theory and found that the policy placed too much of a burden on innocent parties. *Id.* at 276, 283-84.

¹⁴ Under state and federal law, California's Migrant Education Program already offers such support for migrant children. See Cal. Dep't of Educ., *Overview of Migrant Education in California*, at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/iasa/migrant2.html> (updated June 25, 2003) (stating that the program's purpose is to "help migratory children overcome educational disruption, cultural and language barriers, social isolation, various health-related problems, and other factors that inhibit the ability of the children to do well in school").

ADRIAN LOPEZ'S STORY

Adrian Lopez, now twenty-four years old, was born in Tijuana, Mexico. He immigrated to the United States with his parents when he was seven years old and settled in San Diego, California. Like many youth who immigrate to this country, Adrian did not speak any English at the time of his arrival. The first elementary school that he attended in the United States was a predominately white school that did not have the resources to properly educate a non-English speaking student. That same year, Adrian's parents moved again, which exposed him to further transitional challenges in a new, unfamiliar, and unaccommodating setting. This second school that Adrian attended was also unequipped to meet the needs of an immigrant child. The staff placed him in Special Education classes, because they did not know how to deal with a non-English speaker. Being in Special Education classes only further confused Adrian and caused him to get even more behind in his learning. Finally, Adrian had to move to a third school that same year. But this time his educational experience was different. Although this third school did not have a bilingual curriculum either, his father took the initiative to hire someone in the principal's office to tutor Adrian after school. After about a year of working with the tutor, he was speaking fluent English.

One school Adrian attended had a reading program where children were categorized as animals (such as a turtle or a rabbit) depending on their achievement levels in reading and comprehension. Adrian believes that these types of programs can detrimentally affect a passive, shy child with low self-esteem, because it is likely to keep children from moving outside their designated group. However, Adrian's assertive personality and confidence permitted him to use this categorization to channel his energies and drive him to try harder.

Adrian then went on to attend one of the top ten high schools in San Diego. Before graduating from high school, Adrian applied to the University of California, Davis for

college despite his academic counselor's claim that he would not get into the University of California system on account of his race. Adrian believes that not all youth are as capable of utilizing what others perceive as weaknesses and cultivating them into successes. He emphasized the importance of a teacher's role in a child's development. Adrian also believes that educational policy should be more flexible. Teachers should be provided the resources, flexibility and training, as well as possess the motivation, to determine how students can most effectively excel on an individual basis.

Adrian also believes that education is a right.¹⁵ Children should never be deprived of educational opportunities. Even though *Brown v. Board of Education*¹⁶ may have legally eliminated segregation, it still exists within society.¹⁷ Inner city schools need more resources. Proactive legislators and grass roots activists need to promote the needs of youth and demand more programs to help youth who have language, racial, and cultural barriers that impact their educational experiences.

In addition, Adrian thinks parents need to become involved. School systems need to find ways to help parents who do not speak English participate in their children's

¹⁵ Cf. *San Antonio Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 1, 35 (1973) ("Education, of course, is not among the rights afforded explicit protection under our Federal Constitution. Nor do we find any basis for saying it is implicitly so protected."). But see *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202, 221 (1982) (stating that while education is not a fundamental right, it is not merely a governmental benefit, indistinguishable from other forms of social welfare either). In *Plyler*, the United States Supreme Court found that Texas's denial of free public education to illegal immigrant children was a violation of the equal protection clause and threatened to create an underclass of American residents simply because, by no fault of their own, they were unnaturalized. *Id.* at 206-30.

¹⁶ 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

¹⁷ See Roy L. Brooks et al., *Civil Rights Litigation: Cases and Perspectives*, in A READER ON RACE, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND AMERICAN LAW: A MULTICULTURAL APPROACH 212 (Timothy Davis et al. eds., 2001) ("Although *Brown* has removed de jure segregation (segregation by law) from our public schools, it has neither eliminated de facto segregation (segregation in fact) nor brought about quality education for African Americans and other minorities in our public schools.").

educational development. Adrian reflects on what he calls a “messed-up cycle” that negatively impacts school resources. When most public schools are financed by property tax revenue, lower income areas will continue to have fewer resources to expend on serving the most vulnerable, needy youth.¹⁸ Communities with the greatest needs receive the least resources under this type of funding system.¹⁹ Adrian believes that we need to develop more innovative ways to raise money for education and to commit to meeting the diverse needs of youth.

Adrian just graduated from the University of California, Davis School of Law in May. After taking the bar exam, he will work for California Rural Legal Assistance (“CRLA”),²⁰ where he plans to continue to help migrant workers and immigrants find a better way of life and experience an easier transition into the United States. Adrian would like to tell youth who are going through similar experiences that it is always great to have someone in your life who is willing to advocate for you and help you along the way. But, he stresses that “there is no better advocate for your rights than yourself. Fight for yourself and you can do anything!”

¹⁸ See *Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 1, 18 (1973) (finding no equal protection violation where poor or minority children residing in school districts with low property tax bases argued that the reliance on local property taxes to fund schools favored the wealthy and provided better education to children in wealthier neighborhoods).

¹⁹ See Gary Borden, *Creating an Underclass Through Benign Neglect: The Plight of Ethnic Minorities with Limited English Proficiency*, 8 GEO. J. POVERTY L. & POL’Y 395, 404-07 (2001) (describing high rates of correlation between Limited English Proficient students, poverty, and their attendance of impoverished schools in impoverished communities); see also PRESIDENT’S ADVISORY COMM. ON EDUC. EXCELLENCE FOR HISPANIC AMERICANS, FROM RISK TO OPPORTUNITY: FULFILLING THE EDUCATION NEEDS OF HISPANIC AMERICANS IN THE 21ST CENTURY 2 (Mar. 31, 2003) (reporting that nineteen percent of U.S.-born Hispanic and sixty-one percent of non U.S.-born Hispanic students drop out of high school). Hispanics represent the largest dropout rate of any demographic at 27.8%. *Id.* at 16.

²⁰ For more information about CRLA see <http://www.crla.org/mission.htm>.

AKETA NARANG'S STORY

Aketa Narang was born in India and immigrated to the United States when she was four years old. Her mother had come to the United States two years earlier to work as a nurse, and her father joined her mother a year later, while Aketa and her brother remained in India. Her parents believed it would be easier on their children if they established their new life in the United States before bringing their children over. That way, the children would have an easier time adjusting. The time apart from their parents, however, was very difficult for Aketa and her brother.

Even after they were reunited with their parents, Aketa remembered vividly the two years spent apart from her mother, and among her struggles, she feared her mother would leave again. While young children often become upset when their parents drop them off at school, for Aketa, she had concrete memories of her mother leaving her. She feared she would be left behind again and would have to once more endure a long separation from her parents. To "small children, their parents are their world."

When Aketa arrived in the United States, she did not speak any English, and the language barrier made the school experience very difficult for her. The school she and her brother attended was not equipped to help them transition into their new environment. It did not have the resources to help a non-English speaking child bridge the gap between her Indian culture and the new American culture in which she was suddenly immersed. The school placed her brother in an English-Spanish bilingual class. Since her brother only spoke Punjabi, the bilingual class only served to confuse him.

Although Aketa's parents spoke English, cultural differences still made it difficult for them to connect with their children's teachers. One of Aketa's teachers even contacted her parents and advised them not to speak Punjabi at home, because it would be harder for her to learn English. The teacher also informed Aketa's parents that their children were malnourished because they were vegetarians so they should

eat meat. Her parents continued to maintain the children's vegetarian diet, but started speaking only English at home. Aketa still resents the teacher's recommendation because it was culturally insensitive, and it hindered her ability to maintain her mastery over Punjabi. She has only recently become comfortable speaking her native language again. She believes it is important to speak one's language as a child so that immigrants can maintain a connection to their culture and their native country. Aketa picked up English quickly, but because of the initial language barrier, she learned to read a little slower than other children. She did not begin to read until late in the second grade.

Because Aketa's parents were afraid of unknown American customs and because they wanted their children to focus primarily on school, they kept Aketa and her brother close to home. As a result, Aketa had a very different childhood from other children in her class. She was not able to spend the night at a friend's house or date when most American youth start dating. She believes her parents' fears are common for immigrant parents because they "are afraid of what they see on television." In addition, they do not want their children to become disrespectful or to lose their culture. Some teachers and other students' parents did not understand why Aketa's parents would not let her go to sleepovers or school events. Over time, Aketa has come to understand why her parents sheltered her so much. She has also learned to empathize with her parents' struggle to create a life for their children in a foreign society. However, she and her brother also encouraged their parents to be less strict with their younger sister, who was born in the United States, so that she would be able to experience significant events such as the prom.

Aketa believes the first barrier immigrant youth face is cultural differences. There is often a disconnect between the culture at home and the culture youth face in the world outside of home. The second barrier is the language problem. Immigrant children experience significant language difficulties, and their parents know their children must learn English to succeed. A third barrier is that schools are often ill-

equipped, and teachers and staff are often not sufficiently trained to meet the individual needs of immigrant youth. These barriers create a gap between immigrant children and American youth, but teachers all too often “put them into one big pot.” A child’s individual needs are often left unmet.

Today, Aketa is a bilingual education teacher in an English-Spanish dual immersion elementary school in Los Angeles. The knowledge gained from her own experiences and struggles as an immigrant youth has allowed her to better understand her students who are facing similar challenges. Her experiences have helped to make her a more effective and empathetic teacher. The language program provided at Aketa’s school enables Spanish dominant students to maintain their first language and transition into English; it also enables English dominant students to learn Spanish. For Spanish dominant students, this program helps to build literacy skills and vocabulary in their own language, and then helps to build the literacy skills necessary to transition into speaking English. “In order for an immersion program to really work, sixty percent of the students must be dominant Spanish speakers and the remaining forty percent must be dominant English speakers.” The program works, because “English dominant students serve as English speaking models” for the Spanish dominant students.

This immersion program also allows children to learn about different cultures. The immigrant youth’s “parents feel more comfortable because their language is being valued.” According to Aketa, the gap or “wall” between immigrant youth’s primary culture and the American culture does not seem to exist “as much” for her immigrant students. The program is designed to make these youth “feel valued.” Aketa emphasizes that learning is a process that “happens over time, not over night.” For Aketa, the relationship she has as a teacher with her students’ families is so different from what her parents experienced when she was in school. Aketa constantly strives to maintain a good relationship with her students’ families and to involve them in the education process.

Aketa always "knew she wanted to go into education," and she became interested in learning Spanish, because she had many Spanish-speaking friends. In college, she learned to speak Spanish fluently by studying abroad in Spain for a year. She graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles, with majors in Psychology and Linguistics with an emphasis in Spanish. She went on to earn a Master's Degree and her bilingual credential at UCLA's School of Education. Aketa has worked at her school for about four years and has immensely enjoyed the experience, since she has a strong connection to the experience of the youth in the immersion program and the challenges they continue to encounter.

While not all of Aketa's teachers were culturally insensitive, many were not able to connect with her the way she can connect with her students now. In fact, one teacher made a "big deal" when Aketa did not bring Valentine's Day cards to school for the other students. Her parents were not aware of all the American holidays and traditions. But she did have a teacher in the fifth grade who "understood a little bit." This teacher "understood the fact that education was important. He valued education and made certain [she] was getting a good education."

Aketa has learned a great deal from her experiences and incorporates these life lessons into her teaching curriculum and her attitude toward her students. She aims to be culturally sensitive to individual youth's needs and experiences. She thinks that teachers need to take classes on cultural diversity and attend language classes. She encourages teachers and those in political power to "embrace cultural diversity and not look at it as an adversity." Teachers and policy makers need to "listen to kids and understand that every student is different." They need to "be sensitive" to individual needs.

One way that Aketa has attempted to incorporate this sensitivity into her teaching style is by getting to know the students, their backgrounds, and their families. One thing she observed was that not all students have a father in their life, and this affects the celebration of Father's Day in the

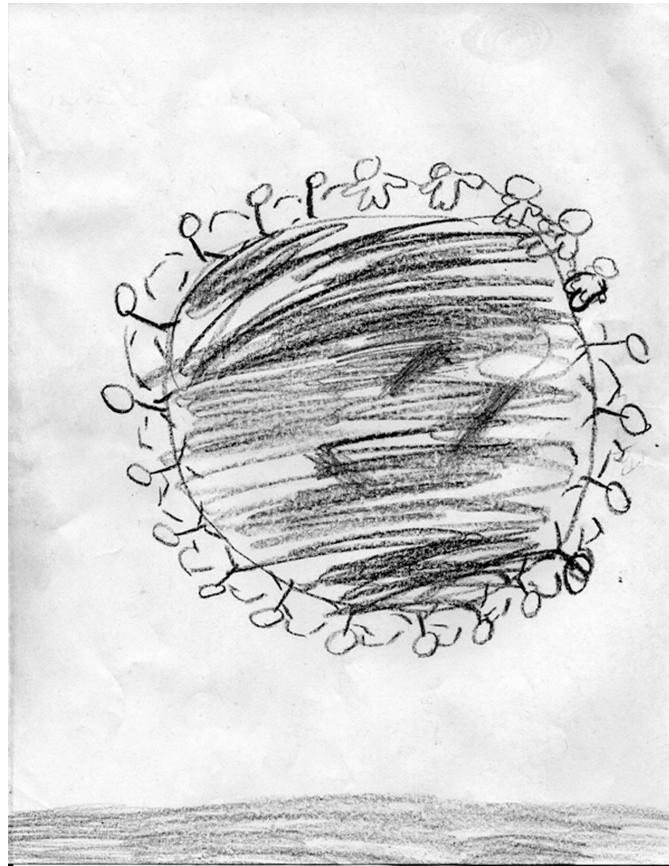
classroom. Aketa discussed the topic in her classroom and reassured the students it was not their fault, and it was nothing to be ashamed of. She also encouraged the youth to think about an important male figure in their life so they could make a gift for that person. She suggested an older brother, the physical education coach, or maybe even the principal, and emphasized that the importance of the project was to “focus on someone special.” Framing the project in this way helped to make all the students feel included since it did not focus solely on making a present for a father.

Aketa also emphasizes the importance of holding students, teachers, and policy makers accountable. Policy makers need to reevaluate educational curriculum. She stresses that “policy makers do not completely understand how long it takes for students to learn English.” They “have the same expectations of an immigrant child from Mexico as they do for a child who has grown up in Beverly Hills.” Teachers and policy makers should collaborate with students and their families to “make sure that every child gets what they need.”

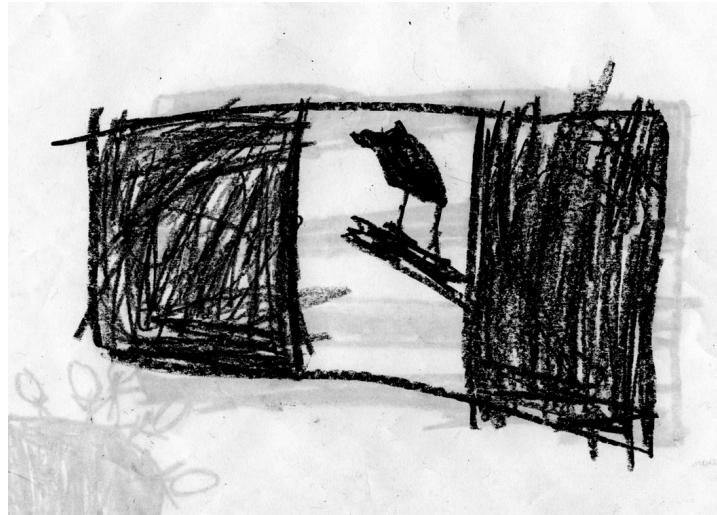
Aketa recalls how immigrant youth react when they see computers in the classroom and when they observe the cleanliness of their new school. These youth want to be American, but many of them also desire to hold on to their cultural roots. As a result, teachers and policy makers should remember that children are not “robots” and thus education curriculum should be designed more flexibly to meet the various needs and circumstances that youth face on a daily basis. These youth each have unique experiences and backgrounds to share. Rather than eliminating immigrant youth’s primary culture and language in order to promote their immersion into the American education system, we should “bridge the gap” that exists between these youth’s past and present lives.

IMMIGRANT CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

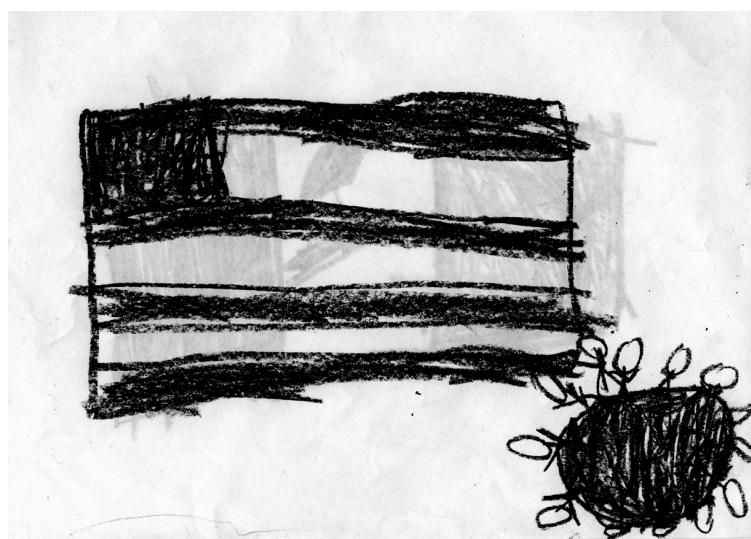
We asked elementary school children, kindergarten through second grade, who had recently immigrated from Mexico to draw about their experiences in their school in the United States. Following is a selection of their drawings.

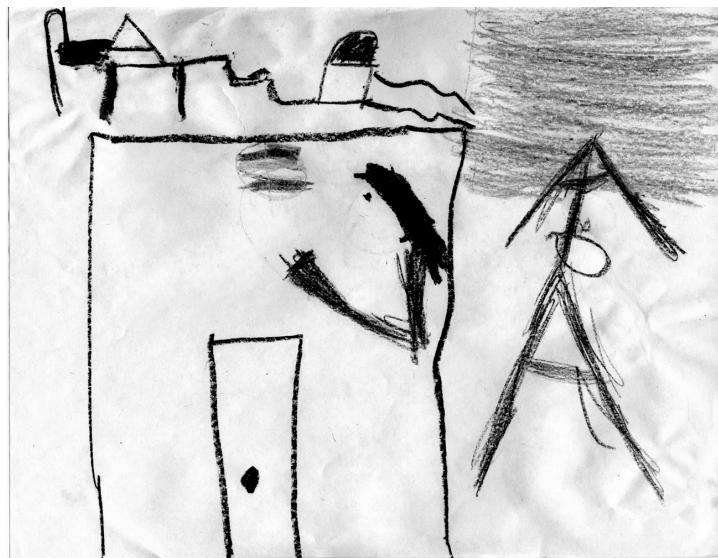


[Several of the children attend a bilingual school that has a large mural of children circling the world, and a few of the drawings reflect this image.]



[One student drew the Mexican flag on one side of the paper and the U.S. flag on the other side.]





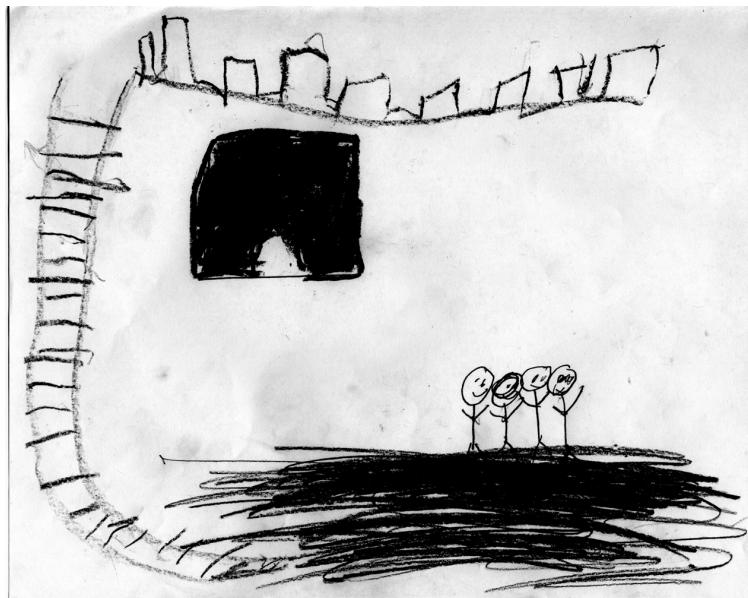
“Mi escuela.”

(My school.)



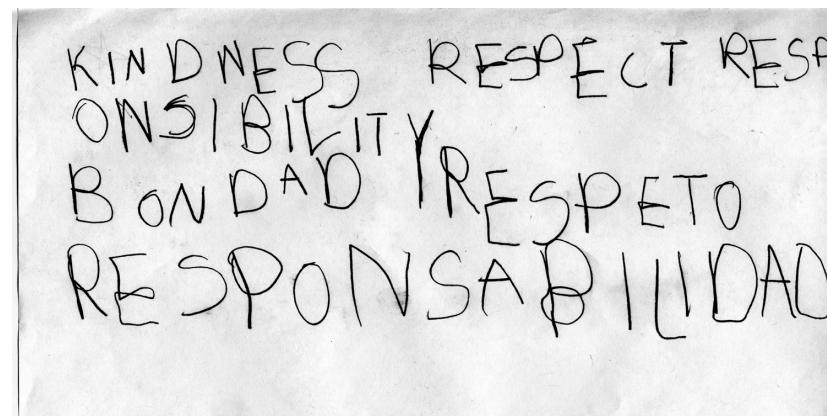
“Mi maestra es muy simpática.”

(My teacher is very nice.)



“Mis amigos.”

(My friends.)



“Cosas que aprendio en mi clase.”

(Things I learn in my class.)



"Hago mi tarea en la computadora."

(I do my work on the computer.)

