

No Excuses: An Interview with Eugene Garcia

BY ART PETERSON

Last Spring Eugene Garcia, Dean of the University of California's School of Education, gave the keynote address at the Conference on English Language Learners held at the University of California, Berkeley.

In his remarks Dean Garcia quoted the conclusion from *No More Excuses*, the final report of the Hispanic Dropout Project (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Garcia had served on this project and participated in developing this report though, he says, he takes no credit for "the eloquence of its conclusion" which states:

"We submit this report with a sense of urgency and impatience because of the slow pace of improvement.... There are dozens of proven programs, replaceable programs capable of increasing Hispanic students' achievement, increasing school completion and increasing their college-going rate.... Why then the persistent gap in Hispanic student achievement? Many explanations have been offered: student characteristics such as social class, language, and entering achievement levels, especially among recent immigrants; school-based forces such as student retention, ability groupings and tracking; and non-school forces such as family and/or neighborhood violence and criminal activity, lack of community based opportunity and the historical and social and political oppression of different ethnic and racial groups. Many of these "reasons" have assumed mythic proportions. They are used to explain phenomena that are portrayed as too large and too complex for the nation's schools to address. In short, these reasons have become little more than excuses for

society's failure to act. We as a people need to say: No more excuses for the time to act is now. (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, p. 61-62)

Garcia explained that in an effort to be comprehensive in its practice reform agenda, the report addressed separately recommendations for Hispanic students themselves, their parents and families, their teachers, and the schools in which they are served.

In an interview with Dean Garcia, *The Quarterly* asked him to focus on one set of the report's recommendations, those directed at teachers who were identified by the report as crucial in the intellectual and academic development of Hispanic students.

The Quarterly: The report urges teachers to teach content that interests and challenges Hispanic students. What are some ways that content can be become more stimulating and lively for these students?

Garcia: Teachers of non-English students should choose, at least some of the time, to use quality material written in Spanish. After all, good literature is good literature, and much excellent literature is written in Spanish. When we teach our students to analyze a literature text written in Spanish, we are, in fact, teaching the tools necessary to analyze English literature. Why not sometimes teach these skills using a quality text in the students' native language?

Also, increasingly there are texts available that make use of both Spanish and English. A favorite book of Hispanic students is *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo A. Anaya. This

is a book that, because of its subject matter, pretty much demands the writer make use of both languages to convey its situations and ideas. Such a text helps Spanish-speaking students appreciate the power of bilingualism.

Then also, teachers need to seek out texts that relate more directly to the lives of Hispanic students than many of the texts we've traditionally used. *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros packs the same kind of power for an adolescent as J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. But the setting and context of *Mango Street* make it an excellent choice for teachers interested in awakening their Hispanic students to the power of literature.

In fact, any book about the immigrant experience, and not just the immigration of Hispanics, is going to have special meaning for these English Language Learners. And it works the other way around also. I think, for instance, that for elementary students, *Two Pair of Shoes* is a book that, while it is about a girl who immigrates from Latin America, speaks to all those kids who are living in two cultures.

The Quarterly: Let's talk specifically about writing. What strategies can a teacher employ that are particularly useful to English Language Learners?

Garcia: One writing form that seems to have special value is the interactive journal. A journal in which the student and the teacher are carrying on a conversation is a safe place for students to try out their English. And writing in this format is a chance for students to write about what they want to write about, not always "about

the book.” This context gives teachers a special opportunity to learn about the concerns of students coming from a culture about which the teacher may have little direct knowledge.

The Quarterly: The report also expects teachers to communicate high expectations to all students. How does it happen that we have come to expect less of Hispanic and other minority students?

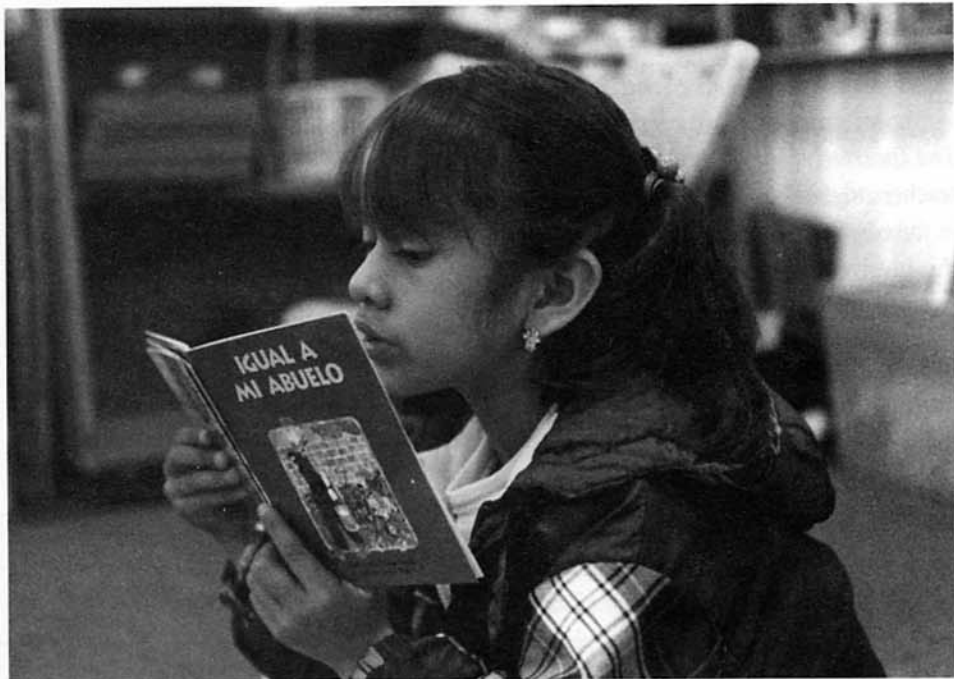
Garcia: It seems to me that many educators fall victim to what I call the “Pobrecito Syndrome.” That’s a mind set that works like this. “These poor kids; their parents are working two jobs. We can change this. We can get them out of the fields and make them store clerks.” These limited horizons are just not acceptable.

The Quarterly: So you support educational standards.

Garcia: Sure, I support standards-based language arts education, with clearly articulated expectations. But standards will only be effective if they are combined with strategies that work for these students: after school programs, summer school and other structures that will make it possible for immigrant students to achieve what is expected of them.

The Quarterly: Is there community support for these standards?

Garcia: The Hispanic immigrant community does not share what has been called the “oppositional” mentality of some other groups that have lived a long time within the system. These groups have watched the system fail them, so they have a distrust of



“reforms.” They often look at the kind of programs I am suggesting as a kind of punishment. But when the parents of Hispanic immigrant children are confronted with the possibility of summer school to bring their kids up to the expected standard they say, “Of course there should be summer school.” But this attitude should not make us complacent. If we do our work badly in these areas, parents will figure it out pretty quickly and they too will become oppositional.

The Quarterly: Is it fair to say that the attitudes and programs teachers need to implement to help Hispanic immigrant students are the generally same kind of programs necessary to help all students?

Garcia: This is pretty much true. Let me give you an example. What we’ve usually seen in teacher assignment patterns is that the newest teacher will get all the immigrant

kids. This is going to set up a strong possibility of failure, both for the teacher and the students. The ninth-grade teachers in one high school we’ve worked with, where there is a 60% immigrant population, said, “We’re not going to do this. We’re all going to take all the kids.” They worked collectively, math teachers, science teachers, language arts teachers. They developed an interdisciplinary curriculum for all students. A yearlong study of immigration became the centerpiece of this effort.

The Quarterly: Did these changes in the ninth grade affect the rest of the school?

Garcia: Yes, the departments began to work differently. There was much more communication among members of the same department and between departments. Counselors did more than negotiate student programs; they became student advocates. The honors program was opened up to all

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willing to accept the challenge. More students are finishing school and GPAs are up.

The Quarterly: The report also asks teachers to engage parents and community in the education of their children. How is this involvement different for immigrant parents?

Garcia: Parents from other nations have a different conception of the responsibility of the school. In Mexico, Japan and Korea, parents expect that teachers will have a good curriculum. The U.S system operates

on the basis of parent advocacy. The truth is you are going to be taken advantage of if you don't communicate with the teachers. But schools need to be proactive in helping these parents understand what is going on in school and in what ways parent participation is necessary to help their children learn. One school in Berkeley, Columbus, has a program worth looking at. They have a parent liaison who serves more as a community advocate than as a representative of the school. Parents are invited to Saturday meetings at the school that are conversations not "top down" lectures.

These conversations are relevant to the kids' academic work. There is none of the preaching that has characterized such session in the past. Everyone comes to learn. Baby-sitting is provided. Parents need not wait around for the occasional teacher conference that they may or may not be able to attend.

But its not just at Columbus School. Models such as this are being taken up with considerable success all over the country. As the report from the Hispanic Dropout Project makes clear, we know what to do; now let's do it.

I Was a Journal-Topic Junkee

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make available plenty of ideas, to crank the creative motor, and to be certain there is something familiar about the road the students will travel. I think that the discussions and subsequent writings convinced many of a Trest Truism: if you can say it with your mouth, you can write it with a pencil. Extended, meaningful conversation also resulted in one other unexpected dividend. Students began asking if they had to write about the discussion topic or if they could write about something else that came to mind while we were talking. I was pleased to acquiesce.

Another reason this plan was successful was because I chose starting points that were relevant to the students. Elementary students are extremely concrete and literal in their thinking, but that doesn't keep them from being creative. They just can't be creative about elves and peanut butter messages and other things with which they have had no experience. When I stopped relying on goofy subjects, I was able to tap into the students' prior knowledge which included love of the outdoors and things of nature. When I gave up the eggs and the elves and offered a branch instead, Edward was able to give me the following:

A leaf is a remarkable thing. It helps ants when there is a flood. They can get

under it like an umbrella so they won't get washed away. A leaf helps caterpillars stay alive because the caterpillar can eat a healthy leaf lunch. A leaf is also like a big cup for a wasp. He gulps down the water ... glug, glug, glug.

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