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# Calexico

## Portrait of an Educational Community

by Mike Rose

*The following article is an edited excerpt from Mike Rose's book, Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America, forthcoming in September from Houghton Mifflin. The book is an account of Rose's visits to public schools all over the U.S. in search of answers to important questions about education. Can public education still work? If so, how? Where do we go from here? How does the entire community affect the tone of our schools? In what ways does writing fit into the big picture?—Ed.*

I DROVE TWO HOURS OR SO SOUTH FROM LOS Angeles, curving through San Diego, close to the Mexican border, and heading east onto Highway 8, where the road narrows to two lanes and begins the slow descent onto the desert floor of the Imperial Valley. The sky was a clear, deep blue, and the sun played off the rockface in the distance. I was the only car on the road, alone and happy. The air was warm and dry. In the distance: Road 98, the road that runs along the border to Calexico.

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Calexico is a truly bicultural American city. Border culture. Of the 19,000 residents, most are of Mexican ancestry, and the majority of Anglos speak so-so to fluent Spanish. This whole area of the Imperial Valley was converted from desert to arable land through water diverted from the Colorado River. The project began just after the turn of the century. Calexico was the surveying camp on the Mexican border—the name blends *California* and *Mexico*—and in 1908 was incorporated as a city. A few of the early buildings still stand on First Street, just this side of Mexicali, Mexico.

Though many families in Calexico are very poor— income is low and seasonal—and the school district is always scrambling for funds, the elementary schools exceeded the Imperial County average on recent statewide tests of language arts, mathematics, and science; and the high schools have the lowest dropout rate of any predominately Latino school district in California. In fact, they are nine percentage points below the statewide dropout average for *all* schools. A significant number of graduates go on to two- and four-year colleges. There are many explanations. One

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has to do with the unanimity of goals between district administration and school board. Another with an effective bilingual education program. And a third has to do with the way good teaching here honors the language and culture of the region, emerges from, develops out of a caring embedded in local history.

The Imperial Valley Campus of San Diego State University takes up one square block of land six short blocks from the Mexican border. Located on the site of the old Calexico High School, which had been boarded up and broken into for a long time, the campus refurbished three original buildings—archways, white stucco, tile roofs—and built a few classrooms, bringing in some portable structures for administration, student services, and faculty offices. There were plans in the works for a complete reconstruction, but for more than twenty-five years this small satellite campus, with its patchwork of buildings and bungalows, served as the only means for Valley residents to get a four-year degree. Walking down Seventh Street, one comes upon it like a park or a historical preserve, nestled between houses and parked cars and an occasional delivery van. Maybe you'd hear the buzz of a lawnmower. Little more.

Most students at the campus began their work at IVC, Imperial Valley College, a two-year school about twelve miles north of Calexico, and transferred over to complete their degrees in humanities or social science. They majored in Liberal Studies, Latin American Studies, English, Spanish, Criminal Justice Administration, Psychology, or History, to prepare for careers in business, law enforcement, or education. Many hoped to teach. They were a serious student body—numbering four to five hundred in any given year—and they came to school in order to lead a better life here in the Valley. Most worked, and night classes were popular. Hardly anyone hung out. So unless you walked across campus right at those times when classes were starting up or winding down—12 noon, say, or 4:00 or 7:00 or 10:00—you might think the place was a historic site, with Mexican fan palms, date palms, and eucalyptus, and birds chirping in the trees and cooing in the red tile. As you made your way toward the north side of the campus—it's a short walk—you'd begin to hear faint music from behind the closed doors of the service bungalows: the hectic advertisements of Mexican *rocanrol* stations, or trumpets and guitars, or the lyrics of North American oldies: "Angel Baby" or "Blue Velvet." A little further and you'd come upon the faculty offices, faded and baking in the sun.

Evangelina Bustamante Jones sat in front of gray metal bookcases lodged tight against her office wall. The shelves were crammed with books on the teaching of writing, bilingual education, reading, and teacher education—her responsibilities here. Student papers and projects from semesters past were boxed or bundled or rolled up and tied and stacked precariously on shelves or placed safely in a corner on the floor. Newspaper clippings about former

students—weddings or awards—were taped to the wall. "It's such a small community," she said, leaning forward and loosely folding her hands on the desk, "that you kinda keep track of everyone."

We had just come from visiting a student teacher she was supervising—teaching over in Heber, a little agricultural town about three miles northwest of Calexico. Anthony Heber was one of the early developers of the Imperial Valley—many of the cities in the Valley and the streets within them were named after developers and civil engineers—the town that bore his name had 2,500 people, two schools, and a lot of cattle that listlessly regarded you as you drove in. The air was heavy and fecund. "You don't notice it," a local told me, "until you leave. Then when you return, it's, well, it's the smell of home." Lori, the young teacher, was born in Heber, and wrote in the journal *Evangelina* asked her supervisees to keep: "I am so happy and so lucky to be working in this school where I grew up."

"She's really good," *Evangelina* continued. "She's very creative, very, very responsible, and she's empathetic. She may not stay in Heber, but it's important for her to be there now." *Evangelina* absentmindedly touched a streak of silver in her hair. "You know, some of the teachers Lori had as a little girl are still there—and her principal, too. They give her a lot of support." A pause here. "And in the eyes of her old neighbors. Imagine! 'Look at Lori. She's come back.' *La Maestra*."

Education is highly valued in Heber and Calexico, as it is in Mexican culture generally. Teachers are respected, and school is seen as a place where children can learn the skills that will enable them to do better than their parents had done. This support of education, however, has to be understood in the context of this community. Many of the families in the Valley were very poor—35 percent of the residents lived below the poverty line—and sometimes had to make decisions between work and school. As *Evangelina* put it, "poverty forces you to parcel out your human resources." So some children would be selected to pursue their education and others placed in the work force. "I was the oldest and had to work," one man explained, "but my brother was able to go to college." Traditional beliefs about gender factored into these decisions, but not in as unilateral way as is commonly portrayed. Some families still believed that girls don't need schooling as much as boys do, but I also heard from a number of professional women that it was their working-class fathers who had urged them toward achievement. Such achievement could, though, conflict with other beliefs about family cohesiveness and a woman's role in maintaining it—and this could become a source of awful tension if a college-bound woman decided to leave the area to pursue her education. The great value of the local San Diego State campus was that it made higher education possible for women who could not easily leave the Valley.

A mild breeze stirred the trees by *Evangelina*'s lowered window. Outside a parrot started whistling. "Do you ever see yourself in these young teachers you supervise?" I asked. "Oh, yes," she laughed. "Except, they're a lot better put together than I was!" *Evangelina* Jones had been teaching

for twenty-two years. Middle school, third grade, sixth grade, continuation high school, the works. A few years back, the college asked her to help them with their teacher education courses and to develop a program for students who came to the campus needing to improve their writing. So now she's a college professor. She thought back: "My first year of teaching, I cried all the time. My methods classes didn't teach me one damn thing. And I didn't have a mentor in the school. I was isolated, and I didn't have very good techniques, and I didn't know how to manage my class." She smiled, and her dark eyes moved quickly from the squint of pain to tender reflectiveness to a fixed gaze of conviction. "If you don't get support, you die a little every day."

Dying a little every day. We talked further about mentoring and apprenticeship, about what powerful ways they were to develop skill. "But they're so hard to get," she reflected, tapping her folded hands on the desk for emphasis. "I knew I wanted to be a teacher since I was a young girl. I had this dream. I was so idealistic—but the reality was another story. If you don't have other teachers to go to for advice, or just to cry on their shoulder on Friday afternoon, this job will eat you up." We talked a bit more about the kinds of knowledge good teachers develop. Then I told her about a friend of mine, an esteemed professor of education who took some time off to teach elementary school. He failed miserably. The kids wouldn't listen to him, some of his lessons fell flat, he had trouble translating his ideas into practice. Evangelina chuckled sympathetically. "Hey, I can still remember what *that* felt like!" Somebody walking by whistled to the parrot. The parrot whistled back.

Evangelina was determined that the prospective teachers in her charge would have a better time of it than she had: better techniques, more support. Her teaching methods courses may not have done much for her, but she was trying her best to make the ones she taught worthwhile. One student-teacher told me that Mrs. Jones's courses were very helpful: "She just knows so much. After all, she's been there."

Students in general are not enthusiastic about methods courses. "It's a tradition to hate them," Evangelina observed. But they're not crazy about more theoretical offerings either, seeing them as obscure and irrelevant. An increasing number of teacher educators agree, bemoaning the trivial, unreflective nature of methods courses, the gulf between educational research and teacher practice, and the pure and simple humdrum, technocratic nature of so much of a student-teacher's pre-professional life.

What Evangelina tried to do was illustrate theory, ground it in practice. She knew how desperately these new teachers would need effective strategies and approaches—the proverbial things to do when entering the schoolhouse door on Monday morning. She also believed that a good teacher knew these things, so to speak, from the inside, had done them, had developed a knowledge of doing. "How can you teach something," another student teacher asked me, "that you haven't experienced?" As for theory, Evangelina mused, "How can you reflect on what you do and justify what you

do without it?" In Evangelina's opinion, she had a long way to go—"I'm supposed to be the expert; I don't *feel* like an expert"—but her students and education students disagreed. As one of them exclaimed, "She's an inspiration to me!"

Later that day, I visited The Teaching of Reading class, taught by Evangelina in the old Music Room. Two nicked speakers hung above the blackboard and over the last row of seats; some simple spotlights were nailed to the ceiling, like those outdoor lights you'd find in someone's backyard. The door was open, and the sky outside was deep blue, the birds still streaking and dipping from tree to tree. It was five to the hour, and the students were drifting in. The youngest looked to be in their early twenties; many more, though, were mid-twenties to mid-thirties. They carried backpacks and briefcases and soft drinks, candy bars, and bags of chips—most were coming straight from work. Except for two of them, everyone had gone to Imperial Valley College, either right out of high school, or after getting a family under way. They all seemed to know each other. The warm hum of chatter began, a free mix of Spanish and English.

Evangelina walked in right on the hour, and a few students came up to confer with her at the podium. Then she took a definitive step forward, as though in a fencing move, and asked the class to break up into groups of four. "I want you," she said, "to show each other your modern fairy tales. Enjoy them...tell each other how wonderful they are...then take fifteen or twenty minutes and write an evaluation of one of them..." A mock groan came from two men in the back. Evangelina smiled. "I know. I'm cruel. That's me. *Así soy.*"

The week before, Evangelina had explained "story grammar," the notion from cognitive psychology that common stories, like, say, fairy tales, share certain structural features—that their plots unfold in predictable ways—and that this predictability helps readers comprehend them. Evangelina had asked her students to determine the "grammar" of a favorite fairy tale, and to use that grammar to generate a contemporary variation. This assignment, Evangelina hoped, would encourage a practical understanding of the theoretical concept of story grammar and would, to boot, make a good classroom exercise.

The students exchanged their fairy tales, and read, laughing, offering pats on the back. In one story, a young Aladino found a Coke bottle rather than a lantern in a polluted river in Mexicali, the rapidly industrializing city just across the border, and made various wishes to end poverty and hunger and war. In another, Little Red Riding Hood emerged as Rosita, who, on her way to her grandmother's house, was assailed by the fearsome wolf, El Lobo. But the author, unwilling to stick to the original tale, concluded with redemption rather than revenge. In the contemporary urban setting of this tale, the woodsman was a construction worker who reasoned with rather than dismembered El Lobo, getting him to release Rosita, change his ways, and pursue a degree in business administration.

Each group in its own time made the shift to evaluation, growing silent, trying to find the right words. The students

thought hard, bent over their notebooks. From the middle of the room came a noise that sounded a little like a brush on a snare drum: a woman was hot on the trail of an idea, writing, then erasing quickly, then writing again, her thin bracelets grazing the top of her desk.

## 2.

The streets in Calexico were calm and lightly traveled, except at evening rush hour. Every morning, though, Monday to Friday, cars and trucks would suddenly converge on the usually quiet streets around the city where the district's elementary schools were located. It would be quick and fleeting, a vehicular whirl of wind: parents and aunts and older brothers dropping off the young ones—pulling in and out of white zones, double parking, stacking up, blinkers on. But no horns. They'd holler and wave to each other, neighbors and bloodlines, generation to generation.

Evangelina recommended I visit the school on Encinas, Dool Elementary—named after another one of those early developers. “There’s a teacher there you should see,” she said. “Elena Castro. She has a good reputation in the district. She teaches bilingual third grade and has mentored a lot of our students. She’s a pistol. You’ll like her, I think. And, besides, Dool is right down the street.”

The next day, I met with Elena Castro and her principal, an energetic man named William Cudog. And not long after, I was walking down Encinas watching the cars cluster and pull away, kids running across the sidewalk with books and lunch pails. Dool was a small, clean school, white and industrial tan, green lawn, on the poor side, but kept up. I turned up the walkway hearing the unsteady bleat of a trombone from the cafeteria, and entered a stream of children coming in from the curb. Other groups gathered around the tree in front of the gate, or just inside at the tables by the dissonant cafeteria, talking and bouncing and laughing. The main office was so full that the door was held half open by kids clumped against the jamb. Then came four or five rows of classrooms, some portable buildings—the library and the Writing Center, both the results of grants and donations—and the expanse of asphalt and grass that loudly signified the freedom of the playground. Kids were shooting baskets, playing tether ball, foursquare, and hopscotch, and running every which way on the broad stretch of lawn. Walking among them, I felt the unbridled joy of physical play.

I found Elena out in the field, two or three kids around her. She handed me the key to her room and said they'd be in shortly. “Make yourself at home,” she called after me, then the children pulled her back in. From our earlier conversation I knew that she structured her curriculum around general themes that the students themselves had a hand in selecting. That way, the various subject areas—language arts and science, for example—were integrated and the students studied them in contexts that were interesting to them. The theme they were currently working on was Sea Life. Evangelina had alerted me that just Elena's room itself would knock me out. “Stimulus-rich,” was the term she used. I found Room 42 and opened the door. Evangelina was right:

the place was vibrant. The walls, the blackboard, even the sliding doors on the cabinets were covered with charts and posters: “Ocean Wonders” and “Milagros del Mar.” Blue, orange, and red fabrics formed a backdrop for the copious display of children's art and writing. Books were stacked and leaning everywhere; a sign with coral drawn around it said, “You don't have to read every day, just on the days you eat!” Drawings of fish dangled from clothesline crisscrossed along the ceiling—a crayola butterfly fish, a newsprint manta ray—seeming to swim in the breeze that came in behind me. I thought of Ariel's song in *The Tempest*. This tan room, like the King of Naples, had undergone “a sea change / into something rich and strange.” An ocean of color and language. Spanish and English. The shark, *el tiburón*, and *la anguila*, the eel, and the jellyfish, *el aguamar*. The bell rang and I took a few steps inside, immersing myself in print and art-paper water.

The third graders filed in, hot and antsy from play, and headed for the long rectangular tables in the middle of the room on which their chairs were stacked. Clatter and clang and the chairs came down. The flush of the schoolyard was starting to fade, but not quite, and while the children reached for their books, there was a jibe in Spanish and a questionable tug and nudge. One boy wore a sweatshirt that said “Motocross Power”; another boy had “Attack Force” on the heels of frayed sneakers. There were two Beverly Hills 90210 T-shirts, and a pullover from the Salt Lake City Zoo, and an old rugby shirt, and some simple checks and stripes.

Elena Castro moved to the front of the room and, while the children did some work at their tables, quickly took roll. Everyone was present. Then she tallied those who would be eating in the cafeteria and had the children stand for the pledge of allegiance. Mrs. Castro's voice was strong and precise—“and to the republic for which it stands”—but tempered by a throaty quality, a lounge singer's rasp, consequential, melodious. These classroom preliminaries were handled with brisk efficiency. Then in a softening of affect, Mrs. Castro said it was time for a story and reached for a chair near the blackboard. The children got up from their tables and gathered around her. I had been leaning against the back wall, still taking it all in, and grabbed a little chair from one of the tables and moved in closer to the half-circle of children. The book was about deep-sea divers. It looked like it had some years on it. Elena opened the book and began. She read in English, then either translated into Spanish herself or asked a bilingual child to “explain to us what's happening here.” During these moments, she would turn the book around to the children, using the illustrations as guides to comprehension, tracing the tentacles on the octopus, *tentáculos del pulpo*, and the broad curving wing of the manta ray. She encouraged interaction through comments and questions—“Carlos, you're working on the manta ray, *verdad?*” or “Why is salt left when the water dries on the boat?”—and the students would respond, sometimes adding observations of their own. At one point, a bubbly girl named Irianna noted that the skin divers' suits are “soooo old, Miss

Castro.” And later Andres, sharp-featured and handsome, observed, in Spanish, that a sinking ship looked like the *Titanic*. Elena acknowledged these and other comments, weaving them into the story when possible, sometimes laughing with the children—a low and easy heh heh heh—the children sitting rapt, legs crossed, elbows on knees, toying with their fingers or cradling their chins. One girl, Arely, reached up and traced with her finger the octopus on the cover, cocking her head and watching her teacher’s eyes widen as the divers went down toward the ocean floor.

Mrs. Castro finished the book at 9:00 straight-up, folded it in her lap, and called for the first rotation. The children uncrossed their legs and, in various springing extensions and ungainly turns, stood up and headed for their stations. What happened from that point on was a study in how an environment can be organized to foster learning. Though Mrs. Castro usually opened her class with some sort of group activity—a reading or a math lesson or, perhaps, a discussion of current events—a fair amount of the work the students did was accomplished individually or in small groups at various stations. There were eight stations. Starting at the door and moving counterclockwise, there was the Listening Station (two old-time tape recorders and earsets on a small table by the door), the Publishing Center (a computer and printer, pre-cut covers and plastic spines, and a binding machine), and the Writer’s Table (actually four small tables pushed together to make one big one). Then, past the front of the room and the chalkboard, came the Reader’s Corner (shelves crammed with books leaning every which way, a big rocker, a worn red Persian rug), a Math Station, and a Research Station, where volumes from two different encyclopedias had been combined to create an almost complete set. Next came the Teacher’s Workshop, where Mrs. Castro did a good deal of her close work with the children. This placed you at the back wall covered with information about fish, just behind the teacher’s desk, which was used mostly for the stacking of papers. A red felt apple lay knocked over. “I ♥ my teacher” was printed across it; a smiling green worm curled out and up its side. A few more steps and you have returned to the door and the Art Station, where blue and orange and yellow water paints left little lines on the tile sink.

To provide sequence and structure to their day, Mrs. Castro shifted students every half hour or so, from one major task—and one station—to another. They moved in groups or “rotations.” Depending on the task, the groups might be composed only of English-speakers or of Spanish-speakers—for example, for writing instruction. Or, they might be mixed, combined with fluently bilingual kids (Elena called them “brokers”), the children conversing in both languages, helping each other with a math lesson on sets and sorting. There was a good deal of fluidity here—though Elena, who was meticulous in her organization and record-keeping, seemed to be on top of the flow of activity. Any moment might yield one group of children bent over stories in progress at the Writer’s Table—with one of the students, brow furrowed, editing a story on the computer at the

Publishing Station. A second group might be working on mathematics, one or two receiving audiotaped guidance at the Listening Station. A third group might be sitting around Mrs. Castro in the Teacher’s Workshop, doing research on the particular sea creatures that caught their fancy. Elena Castro moved the children through a wide range of activities. Within each activity, children were free to follow their interests and take responsibility for completing their work in the way they thought best.

Although the students helped determine the organizing themes they would study, Elena gave them a sense of how this would work by beginning the year with a unit of her own choosing, but of relevance to them: the Imperial Valley. (In a blue basket by the computer, I saw a stack of booklets the students had written collaboratively on the histories of the towns of their birth: Mexicali, Calexico, Brawley, Holtville, Heber.) After studying the Valley for a month, the students voted on the topics they’d want to study through the year. These topics then became the conceptual skeleton of the curriculum. A list of them was taped to the door:

THEMES WE WILL STUDY  
*TEMAS QUE ESTUDIAREMOS*

Earth  
*La Tierra*  
Sealife  
*Animales Marinos*  
Energy  
*Energía*  
Pollution  
*Contaminación*  
Cultures  
*Culturas*

And so on. As a particular month progressed, then, the books Elena Castro begged, borrowed from the library, salvaged, and bought from her own pocket would change somewhat, as would the charts and posters and plentiful work of the children that adorned the walls and hung in the air. There was much that was stable, of course—from the multiplication chart to the computer to that incomplete encyclopedia—but this was a classroom that was always in a state of orderly evolution, both structured and unpredictable.

Mrs. Castro walked back to the Teacher’s Workshop area. A stylish dresser, she was wearing a black jacket with sleeves rolled to the elbow, silver bracelets, a bright blue dress, and heels. She was about five foot two, and moved quickly—though she could stop on a dime to listen to a child’s question, seeming to momentarily block out everything else. Andres headed her off and asked if he could take home the book about the diver: “¿Maestra, me puedo llevar el libro a la casa, por favor?” Sure he could, she said, touching his shoulder, complimenting him for giving the English book a try. Then she settled in at her workshop to help the nine students gathering around her with their marine research. I pulled up a chair.

The students had booklets in front of them, made by Mrs. Castro to guide their inquiry. Each booklet had four sections: What You Know, What Do You Want to Know?, Bibliography, and Research Notes. Across the top of each section swam a series of sketched fish, each about to gobble the other—a cartoon food chain. Mrs. Castro took a booklet, creased it open, and turned it toward the children, the top of the cover resting on her shoulder. She began, slowly turning the pages, explaining the purpose of each section: How you listed all the things you already knew about your puffer fish, or manta ray, or great white shark. How, on page two, you then listed all the things you want to know, what you're curious about, what puzzles you. ("For example, Alex, you wanted to know how the jellyfish eats. You'd put that question here.") Next came the Bibliography, and bubbly Irianna, who, I later found out, had just recently begun acquiring English, leaned across the table, face out, and said that was where you put the books you read. "Very good, *mija*," said Mrs. Castro—using the common term of endearment, "my daughter"—and Irianna smiled in a dimpled way that brought her chin to her chest. Then Mrs. Castro turned to the final section, Research Notes, and talked a little about the importance of research in helping us to learn about the world. "I'm always looking things up, in my dictionary, in my encyclopedia, at the library. *Ay*, we learn a *lot* that way." She paused here and drew herself up in the chair for emphasis. "In fact, when you boys and girls do research, I learn so much." She looked at Irianna. "Yesterday, Irianna showed me something she found on the starfish. Do you want to read it to us, Irianna? It's so interesting!" And Irianna lit up, reached for her book, and read to the group about the eye at the end of each arm of the starfish.

When Irianna finished, Mrs. Castro reached to the center of the table where she had piled two stacks of books on marine life. Books on dolphins, sharks, and killer whales, the "F" volume of an old encyclopedia, a book on coral, and one on the octopus. Books and books, the dirt of innumerable fingers ground into the covers. Books she dealt out like a giant deck of cards. "Alex, here's something on the jellyfish...and, let's see, Irianna look at this, another book on the starfish...and, hey, Arely, we're in luck, here's the 'W' volume of the encyclopedia—see if your walrus is in it." As the kids flipped through the books, she showed them how to use a table of contents and an index—some "got" this and some didn't yet—and then she gave what brief assistance she could when a book was beyond third-grade reading level. The children started writing things in their research notes.

Alex got up from the table and came over to look at the wall charts on the cabinet doors behind Mrs. Castro's desk. I followed his gaze. On the door closest to me, layers of sea life descended, taking you down from the barracuda to the mid-level octopus to the sea urchin and deep sea angler. The door next to that displayed the Whale Wall Chart where the 100-foot blue whale swam past the fifty-foot humpback whale who curled toward the fifteen-foot narwhal. On the next door was a chart of "ocean wonders": the flying fish and the oarfish with its long dorsal fin and the very weird luminescent snake dragonfish. And...the jellyfish! Bingo.

Alex stopped and folded his booklet open, trying to steady it on his forearm, writing irregularly, looking back and forth from chart to page.

Another child, Maria, tall for her age and pretty, untangled her feet from her chair and walked over to the Research Station. She sat down and looked at the drawing above the encyclopedias. It was a large hand-drawn sketch of fish anatomy, something I hadn't noticed yet—I'd be discovering new things each day I was here—and Maria settled her chin in her cupped palms and looked a while longer: heart/*corazon*, aorta/*aorta*, gills/*agullas*, fins/*aletas*. I let myself drift, thinking how rich this was, half-listening to Elena and the students at the Teacher's Workshop. I thought about how radically this classroom clashed with so many of our stock representations of school: monochromatic, trivial, regimented, dull. To the side of the children at the Teacher's Workshop was a broad stretch of wall Mrs. Castro had covered with swirling blue-violet fabric. "Creatures of the Sea" was printed above it. Over the week it would be populated, like a slow-motion nature film, by drawings that had cartoon-like blurbs emerging above them, first-person accounts of what it's like to be a squid or an electric eel or a puffer fish. A few were already done. Arely's skillfully rendered walrus said, through his big tusks and whiskers:

I am a walrus. I live in the ocean and I eat fish. I am brown and I have big teeth called tusks. I like to be in the ocean and swim a lot. I also live on land.

On a little table under the display sat a cluster of objects, material for post-lunch show-and-tell: a stuffed, fuzzy dolphin with "Sea World" scripted on its belly, a few pieces of coral, and a construction of four frogs, about six inches high, playing guitars and trumpets—frog mariachis?—made entirely out of seashells. It's a lot of fun under the sea.

### 3.

Just to the south of the San Diego State Campus is a little park called Rockwood Plaza. From there, you could walk to the border in about five or ten minutes. Maybe a little longer in the dead heat of summer. You could, if you wished, cross the border and shop in Mexicali. People have been going back and forth for a long time.

Most of the people I met in Calexico had relatives living in Mexicali, and Calexicans frequently crossed the border to visit them, or to shop, or to dine, or to secure professional services. Calexico's economy wrenches with changes in the peso. "When Mexicali sneezes," a saying goes, "Calexico catches a cold."

Originally a labor camp, then a cow town, Calexico, by the late 20s, had become an established border city with the extensive agricultural base those early developers had envisioned. It is not at all surprising, then, that the city's old local histories lavishly celebrate the "courage," "ingenuity," and "pioneering spirit" of the engineers and businessmen who founded Calexico. They had, in fact, pulled off an extraordinary technical achievement: turning a desert into lush farmland. Like the writers of those histories, the entire leadership of Calexico was Anglo and would remain so well

into the fifties. Though there was eventually a majority of Mexican Americans in Calexico, they had limited influence: the city council, the judiciary, the police force, the teachers were all white. Classes in the schools were, in effect, segregated, as they were throughout the Southwest, by race.

Change began in the mid to late fifties. Both Héctor Calderón and Matt Contreras, the judge who acted as my guide through the Imperial Valley, recalled the beginnings of Chicano political activity through activist groups that brought Mexican American families together for a dance, a barbecue, and some grass-roots organizing. In addition, the Viva Kennedy campaign in 1960 mobilized the vote, and the farm workers movement, which developed a major power base in the Valley, got poor people involved in the political process. Early Affirmative Action programs gave Mexican American youth a greater sense of the possible, and led to the recruitment of high schoolers into higher education and subsequent jobs in law enforcement, education, and business. Matt still remembered the strange sense of pride he felt when, in the late fifties, Rollie Carillo was appointed the first Mexican American mayor of Calexico.

“Extra! Extra!” announced the newspaper banners pinned to the wall way up above the sink where Art Station paints ran pink and orange in the draining water. “Extra, Read All about It!” Tuesday through Friday, right after the Pledge of Allegiance, Elena Castro’s students reported on current events in their neighborhood, the city, county, state, country, or the world. They followed a schedule posted on a free patch of wall over the Art Station, their names listed by day—Arelly on Tuesday, Carlos on Thursday—on any given day monolingual and bilingual speakers mixed, holding the floor together.

This was one of the ways Elena connected her classroom to events in the community and beyond. Here’s how it worked: during the week before their presentation, students would be on the lookout for a news story that interested them—and it could come from print media, T.V. or radio, or from word of mouth. Then they would fill out a sheet available in a large envelope pinned beneath the headlines. The sheet asked them to indicate the focus of the story (city, state, etc.) and its source (newspaper, radio, etc.). Then they had to answer journalism’s central questions: who (*quien*), what (*que*), when (*cuando*), where (*dónde*), why (*por qué*), how (*como*). Finally, they had to consider how the event affected their lives. When a student’s day of the week arrived, he or she would read the responses on his or her worksheet to the class and answer questions posed by fellow students or by Mrs. Castro. There was a lot of interchange between Spanish and English, with Elena acting as facilitator. The schedule was posted on the wall, but by the time of my visit, the kids pretty much knew who was up when, and they would regularly come forward in the morning to talk about the news, to field questions, to think on their feet about the world outside themselves.

Sometimes the news was very local. Carlos reported on his aunt being mugged on the streets of Mexicali; Andres’s

grandmother visited from Heber, and his headline read: *La Visita de la Abuela de Heber*. Elena and the others would then listen to the “where,” “why,” and “how” of these events and proceed to ask their questions: “Is she O.K., Carlos?” and “Why do you think such things happen?” and, for Andres, “¿Que pasa en la casa cuando visita su abuela?” (“What happens in your house when your grandmother visits?”). City news came primarily from the region’s newspapers: the *Calexico Chronicle*, the *Imperial Valley Press*, *La Voz de la Frontera*, and *El Mexicano*—the last two printed in Mexicali but sold as well in Calexico—or from the local radio stations, KQVO, XEAO, and XED, “*La Grande*” across the border. Ricardo reported on the pesticides used in agriculture and the way they can hurt us; Arelly told everyone about the fair that was then in progress; Maria said that the school board was trying to get more money, so there could be more aides in schools, and “that would be good for all of us.”

State news and beyond tended to come from television: *President Clinton Visits Europe* or *People from Haiti Turned Back to Their Home*. Irianna told the class about AIDS, that people all over the world were dying every day, that it made her very sad because it was hard to find a medicine to cure them. Veronica reported on “the hole in the ozone layer,” that it came from spray cans, that we can get skin cancer because of it, and that we can help by not using stuff that comes in spray cans. Jorge reported on smog in “*las grandes ciudades como Los Angeles y Mexicali*,” explained that it comes from “*el humo de las fabricas y el humo de los automoviles*,” and observed that it affects everyone, causing much illness, “*muchas enfermedades*.”

Elena would be sitting against the board, behind the presenter, leaning in occasionally to ask one of her bilingual “brokers” to rephrase and comment, or to add some information that would place a presentation in context, or she would pick up on a child’s question or add one of her own. So during the report on Haitian refugees, she pulled down the map and found the island for the class—then she asked them whether they thought the United States should turn the people away or let them in. During the discussion of the ozone layer, she asked the class to brainstorm for a minute on what they could do to curtail the use of aerosol cans. During the presentation on the school board, she explained what a school board was and how people got elected to it. Then she would slide down a little in her chair, feet together, hands folded, attentive as the next child came forward to engage the news.

Elena Castro moved with her family to Calexico in 1959, just as the power base in the city was beginning its slow shift toward the Mexican American majority. She entered kindergarten in 1961, a monolingual speaker of Spanish, six or seven years before the advent of bilingual education in the Imperial Valley. (The first bilingual program in modern American public schools was launched in Dade County, Florida, in 1963. Lyndon Johnson signed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968, and Calexico’s first experimental programs started in late 1969.) Elena struggled through

kindergarten and first grade, not catching on, confused, reprimanded. “She’s not trying,” the first grade teacher told her mother through an interpreter. “She doesn’t know how to pay attention. She has no discipline.” By sheer luck, Elena’s second grade teacher was a Mexican American woman, one of the few beginning to enter the teaching force, and though, at that time, the use of Spanish in the schools was forbidden, the woman encouraged Elena and explained lessons to her in her native tongue. Elena credits her with saving her academic life.

When Elena Castro talked about bilingual education, she spoke with an authority grounded in the very beginnings of her own history in the classroom. And that history developed out of the multi-layered history of the border town that became her home. These are histories of power and language, of emerging participation. Participation. One of the things you noticed, you *felt*, right away when you sat in Elena’s classroom was the excitement of young minds working. Many of her students came from poor families, a fair number were the children of migrant workers and laborers—people who have had very hard lives and little or no opportunity to learn English. In schools across the Southwest, such children have sat silent, uncomprehending, withdrawn—lost to the possibilities of the classroom, like Elena years before. But in Room 42 in Dool Elementary, the students were alive, caught up in the flow of words and images and numbers.

After a halting but auspicious start in the late sixties and early-to-mid seventies, bilingual education evolved both as a philosophy and a set of methods, always controversial, marked by both incompetence and dogged brilliance, conceptual confusion and real insight into the dynamics of culture and schooling. It evolved through a mix of legal decisions and legislation into a powerful pedagogy, only to be undermined during the Reagan presidency. Now, lobbying groups such as English Only and U.S. English present the most organized opposition to bilingual education, arguing that it will contribute to ghettoization, divisiveness, or, in the worst-case scenario, a balkanized America. The charge stirs deep fears, playing as it does to anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiments, but, in one way, it’s curious, for there is a long history of bilingualism in our country.

Though English became the dominant language in the colonies, multiple languages were spoken—German, Dutch, French, Swedish, Polish, and various Indian languages among them—and it was common for pre-Revolutionary War colonials, from indentured servants to the elite, to be adept in several tongues. It was common, as well, for official documents to be published in more than one language. The Articles of Confederation, for example, were printed in German as well as English. By the late seventeenth century, German colonials had opened private schools in Philadelphia in which their native language was the medium of instruction, and throughout the eighteenth century other linguistic minorities would develop such schools. With the emergence of comprehensive public education in the nineteenth century,

groups with sufficient political clout lobbied for monolingual or bilingual instruction in their local schools, and though such instruction was, at times, contested by other ethnic and religious groups (for example, the Irish vs. the French in Massachusetts), it was often granted, primarily to keep students in the newly developing public school system. So, German language instruction was conducted in public schools in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago, and San Francisco; French in Louisiana, three counties in Wisconsin, and in San Francisco; Spanish in New Mexico. To be sure, such instruction was opposed before our time by policy makers wary of foreign influence, but the most significant force threatening our nation’s linguistic diversity was a potent early twentieth-century nativism fueled by increasing Central and Southern European immigration and, finally, the advent of World War I. It was not until those 1960s experiments in Dade County—urged by a powerful Cuban American constituency—that bilingual education has reemerged in our country as an educational program of any consequence.

The primary concerns raised by U.S. English, English Only, and other similar groups are that bilingual education retards the learning of English and the entrance of non-English-speaking children into the social and institutional flow of American life, and that this encourages linguistic and social isolation and divisiveness. To be sure, there are poorly conceived and poorly taught, academically limiting bilingual programs—though their limitation, ironically, tends to be their focus on rudimentary functional English in lieu of educationally rich bilingual curricula. And a small number of Latino cultural nationalists in the past have tried to incorporate bilingual education into a separatist political agenda. But when you sit in Elena Castro’s classroom, it’s hard to believe that what you’re seeing will lead to exclusion and separatism.

Overall, this was an unusually cohesive class. I saw children working together in groups, helping each other, listening while the other spoke, and the one Anglo child was right in the thick of it all. There did not seem to be a pronounced separation of bilingual children from those who were monolingual—though in Calexico, itself, there was some friction between older established Mexican American families and poorer new arrivals. You saw, in Room 42, a lot of translating and other cross-linguistic exchange. The children’s native Spanish was appreciated and utilized, and the use of English was encouraged and guided. Both were used to communicate, solve problems, learn things, reflect on intellectual work, and make connections to the world outside. There was a belief here, as in other effective bilingual classrooms I’ve seen, in the power of participation, a belief that engagement in the classroom will lead to rich cognitive and linguistic development that will extend outward to the world beyond. “Extra! Read All About It.” The children in Room 42 were beginning to develop a sense of civic life.

It occurred to me after a day or two in Calexico that the city could be imagined as an English Only nightmare. Walking down Heber or Rockwood or Heffernan, or spending a few



minutes outside Dool Elementary, or shopping on Second Street, you would be likely to hear Spanish more than English. Most of the signs in the business district were in Spanish and English, but sometimes just in Spanish. If you entered a ma-and-pa restaurant with a local, the owner might well greet you in Spanish. Your friend would probably order for you.

But when you went to pay your bill at that restaurant, you'd see 8 x 10 color photographs of John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan behind the cash register. Those parents chatting outside Dool Elementary were more than likely bilingual, choosing—as ethnic groups have always chosen—to speak their native tongue in informal or private situations. (It's interesting to note that in 1911 a federal commission feared that the new immigrants—Italians and Central Europeans, characterized now as model assimilationists—were not learning English quickly enough.) And those parents who spoke only Spanish encouraged their children—really encouraged them, from what I could tell—to learn English, for, as one mother struggled to explain to me, “it will help them get ahead.” If you visited English composition courses at Imperial Valley College or at the San Diego State campus, you would meet young people like Izela, who worked with children in a Mexicali school, or Claudina, who wanted to get a degree in business—both fluently bilingual, working hard after work to master the conventions of written English.

Though infused with Spanish language and Mexican culture, Calexico defied, in its complexity, the kinds of political and social generalizations that are made about such communities. Attitudes toward English ranged from intimidation and resentment to admiration and a desire for fluency. You'd find a strong Mexican work ethic fused with an American “can do” attitude. There was despair and weariness, alcohol and violence, but also a dogged commitment to the possibility of a better life: “Take care of yourself and work hard,” was one old man's philosophy. “I never could have owned a home like this in Mexico,” said another. There was provincialism, yet there was respect for those who went away to acquire specialized knowledge and brought it back to the community. There were communitarian bonds and a deep commitment to family, yet a strong individualist ethic as well, a belief that, as one woman explained: “You have to show what you can do. You can't be one of so many. You have to stand out.” There was talk of solidarity, of *la raza*, and there were class conflicts. There were a wide range of reactions to historical inequities and racism: from fury to denial, with many believing that they could effect change by entering professional and managerial and service ranks and doing things differently. (I heard this especially from people hoping to become teachers.) There was cynicism about politics and pride in citizenship—with many old timers having voted in every election. The power base had changed: all the above now played itself out on a Mexican American political landscape marked by infighting or compromise. The Spanish language was no longer denigrated, the Mestizo heritage honored. But you knew the moment you came back across the border from Mexicali that you were in a city in the United States. It was hard to explain why, something you

felt, the movement of the people on the street, the look of things.... “You know,” one civic leader explained to me, “if you stood up in a council meeting and proposed that we become part of Mexicali, you'd get hooted out of the room.”

Rafael Jacinto picked at the crease in his old gray flannel slacks, the crease carefully ironed in—he picked as if to say “see what I mean.” He was leaning against a desk in the Music Room at the San Diego State University Imperial Valley campus, where he and his wife had just completed another session of Evangelina Jones's *The Teaching of Reading*. Stacked on shelves behind him, warped and dusty, was an old library of record albums—Ralph Marterie, Blossom Dearie, Broadway hits, *Songs of Ireland*. He looked from his trousers up to me—*see what I mean*—explaining how this decision to go back to school has limited the hours he can work, how he and his wife have to spend so many hours studying, so he wears these old pants, and this wind-breaker, staying up late, tired, the crease carefully ironed in once the kids have gone to bed.

He was telling me the story of his decision. It was in 1985. He was working in the fields, packing cauliflower. It was past midnight, and he was driving through the desert. Late, tired, those little hallucinatory wisps flitting in from the periphery of the beams of his headlights. “I started thinking about my life. What I had achieved so far. What I would probably achieve in the future. And just like that,” he snapped his fingers, “just like *that*, I knew I had to make a change.” When he went home, he woke up his wife and told her what he wanted to do. He asked her to join him. And they began taking high-school equivalency classes at the local adult school. They applied for citizenship and enrolled in ESL classes at Imperial Valley College. Five years later, with Associate Arts degrees in hand, they entered San Diego State. They have both passed the difficult English composition proficiency exam. Last semester, each got a 3.0. They want to become teachers.

Guadalupe Jacinto, who had been outside in the warm evening talking to Evangelina, walked in and took a seat beside Rafael. She was polite, engaging, full of thoughts that she expressed slowly, measuring her expression, conscious of her spoken English, but gaining in fluency and fervor as she spoke. She was born in Mexicali, married Rafael at sixteen, had four children—one of whom Evangelina taught when she was still at the elementary school. “My father always wanted me to go to school,” she explained, “but, well....” She shrugged her shoulders and smiled. “She's very smart,” Rafael observed softly. “The English is very hard,” she said, cocking her head, leaning forward. “But we work on it together. We study together.” They have about two more years to go for the Bachelor's Degree. Then certification. “It's like you're in a dream,” she said. “I can't believe it sometimes.” There was exhaustion in her voice—as though every word of English came with its own oppressive weight—but anticipation, too. To be a teacher. Pride and disbelief. “San Diego State University,” Rafael said, pausing on each word, melodious, a Spanish lilt to his English.

Elena Castro usually ate lunch in her classroom. Other teachers would drop by for a minute or two or for the duration of a quick meal. There were three regulars, the school's three first-year teachers. Carmen Santos was twenty-five and taught first grade. She had a serious, almost studious, demeanor that registered in her gaze and in the slight pursing of her lips. Veronica Zwart, whose mother was Mexican and father Dutch, taught third grade next door to Elena. She was thirty, angular face, high cheek bones. Jessie Carillo, twenty-five, taught a combined fourth–fifth class in the very room where she was once a fifth grade student. Jessie's eyes were round and big, and she had a quick, full smile. Everyone sat at the Writer's Table, spreading sandwiches, burritos, or microwaved leftovers out on paper towels. Like Elena, the three new teachers were all born in the Valley, were all bilingual, and all graduated from the SDSU campus—where they either took courses from or were supervised by Evangelina Jones, who one late afternoon had told me: “Your first real teaching job is crucial. It forms you. If you're lucky, you'll find a place that will nurture you and teach you things. It'll shape the kind of teacher you'll become.”

On the days I was observing Elena's class, she would ask me to join her and the others for lunch. The group had a casual warmth to it, low-key and inviting. Sometimes they would talk about a shopping expedition to San Diego, two hours west, or exchange local gossip—stopping to explain to me the context of a story—or discuss a union issue, for Elena was Dool's representative. But they also talked a lot about teaching. They talked about particular students or lessons or about upcoming statewide tests and how to prepare for them. And they swapped materials: books, wall displays, the advertisements that ended up in their mailboxes. So in the easy flow of conversation, a lot of advice drifted around the table. Elena was by far the most experienced teacher there, the mentor, but you couldn't tell it from her bearing. “She's willing to share everything,” Jessie told me one day. “She's very knowledgeable, but, you know, she doesn't brainwash you. She definitely has her opinions; she'll say ‘This is what I think,’ but then she asks you to talk.” Isolated in their rooms, young teachers easily get overwhelmed by their notions of success and experiences of failure. Elena's table created a common space for them, familiar, set in shared history, alternately light and serious. And hopeful—you definitely got the sense that competence was taken for granted here. “When I first started,” Veronica explained, “I would go home feeling hopeless. But, now, well, now I'm excited.” If one of the young teachers came in defeated, it was assumed to be momentary, a problem to be solved. And sometimes a request for direct help would emerge as part of the give and take. That's the way it was when Carmen asked Elena to visit her class and help her with Felipe.

Carmen had her first graders around her at the front of the room, and they were all singing along to a scratchy record:

The world is a rainbow  
With many kinds of people  
When we work together  
It's such a sight to see.  
The world is beautiful when  
we live in har-mon-eee.

As they sang, the children waved their hands back and forth in the air, sweeping the sky with the curve of the rainbow. Carmen swept the sky as well, rocking her head, a little grin on her face, into it, but with a hint of amusement. Her room was set up like Elena's with a range of work stations—*Estación de Escuchar*, the Listening Station, *Estación de Arte*, the Art Station, and so on—and the walls were filled with print, and overhead hung colorful samples of the children's work.

After the song and a little stretch—“reach beyond the rainbow, higher, higher”—Carmen began the rotations. Small groups of students went to the *Estación de ABC* and the Listening Station. A larger group went to the Writer's Table where some would be setting down the words of their first stories while others would be dictating more elaborate stories to the aide Carmen had that morning: stringing events together, wide-eyed, with “and...and...and then....” And still others would be joining Carmen at the Teacher's Workshop to continue to learn to read in Spanish. On a shelf behind Carmen sat a short stack of books: *Los Animales de Don Vincencio*, *Azulín Visita a México*, and a book about a kite, *El Papalote*. Alongside them was a large book, bound in art paper, entitled *Mi Extraterrestre*. I reached over and quietly pulled it out. It was collection of student drawings accompanied by Carmen's neat script; and, from what I could tell, students had to imagine what their own private extraterrestrial might be like. The creatures they conjured had multiple legs and multiple heads, long ears, fangs, huge purple hands, big red eyes—lots of them. In English and in Spanish the children described E.T.s that would knock things down, and “spin around to get to the earth,” and attend a birthday party, and fly to the mall.

Right at the second rotation, Elena came in. The children knew her; she had visited before. So there was no uneasiness. She walked over to the table where students were writing in their journals—the idea here being that they would write, as best they could, about something that happened to them and then the teacher, or an aide, would respond, thus demonstrating to the children that writing did things, was interactive. Elena worked with two or three children, then moved next to Felipe. Carmen drifted over.

“Felipe,” Elena said, “may I write in the journal with you?”

“Yes.”

“What would you like to write about?”

Silence.

“Did you go to the fair last weekend?”

A big “Yes.”

“What did you see?”

And Felipe began to write—slowly, awkwardly—and Elena helped him along.

“Saw. Sawww. What letter makes that *www* sound?”  
And eventually Felipe wrote: “I went to the fair and saw a bull.”

“Felipe, what else did you see?”

Felipe fell silent again. Elena took a different tack.

“Did you eat anything at the fair?”

An enthusiastic “I ate corn dogs!”

“¡Ay!” exclaimed Elena. “Write about that!”

And so it went. After Felipe produced another sentence or two, Elena said to him, “I’m going to respond to you now, O.K.?” Then, under Felipe’s sentences, she began to write—reading out loud what she was writing—“I went to the fair last year, but I’m not going this year.” She paused and looked at him, all serious.

“Do you know why, Felipe?”

“No, *maestra*.”

And here she picked up the pen again, talking as she wrote: “Because I ate tooooo many corn dogs!”

She laughed that throaty heh-heh-heh and turned back to Felipe who was grinning in skeptical pleasure.

They finished up and, as the aide continued to work with the journals, Elena took Carmen out of earshot and said, “He just needs a little more. Three or four days of intensive work. Then leave him be. But, now, be persistent.” Carmen listened, nodding. “Be persistent,” she said under her breath, and walked Elena to the door. Then she went back and sat with Felipe.

Eddie Hernandez taught kindergarten on the south end of Dool. He had been teaching for ten years; Elena Castro was his master teacher. Now he’s known throughout the district and serves as a master teacher for others. Eddie was born in Calexico—one of a family of ten—went to Imperial Valley College, then to the San Diego State campus up the street. In fact, his kindergartners play on a grassy enclosure that was once the site of his grandmother’s house—where there used to be a tool shed and a garden there were now swings, a slide, and a burro and parrot, both saddled, ready for a rider, on iron poles rising out of the ground.

Evangelina had sent a lot of education students to Eddie, and based on their reports and her own observation, she described him this way: “Eddie is the epitome of the master teacher. He shows trainees how to think about teaching. He expects a lot from his class, and at the end of every week he sits down with his student teacher and thinks out loud about how things went, or about new things that emerged, or about what he had to modify to help so-and-so understand a concept. It’s really something, you know, because Eddie looks so effortless, but really he’s always thinking, and the new teacher gets to see how that works.”

The philosophy guiding Eddie’s classroom—and guiding the way Elena, Carmen and the others ran their classes as well—was “whole language.” To be sure, discrete work on particular skills was done in the whole language classrooms at Dool—you’d see Eddie and Elena, for example, helping kids sound out words phonetically—but, as Elena explained, such work was done “in the service of

something bigger,” was done as children were trying to write stories or pursue the narrative line in a book. A new teacher in Eddie’s room would learn this philosophy and the range of approaches that came with it—a way to think about the teaching of language and a set of beliefs about what students can do under the right conditions.

One of the first things that struck visitors to Eddie’s class was how sophisticated it seemed, how much academic work the kids were doing. There were ditties, of course, and snacks, and happy faces everywhere—and half the time, the stars Eddie gave the kids would end up on forearms or foreheads, rather than on the fronts of shirts and blouses. But in addition to practicing the formation of letters, the children were trying to write stories; along with learning the ABC’s, they were being guided through simple narratives and giving their opinions about them. Spanish and English was all around them—as in Elena’s room—and they were expected to try to solve problems with words. Eddie had covered one section of his west wall with samples of print that the children would recognize from their home environment: there was a box of Lucky Charms and a label from Campbell’s *Sopa de Pollo* and a package of Blue Bonnet, and a range of other food and household products. So when, one morning, a little girl was writing a story and got stuck on the word *blue*, Eddie turned her around and asked her to find the word on the display. She did and copied it down. “See,” he said to the intern who was there that day, “there’s all kinds of ways they can learn to spell.” “The whole idea,” he explained further, “is to get them to think, to look around at the language that surrounds them and use it.”

One day I asked Carmen, Jessie, and Veronica to speculate on the ideal training program for elementary school teachers. “They’d put you in the schools earlier—observing, tutoring, something to get you around kids sooner.” “It would be more hands-on.” “Reading books alone doesn’t do it. Books can’t tell you what to actually expect in the classroom.” The training would involve a lot of role playing and simulation, for “it’s important to go through what the kids go through.” Who should conduct this training? “People who have been in the classroom, who have a lot of techniques.” Evangelina Jones and Elena Castro were cited as exemplars, as was Eddie Hernandez, and a woman named Jane Carpenter, a local teacher who had developed a training program in children’s literature for the district. The topic of in-service workshops came up several times, and the young teachers made it clear that they were *not* talking about the typical one-day presentation, usually given by an outside consultant. What they had in mind was an ongoing series of sessions—like Carpenter’s—where teachers could come, learn some things, try them, and come back, discuss the results, fine-tune, modify or abandon what they tried, and learn more. This sort of training, said Carmen, Veronica, and Jessie, should be in place especially during a teacher’s first few years in the classroom. “So what is it,” I then asked, “that makes people like Evangelina, Elena, and Eddie so good?” The answers: “They know so many things to do.” “They

make learning fun.” “They have a great relationship with their kids.” “They care.”

Probably because of the demands of their immediate situation and the early phase of their own growth as teachers, the focus of Carmen, Veronica, and Jessie’s discussion was very much on practice. This made sense. No matter how well they might master the content of a teacher ed. class, or how high they might score on a test, or how adroitly they could generalize about teaching, they still had to walk into a room full of children five days a week and *do* things, engage in an extraordinarily complex activity fraught with the uncertain and conditional. Developing effective ways to generate and guide discussion, provide feedback on reading and writing, put together a test, even take roll and collect homework—procedures and routines, big and small—these and a formidable number of other activities would determine their success or failure as classroom teachers. And central to that success, and to their own sense of themselves as both competent teachers and decent human beings, were the ways they could find to both manage the classroom and connect with the children in it. The social dimension of teaching. How could they foster relationships with the children that were caring yet professional, that would enable them to manage the room and touch individual lives? No wonder they admired Elena’s warmly attentive but efficient classroom style.

What was interesting to me—and it took me a while to grasp it—was the degree to which these concerns about practice and relationships, while certainly emerging from immediate needs, were also reflecting deeply held values and beliefs about children and learning. At first, I wondered—because I didn’t hear much specifically about it—I wondered about the importance for these young teachers of the conceptual or moral dimensions of teaching. Did they see themselves primarily as technicians, caring technicians, but technicians nonetheless? Or was there more? What I came to appreciate was the fact that their concerns about practice were embedded in wide-ranging moral imperatives. Take, for example, the talk about “caring.”

When Carmen and company praised Elena’s “care,” they were referring partly to their mentor’s affection for kids, but more to her absolute regard for children, her unflinching belief in their potential. “Caring” had as much to do with faith and cognition as with feeling. All children, no matter what their background, had the capacity to learn. And this belief brought with it a responsibility: it was the teacher’s intellectual challenge to come to understand what must be done to tap that potential. All this was so solid a tenet of these teachers’ beliefs about their work that it usually went unsaid. It was simply acted upon. Thus the need for skill, techniques, smart practice. So when Felipe wasn’t writing, Carmen went to Elena for help—for Felipe’s capacity to produce written language was not in question.

Every time interns watched Elena teach, they saw these beliefs in action, in even the most commonplace encounters—and it’s often in the asides, the offhand questions, the micro-lessons that a teacher’s most basic attitudes toward students are revealed. Carlos had written a shaggy dog story. Elena was slowly scrolling up the computer screen, praising

the story as she read. Once done, about to move onto the next child, she tapped the *home* button, taking the story back to a line at the beginning in which Carlos described the dog as a “troublemaker.” “You know, Carlos,” she reflected, “I found myself wondering what Penny did that caused so much trouble?” “She tips over garbage cans,” he said. “Good, anything else?” Carlos giggled. “What,” she asked, “What is it?” “She makes messes!” Elena laughed. “Put that in, too, Carlos. That way your reader will *really* know what you mean by troublemaker.” Another time, Elena was reading to the class a story in Spanish about a marvelous garden, and she came across a description of a beet that was six inches wide. She paused for a moment and reached across her desk for a ruler, handing it to Arely. “*Mija*, show us how big that beet was.” Arely counted four, five, six on the ruler. “Whoa,” said Alex, “big, huh?” And yet another time, Elena was working with a group of students on their marine research when Alex walked over from the Writer’s Table to get her attention: he needed a definition of the word *admire*. She looked up, defined it, and, as he was walking away, she called to him and asked if he admired the farmer in a story they had read that morning. He turned back and thought for a moment: “No,” he didn’t, thereby applying the new definition to a familiar character. She was masterful at extending a child’s knowledge at every little turn of the classroom day.

This affirmation of potential was deeply egalitarian. It did not stratify children by some assessment of their readiness or ability or by judgments based on their background or record. It assumed ability and curiosity; learning, in this belief system, became an entitlement. In Elena’s words, “You can’t deny anybody the opportunity to learn. That’s their right.” Bilingual education gained special meaning in this context. Bilingual education was not just a method, but an affirmation of cultural and linguistic worth, an affirmation of the mind of a people. It fit into a broader faith that, as Evangelina said before her Teaching of Reading class one afternoon, “All children have minds and souls and have the ability to participate fully in the society, and education is a way to achieve that.”

These egalitarian beliefs, from what I could tell, had multiple origins, and played out in life and work in complicated ways.

There was a civic base to Elena and her colleagues’ teaching. They took seriously their nation’s best promise. There were pictures of Washington and Lincoln in their classrooms, the flag, the pledge of allegiance—icons and credos to counter the forces that have limited the growth of children like those in Calexico. Teaching was a means of effecting social change. “*Any child can learn*,” said Carmen, “They just have to be given a fair chance.”

On a more personal level each teacher spoke about a teacher of her own who validated her intellectual worth, who demonstrated to her the power of having someone believe in a student’s ability. Also of critical importance was the fact that Elena, Carmen, and the others shared a history and a community. They knew the families of the kids they taught, knew the streets they lived on and the cultural pathways open or closed to them. This familiarity, of course, widened

the teachers' sphere of influence: as Jessie said, it's easy to "see a kid on the street and tell him to come by"—but on a deeper level, the place where heart and instruction intersect, they identified with their students. As Evangelina explained, "when you see that third grader, you're seeing yourself. You think, 'if someone had done this for me when I was in third grade, how much better my education would have been.'" This was an identification that had significant pedagogical consequences.

Though these teachers certainly had strong community bonds—and in their professional lives they overcame the isolation of the classroom by working together and by involving themselves in union activities and various educational lobbying organizations, Carmen and the others defied easy ideological distinctions by also putting great weight on individual responsibility. They believed that if one was self-reliant and worked hard, one would succeed. "It's a big thing here to be a teacher," Evangelina explained, "and it's achievable." There seemed to be few illusions about the effects that social inequalities could have on this success. "You have to work twice as hard," as Elena put it. Because of race and class, it could be a difficult life—all the more reason to develop a resilient inner core. Their family histories were histories of hard work, and they respected those histories, derived from them a personal mythology of strength and endurance. And they, in turn, have worked hard to enter a profession and develop a sense of institutional efficacy. They believed they could make a difference and pushed themselves to do so. It was no surprise that they had high expectations for their students.

This was surely true for Elena. The majority of the children I saw in Room 42 had entered school in September with the designation "low achiever" or "slow learner." Elena's response was to assume that they had gotten into some unproductive habits and were sabotaging their own intelligence. "The first two weeks, it was difficult," she explained to me one noontime at the Writer's Table. "I'd put them here to write—and they'd fool around. It took them a while to figure it out, it took time, with me talking to them. 'This is *your* education,' I'd say, 'It's your responsibility. I'm here to support you...but you have to do the work.'" She spoke emphatically, with a nod or an exclamation or a quick laugh, her finger tapping the table, her hand cutting the air. "I had to keep some in at recess to finish the work. I had to talk to them and talk to them. But then...look at them now. They're bright kids. They're not underachievers; they're not slow. They were just used to doing what they could get by with." Her room was constructed on work and opportunity. "You can't say 'I can't' in this classroom. You have to try." And that cut both ways.

If you believe so firmly in the potential of all your students, you have very few ready explanations for their failure. The first line of scrutiny was oneself. "What you do is not necessarily good for everyone," Elena would say. "You have to try different things. You have to ask yourself: 'What can I change that will work for a child who's not learning?'" When a student was not doing well, Elena would assume she was failing and put herself through a rigorous

self-assessment. "Why am I not teaching him?" she would ask, her record book open, the child's work spread out in front of her.

Roberto was a sweet, quiet boy who understood his classwork and would do it when Elena was assisting him, but simply would not do it on his own. "I don't know what to do to get him motivated," she said. "I tried structuring things more, and I tried letting him pursue whatever he wanted. He's a smart boy...I'm doing something wrong... What am I missing?" Then one day when she was sitting with him, encouraging him to write a little more on a story, he suddenly started crying. His mother had left home, and he was sent to stay with his grandmother. He missed his mother terribly and was afraid that his grandmother, who was ailing, would die and leave him alone. How could he concentrate, Elena thought, when his very security was threatened? This was beyond anything she could influence. It was telling, though, that Elena didn't entirely let up. She told him he could talk to her anytime he felt sad, and that she would lighten up a bit—on him, I suspect, more than herself—but that "they both had a responsibility to teach and learn," and that the best thing he could do was to learn what he could so he would someday be able to take care of himself. "We both have to try," she said, holding him, wanting to make for him, as best she could, her classroom a place of both love and learning. For in Elena's mind, the consequences for Roberto's future of not learning to read and write and compute were too great to ignore, even in sorrow.

Among the teachers I got to know in Calexico, the response to hardship was a firm resolve to try harder. On the day of my visit to Carmen's classroom, the *San Diego Union Tribune* ran a story on the social and economic problems plaguing the California Latino community and the impact those problems were having on education. I mentioned the article to her and we talked about it a bit. "You know, Carmen," I finally said, "some would say that teachers like you are battling insurmountable odds." "The problems *are* big ones," she answered, "and they make me very angry. But everybody's got a job to do. The problems are not going to stop me from teaching."

All this was what it meant to care.

## 5.

I sat in the booth across from Emily Palacio in the large, bright coffee shop of Hollie's Fiesta Motel. There were a few businessmen around us—insurance agents, merchants—and some of the mechanics from the Pep Boys down the street. From our window we could see the traffic lining up on Imperial, eight blocks from the border, and it felt good to settle into the thick naugahyde cushions in the quiet dining room. Emily was the director of Curriculum Development for the Calexico Unified School District, and she was going to take me to a meeting of the school board. We had some time to kill, dallying with Pepsis, and at one point I asked her to talk about the classrooms I had been visiting, to give me the perspective from the district office. "You have to understand," she said, "the number of things that had to be put in

place so that those teachers you saw can flourish.” Emily’s strong, almost formal, bearing was counterpointed by a friendly directness.

“Bilingual education,” she continued, “is a good example. When I first started teaching in 1969, we still weren’t allowed to use Spanish in the classroom. And, to be honest, when we got our first bilingual ed. money, I wasn’t sure it would work. There was resistance from some of the Mexican parents too—it’s really important to them that their kids learn English—and, well, I was skeptical too.” She paused momentarily, twirling the wrapper from her straw around her fingers. “But then,” she continued, “I started reading some research that impressed me, and I started looking closely at our kids who were being taught to read in Spanish—and paradoxically they were learning English better than those who had moved into English early. I knew then what we had to do.” She smoothed the wrapper out and started over. “But nothing came easy. We convinced the parents to let us try things, but got a lot of resistance from some teachers who were monolingual and from some of the city leaders in Calexico. We had to work very hard. It was a struggle. But the leadership was changing here, and slowly, slowly things turned around.”

As we continued to talk, I heard the same affirmations of potential I had heard from the teachers—“We just don’t believe that our kids can’t succeed”—spoken from the same kind of personal base: “My father stressed that his children would get an education, so that we could help our people.” And I heard, as well, a significant linguistic range put to the service of those beliefs. In our time in the restaurant, and during a subsequent visit to her office, I listened as Emily spoke both informal and highly educated Spanish and English, shifted into policy-speak on the phone to the state capital, and adopted the language of educational research—she had done graduate work at Claremont College—when talking to a reporter. I would sit back, thinking about the ways in which that fluency affected the classrooms in which Elena, Carmen, Veronica, and the others did their work.

Emily was right, even the most individually brilliant teaching takes place in a historical and political context. There was so much that had to be achieved: the changes in Calexico’s power base; the federal-level policy and legislation involving bilingual education, affirmative action, and increased support for education—and the resulting availability of loans and scholarships for economically disadvantaged students; the movement of bilingual teachers, both Latino and Anglo, into the work force; new blood in administration; a decent working relationship between the school board and administration; the documented successes the schools were having and the sense of pride and purpose this evidence gave to the community about its schools. Hard-won achievements that, in turn, made further achievement possible.

Driving out to the District Office, I thought about what Emily had said, about all the lines of history and power that intersect in one classroom...or circles, concentric circles moving inward from the activism of a previous era, the pain and optimism that made a good classroom possible.

The meeting at the District Office opened with a greeting by the two student representatives on the school board—Lorena and Lizette, both from Calexico High—and then proceeded to presentations of awards for “Student of the Month.” The meeting was taking place right at the time of a regional science fair, so a display of some of the work of Calexico students came next. One young woman told us about studying the reproductive cycle of the whitefly, an insect that had devastated crops in the Valley. A young man explained a research project on the relation between hormone levels in cows and the production of milk. The members of the board sat back while the students spoke. Their posture seemed to say: this is our reason for being.

Then Roberto Morales, the board member with the longest tenure, thanked the students and turned the board toward its administrative agenda. There were a number of items dealing with planning and budget, and then came new business: the head of the Chamber of Commerce sought to honor the schools by putting a photo of the district office on the cover of a promotional brochure. More business. Then another board member, Refugio Gonzales, the director of the University of California Agricultural Extension in the Valley, took the meeting on a different course. He pointed out that the national meeting of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, MALDEF, was coming up soon, and he wondered out loud if someone from the board could present data on Calexico’s success. “There is so much press,” he said, “about Hispanic failure, I’d like to let people know that there are programs in which Hispanic students are doing well.”

Over to the side of the meeting room, along the west wall, there were two architectural models of the schools the district was planning to build. One, a middle school, was going to be named in honor of Willie Moreno, one of those sixties activists who worked so hard to get Mexican Americans elected to Calexico’s school board and city council. I thought about his legacy—evident in this boardroom—and about how important the achievements of Calexico’s student’s were becoming. The community was inspired by its students, and it takes such a feeling of hope to make effective school governance possible: The effect of hope on structure and function, the way it can open political space and foster common cause.

But as Willie Moreno certainly knew, the alliances and commitments necessary for progress are tenuous. Previous boards and administrations had been at each other’s throats, and though that relationship has, over the last few years, been amicable, there were brewing some conflicts between the teacher’s union and the administration over benefits. This conflict was potentially volatile because the state of California was in the middle of a financial crisis, and school budgets were being cut. Could the differences be worked through? On another front, would the long-standing friction between older Calexicans and new arrivals from Mexico worsen and be reflected in school politics? Or would personal rivalries among the city’s power brokers erupt into divisive disputes? For now this was only worrisome speculation. There was broad-based support for the schools and the

climate for new ideas. Alex, Arely, Carlos, Irianna, and the others were having an influence on school governance beyond what they knew, and what happened in this room over the next span of years would, in turn, have a profound influence on them.

Down the hall after the board meeting into the Superintendent's office. Roberto Moreno (no relation to Willie) spoke easily, steadily. A tall, muscular man, quietly enthusiastic, sweeping his hair away from his eyes. He was born and raised in Calexico and married his high school sweetheart, who was now a counselor at a neighboring high school. He had been in the district, as a teacher or administrator, for more than twenty years, except for some time at Stanford for graduate work.

"We're not in a position," he was saying, "we don't have the resources to invent—it takes a lot of money to develop curriculum from scratch. We just can't do that. But we're great at implementing the good things that we find. We might have to beg, borrow, or steal it," he mused, "but we can apply a good idea. And the Board is supportive of innovation and risk."

"We've got some great teachers," he continued, rocking back in an old swivel chair. "They're always on the lookout and so are we. Something good appears. We ask, 'What's this program about?' 'What are the underlying concepts?' 'Can we make it work for us?' Then," he laughed, "then we try to find the funds to do it."

I had met the person who scouts for those funds, Mary Camacho, Director of State and Federal Projects. Calexico is a poor district and couldn't survive without such assistance—and Mary was compiling an impressive record of securing it from government agencies, industry, and private foundations. Originally a home economics teacher at the high school, she had become an assistant principal, then moved into the district office where she learned about grantsmanship. "I was told to try things," she explained. "A lot of us here are home-grown. We might go away to school, but some come back, and we develop here. I just learned from a lot of people who were generous with their time. This is the kind of place where, if you have an idea, you're encouraged to pursue it."

One of the ideas that had been stirring excitement in the district office originated several years ago with an enterprising middle-school English teacher named Gretchen Laue. Gretchen wanted to turn the summer session at her school into a lab school, a place where teachers would learn new methods and students would, in turn, benefit from an enriched language arts curriculum. She applied for, and received, a grant from the state. The project was a local success. This past year, Roberto suggested to Emily Palacio that they apply Gretchen's idea to summer school for all the district's elementary grades. Get them early. "Be inventive," Roberto told Emily. And so, Emily decided to fundamentally reconceive summer school for elementary students in Calexico's public schools.

Summer school had typically been remedial in nature,

instruction in basics for kids who weren't doing well or for the children of new arrivals from Mexicali. "I don't want it to be remedial," Emily thought, "I want it to be an academy." She wanted to make it a lab school for teachers and a site of enrichment for students. And she wanted to affect a number of subjects: math, language arts, music, and art. School restructuring that was not just organizational but involved a rethinking of what students can do.

She developed a plan. There would be four expert teachers hired as coaches for each of the subjects. They would conduct workshops for the teachers, visit their classes, do demonstration lessons with their students, and consult with them. One pattern would be this: the coach does a lesson before a teacher's class; on his or her own, the teacher does a follow-up lesson; the teacher then does a third related lesson with the coach observing and providing feedback. As teachers mastered these new approaches, they would become part of their repertoire and, Emily hoped, would be carried over into the regular academic year. Eddie Hernandez was hired as the art coach, and Evangelina Bustamente Jones was brought in to supervise language arts. One of the teachers, it turned out, would be Jessie Carillo.

The program took place in the summer after my visit. Evangelina told me about it by phone.

The language arts curriculum emphasized poetry, revising and editing, and various methods of collaboration. There were thirty teachers involved and about 850 students. From what Evangelina could tell, it was a big success, and now Emily, Mary, and Roberto are thinking ahead about funding for next year. The children wrote poetry, letters, and stories in Spanish, English, or both, and wrote responses to each other's work. At the end of the program, the students in each class selected the writing they liked best, and it was displayed as part of a celebration that extended across several schools. They were given forms on which they could respond to the work of other children that struck them. "Your writing made me feel \_\_\_\_\_," was one item on the form; "I'd like to know more about \_\_\_\_\_," was another. These forms were then returned to the original author.

Evangelina walked me through the displays, reciting some pieces she had copied down. There were metaphors by first graders, written as they let their imaginations play over a bowl of popcorn: "popcorn tastes like haunted candy" and "popcorn looks like crumpled flowers." There were majestic descriptions of fireworks by fifth graders: "under attack, neon fireballs turn with rays curving around them" and "different colors of fluorescent confetti fall to the ground." And there was this reflection written by a third grader as she listened to a recording of flute music:

I was in the ocean and there were lots of leaves and trees.  
I was on a rock on the water. I was singing and touching  
the water by myself and I felt like the world barely  
started.

