

**A Year and a Day**  
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**Mr. Rodriguez's Office, the school's parent coordinator, 10:30 a.m.**

*(The entire meeting was spoken in Spanish)*

"Good morning, Ms. Gutierrez. Oh, Mr. Solarte, welcome, welcome, come on in. To what do I owe this visit of my two favorite parents?" Every parent was Mr. Rodriguez's favorite parent. As parent coordinator, he acted as a liaison between the parents and the school. The position was created three years ago by the school district. Needless to say, he was new to the position. He was still feeling his way around, but both his children were students at P.S. AX. The parents trusted him and often came to him for help, even if it wasn't about the students. In fact, Ms. Gutierrez had recently been in his office seeking immigration advice.

"Well Mr. Rodriguez, we are very upset. We were just in a parent meeting with Ms. Santiago and she said that our children will have to take this big English test. She said if they don't pass, they can't go to fourth grade. I think making Alexandra repeat the grade is just a punishment for not being born here. She is trying real hard."

"Yes, Mr. Solarte, I hear Alexandra is really showing progress. If she doesn't pass the test she will not necessarily have to stay in third grade. She could go to summer school and take the test again. If she passes it then she will go to fourth grade. The extra time might be what she needs. You never know, by the time the test comes she might be fine. I don't think it is a good idea to get worked up about this because it will cause her to become very nervous. Ms. Gutierrez, what are your fee ..."

"How can I not get worked up about this? This is her future. She is a good girl." Mr. Solarte interrupted. He was angered by Mr. Rodriguez's nonchalant attitude.

Mr. Rodriguez could see Mr. Solarte's jaw pulsating and knew he needed to calm him down. "Mr. Solarte, I understand you are very upset by this, but she has been here for over a year and she will have to take the test. All I am saying is that it is not going to be good for you or Alexandra to get worked up about this. She will see how upset this

makes you and become very nervous about the test. It is of no use to make her more anxious. You must encourage her to do her best. Ms. Santiago is a good teacher and she will do her best to help Alexandra. We all want what is best for her.”

“Yes, yes, Mr. Rodriguez, what you are saying is right but what message is this sending to Alexandra? You work hard, do all you can to get ahead and fail this test. It isn’t fair. I teach her how hard work will pay off, but then one test can ruin it.”

“I agree, Mr. Solarte, it is not fair but like I said we should not make Alexandra more nervous than she already is. I assume you feel the same way Ms. Gutierrez.” Ms. Gutierrez quietly nodded. “I’ll talk to the principal on your behalf. I must warn you, she might not be able to do anything about it. This is something that was put in place by the state. I think what we can do for the time being is continue to encourage the girls to work hard and try their best.”

Mr. Rodriguez wondered if there was more he could have done. He did not want to go against the principal and thought it was best to consult with her.

### **Earlier that morning**

Katherine stopped at the local grocery store on her way to work to buy some juice and cookies for the Parent Tea. She expected a good turnout, luckily juice was on sale. She was looking forward to meeting the parents of her new students. She had so much to go over with them. She spent most of her evenings last week translating letters and samples of class work in order to help the parents understand how to prepare their children. The State English Language Arts (ELA) test would be here in the blink of an eye. She worried about Alexandra from Ecuador with some schooling and Perla from Mexico with no formal schooling. Both girls came in mid-year the previous school year. According to state mandates they would not be exempt from the test. The stress was almost unbearable. How could she get her newcomers ready for the test? Alexandra was really coming along, but Perla had a long way to go.

Katherine was deep in thought, rehearsing what she would say to the parents, as she stood in the express lane. She wanted to make sure the parents understood what needed to be done to prepare the students. She mentally checked off the list of things

that needed to be prepared for the meeting as she mindlessly handed the cashier a twenty. He handed her the change and she stuffed it in her pocket and rushed towards the door. “Miss! Miss! You forgot your bags.” The cashier called out to the Katherine as she walked out.

### **P.S. AX**

P.S. AX is an elementary school located in the South Bronx section of New York City. It contains 670 students in grades pre-kindergarten through grade five. The school population is composed of 30% Black, 69% Hispanic and 1% White students. The student body includes 20% English language learners and 15% special education students. Boys account for 48% of the students enrolled and girls account for 52%. The average attendance rate for the previous school year was 91%. The school receives Title I funding. The school currently has a transitional bilingual program.

In recent years P.S. AX has received an influx of immigrant students from Central and South America as well as Caribbean countries and Eastern African countries. Bilingual classrooms have students from Spanish-speaking countries. Students speaking primary languages other than Spanish are placed in monolingual (English) classes and receive English as a second language (ESL) services five periods a week. The school is challenged by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandates to meet the needs of second language learners as well as following state English Language Learner (ELL) testing mandates. Four years ago the state changed its ELA testing policy for newcomers from five years to one year and one day. As a result, P.S. AX bilingual students are the lowest performing group on the ELA test. This year the school’s Research Team has chosen the ELL students as a focus its for study.

### **Parent Tea 10:00 a.m.**

*As an annual tradition, the P.S. AX hosts “Parent Teas” in mid-October. This allows parents to get to know their child’s teacher. This also gives teachers the opportunity to inform parents of their expectations. Most classes get a small handful of parents whereas the bilingual classes have approximately half of the parents show up. The “Parent Tea” takes place during the classroom teacher’s preparation period.*

*(Katherine conducted her entire meeting in Spanish.)*

"I'm so glad to see all of you here. First, allow me to introduce myself. I have been teaching third grade for five years. Last year, I received certification in bilingual education, so this is my second year teaching bilingual. The only difference between this class and the other third grade classes is that I provide support to your children in Spanish in order to help them transition into English. Enough about me, let's now take this opportunity to go over what is required for your children this year and to tell you how we will meet the requirements. This year your children will be required to take tests. They will need to pass these tests in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. The first test will be in January. This test is the English Language Arts test. The students will be required to read a few passages, listen to a story, answer multiple-choice questions, write short responses and edit a paragraph. The test will be given over two days for about forty minutes each day."

"Wait a minute, the students will need to read and write in English? I don't understand. How can this be? We just came here this summer from Puerto Rico. Juan barely speaks in English. He reads in Spanish. How can he take the test when he is still learning the language?" Asked Ms. Sanchez, Juan's mother who was very outspoken.

The other parents agreed – especially Perla's mother and Alexandra's father. "Alexandra is very smart; she is starting to read well in Spanish, but her English is not that strong yet. I don't think it's fair. She is doing well, but she needs more time."

"Ms. Sanchez, Juan will not have to take the test this year, but next year he will no longer be exempt. We need to prepare him now. And Mr. Solarte, I don't disagree with you, but these are the rules that I must follow." Ms. Santiago replied.

"I still don't think it's fair. What if he isn't ready next year? I mean, *his* girl has been here since last year." Ms. Sanchez said as she pointed to Mr. Solarte. "There must be something we can do. Can't the principal do something about it?" Juan's mother asked.

"Ms. Sanchez, believe me, I understand your frustration, but all I can do is instruct the students so they can be ready for the test. The principal can't make exemptions. The state makes these rules."

"Maybe I should speak directly to the principal about this." Ms. Sanchez declared.

*Ms. Santiago was very disappointed she didn't get to go over the material she had prepared for the meeting. She wasn't prepared for the dissention of the parents. She truly understood their frustration. She thought perhaps their objections would get somewhere. She said a little prayer in hopes that someone would understand their frustrations and do something about it. She sighed almost knowing it was hopeless.*

### **Teachers' Lounge 11:45 pm**

"Your parent meeting must have gone well, Katherine, I noticed your full classroom. Did all your parents show up?" Mr. Berger, the second grade bilingual teacher replied.

"Most of them, but I wouldn't say it went well." Katherine replied. "A few of the parents were upset about the ELA."

"At least they showed up and know there is going to be a test. I had one parent show up!" Ms. Lee said with some disgust. June Lee taught one of the third grade monolingual classes.

"I guess, but it's just not fair. Their kids are just barely learning to read English, I am trying to strengthen their Spanish but they are expected to take the same test as all the other third graders in monolingual classes. I understand where they're coming from."

"Whatever, my students were born here and they can't read in English let alone Spanish!" June was obviously frustrated with her class so early in the year.

"I wonder if I had held them back in second grade if they would be better off." Mr. Berger asked Katherine.

"It might have hurt them just the same. I mean, Alexandra is such a hard worker. What message would it send her? And Perla, well based on her age she should be in fourth grade. They put her in second grade last year instead of third due to her limited schooling. Can you imagine her in second grade now?" Katherine replied. "I don't understand why 'the powers that be' think students will be ready in a year to take a test in a language other than their first. I wonder if they went to another country, like China, if they would be ready to take a test in Chinese. In grad school we were taught that true acquisition of a second language takes five to seven years."

"Yeah but will they ever truly understand the language if they aren't fully immersed. They just need to learn English. I mean when my parents came to this country they didn't have the option of being taught in Chinese. They just had to learn English." June stated.

"I see what you are saying, June, but in this day and age it is helpful to know two languages. Why can't we strength their first language? It could even help their English acquisition." Katherine responded.

"Listen the only thing to help their acquisition is full immersion. We are just babying them by letting them stay in a classroom where they can speak, read and write in Spanish. Anyone who immigrates to the U.S. doesn't have the luxury of learning or strengthening their first language. Why should your students be the exception?" June fired back.

"Well it isn't like we are making the decisions here." Katherine felt the conversation escalating into more personal territory. She was thankful that the current mandates weren't in place when she emigrated from the Dominican Republic with her family. She was fluent in three languages having taken French in high school.

#### **Principal's Office 2:30 p.m.**

"Mrs. White, can I speak to you?"

"What's up, Mr. Rodriguez?"

“Well, I had a visit from a couple of parents from Ms. Santiago’s class. I told them I would speak to you on their behalf. They are upset about their children having to take the ELA. They don’t think it’s fair their children will be taking a test in English when they just came to the country last year.”

“Yes, I heard about the parent meeting. Juan Sanchez’s mom talked to me this morning. She’s a handful! I understand the parents aren’t happy about this, but the state mandates that after a year and a day in the school system the students should be able to take the test in English. I wish they didn’t have to take the test either. Can you imagine how much better our school’s overall test scores would be? We have been cited for our lack of growth in ELA scores. Anyhow, I wonder how long this mandate will last.” Mrs. White said rolling her eyes. “Listen, we spent a lot of time and money on test prep, Ms. Santiago has the resources to prepare the children.”

“What should I tell the parents?” Mr. Rodriguez asked just as Mrs. White’s Blackberry started vibrating. Mr. Rodriguez waited patiently for a moment while she checked her messages but knew his meeting with her was over for the time being.

**Discussion questions:**

- 1) How could Mr. Rodriguez have better helped the parents to advocate for their children?
- 2) Should bilingual teachers continue to work on strengthening literacy skills in the students’ first language?
- 3) Would full immersion in English raise test scores?