

Kim Gutierrez

Power Autobiography

I have always admired and looked up to my mom. When I was 8, I believe that regard was amplified. I felt proud to be the daughter of a mother who raised me, held a job and ran a household all on her own. This modality of independence pushed me to be the best student I could be. I wanted to make her proud and use the resilience that she taught me to do so.

I went to school across the street from where we lived. It was a densely populated neighborhood in Los Angeles. Most of my classmates came from families whose predominant home language was Spanish, like mine. The first time I learned the meaning of power, I was in the second grade. Parent teacher conference season was always a made up to be a very exciting time for good students. The expectation was that teachers take the time to speak highly of our progress and the work I was doing to our parents. Although I was a very good student, Parent Teacher Conferences were something I dreaded. Most times I was asked to sit at the table with the adults and translate pieces that did not seem clear to my mom. My mother's predominant language is Spanish and would only retain small phrases in English. Among some conversations I remember repeatedly witnessing the repetition of these phrases across the adults.

2nd Grade Teacher: "Do you understand?"

My mother: "Yo no entiendo."

I dreaded sitting at this table because my mother would have questions for the teacher regarding what she was reporting to her about that my 2nd grade teacher would not know how to answer. My 2nd grade teacher did not speak Spanish, so to the best of my ability I would try to break phrases down. It was routinely a frustrating exchange for everyone involved. My mother would leave frustrated and I would feel helpless. This continued to be my school for several more years since we could not afford to leave the neighborhood. Overtime however, I stopped getting Parent Teacher Conference requests home. At first my mother was curious about why those meeting requests stopped coming.

My mother: "Y porque ya no me invita tu maestra a la consulta?"

Then she acted relieved to be spared those frustrating conversations. She relied on me to update her on my progress. This frustrated me even more because it did not seem fair to me that my mother not be invited to spend my in what seemed to me to be my second home. One day we ran into a neighbor who's child also attended my elementary school. This mother had immigrated from El Salvador and she shared with my mother that a similar disappearance of



invitations to Parent Teacher Conferences had happened to her with her son. I saw wheels turning for my mother in that moment and the next day she donned a suit and she walked me to school. She marched with me into the administrator's office and demanded to speak to someone. As they shuffled around she turned to me and said "esto no es justo, nadamas porque somos Latinos cren que nos pueden hacer de menos" meaning, "this is not fair, just because we are Latinos they think they can belittle us. I was in the 2nd grade but her conviction and her words have stuck with me ever since.

As a Chicana, daughter of immigrant parents, whose primary language is Spanish. My mother was taking power back. At the end of the exchange in the office she was given a meeting with the Vice Principal. Life for the families that we shared a neighborhood with did not change drastically. After my mother meeting, they sent home letters inviting families to events they were planning but the trust was already broken. What did have a significant impact on me was the way my mother was moved to take action on our behalf and on behalf of the families we learned were also not being invited to participate in their children's education.

My mother's advocacy held my feet to the fire. There are several times I think back to that experience of powerlessness and reclaiming power and the many families that came before mine, who did not feel like advocacy was an option for them. I have learned to listen carefully for when black and Latinx students and their families are being pushed out from educational opportunity. I work and align myself with organizations whose mission is to put those families at the center.

