

Introduction

My parents, Blanca Estela Artavia Soto and Rodrigo Soto, immigrated to the United States from Costa Rica—my mother when she was eleven years old and my father when he was twenty-one years old. Their story, like that of many children of immigrants, is central to my work with schools and in teacher education, as well as to my research passions now as an adult. My mother went to school in the Los Angeles Unified School District during a time when a systemic plan for working with English Language Learners (ELLs) was uncharted territory. Although she spent many more years in United States schools than in Costa Rican schools, in high school she quickly noticed that she was not developing the English language skills that she would need to become proficient. Being the self-starter that she was (and still is), my mother became her own advocate and enrolled herself in additional adult school English classes in order to receive the English language instruction that she needed and deserved. It is because of her persistence and determination that my sister, Arlene Soto Smith, and I have furthered ourselves in this country as we have.

Unfortunately, this notion of not systemically meeting the instructional needs of our ELLs still exists today. Although we now have a strong body of research literature pointing toward best practices with ELLs, and even though we have more and more district, state, and federal policies in place to meet the instructional needs of ELLs, the same inequities that my mother contended with over fifty-one years ago continue to prevail. Such imbalances fuel my work. When I review data and see that the achievement gap still exists, read articles about the politics of why we are not educationally advancing the way we need to, or work with districts that are in state sanction because they are not making adequate yearly progress with their ELLs, I refuse to stop trying to create change within systems. Part of the reason is when I see all of these issues in education, I see them through the lens of one person—my mother—and that keeps me going. That is the purpose of ELL shadowing—reflecting upon a day in the life of a child or adolescent in English language transition who may be experiencing school slightly differently than native English speakers.

Throughout this book you will get to know one ELL named Josue. Although he is a compilation of all of the ELLs that I have shadowed, he represents the invisibility and silence that many of our ELLs experience in

school. But Josue, like my mother before him, has a story; he must be allowed to gain voice and an academic identity in the classroom setting. He needs to be engaged and heard and understood in the classroom. He has so much to say if we would only elicit his speech and listen . . . Remember Josue each time you use this book. You will never teach the same way again—I promise.