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The American Education System and an Immigrant's Pursuit of Social Mobility with Lola Esmeralda

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EP: How’s the weather?
JG: The weather is good here. I mean a lot of people have been getting sick, but I’m getting better.
EP: Yeah, Same thing here.
MG: I sent the stuff.
JG: Okay! Thanks, Mom.
MG: You’ll get it Thursday.
JG: Oh, perfect!
JG: Okay, want to start now?
EP: Okay.
JG: So—
EP: where were you educated?
JG: Where were you educated?
EP: I was educated in the Philippines.
JG: Where in the Philippines? Where did you live there?
EP: What kind of school did you attend?
JG: Oh, but what city did you live in the Philippines?
JG: B-A-T
JG: I got it!
EP: Okay. Batangas, that’s where I lived. You want my address there?
JG: (Laughter) That’s okay.
EP: I won’t give that! I’ve been here fifty years. You know that!
JG: (Laughter) I know that.
EP: I’ve been here fifty years.
MG: With Lolo Bert?
EP: No, because I came here as a student.
JG: When you were in the Philippines… Hello?
(There is a loss in streaming. New video call is made. Sound of Buttons.)
EP: We got lots of work to do.
JG: I know!
EP: When are you going to submit this? Friday?
JG: Um, yeah, next week.
EP: Oh, next week.
MG: Next week. Okay
JG: Okay, I stopped at ‘Where were you educated?’ and you said you were educated in the Philippines at Batangas City. And you..
EP: You want to know the college?
JG: Yeah, what college?
JG: Okay, and how many years where you there?
EP: In that school? I've been there for. Let's say I graduated high school and four years of college. That's fourteen years.
JG: You had the same school?!
EP: Yes, I was lucky because they opened up the college after I graduated from high school so I just continued the same school.
JG: Wow... So even when you were a little girl you were there?
EP: Yes, and not only little girl. Because that's where my mother started school too.
JG: Wow!
EP: Same school... Yes...because of the Americans. We were under the American time. We were under the American regime at that time. The 1930s.
JG: Woah. And what kind of school was it? Was it a public school?
EP: No, it was a Catholic Private School. Run by nuns.
JG: What kind of nuns were they?
EP: Good Shepard.
JG: So, you were there for fourteen years?
EP: Mhm.
JG: And you had the. Did you have the same teachers?
EP: No.
MG: It's different teacher.
EP: No, it's different teachers and different nuns.
JG: I can hear you.
EP: I got six years of an... education
JG: Of a what education?... Hello?
JG: I'm gonna try to just get the audio.
MG: Ok.
EP: Ok.
MG: Can you see lola?
JG: I can.
EP: And I can see you too!
JG: Good!
EP: Boy! You look good!
JG: (Laughter) Thank you!
EP: I guess Dallas is doing some good for you, huh? (Laughter)
JG: Well, at least I look cus I am certainly kind of sick.

EP: Oh yeah, huh? Where are we?

JG: You said you had six years of an education. You said six years of a


JG: Elementary… Mmm.

EP: We don’t have middle school, right.

JG: You don’t in the Philippines?

EP: At that time, now they changed the curriculum. We talked about the… right?

JG: The? Did we talk about what?

EP: We are talking about this when I was educated, right?

JG: Yes.

EP: Okay, so I will when I… So, we only have six years of elementary education. And after grade six, we go to high school, and first year, second year; and third year, fourth year.

JG: Okay.

EP: Mhm, and then after that… You can continue at… First of all I did two years of elementary education. I got a certificate for that to teach elementary.

JG: Okay, so you got a certificate to teach elementary.

EP: Yeah, and at the same time, I… for my music…

JG: For music?

EP:… Mhm… So I got a certificate for junior music teacher. Then, when I was still there, I still continued, you know, for another two years to finish my bachelor of science for education. Major in elementary education

JG: So you’re an education major.

EP: Yes…

JG: When you were growing up did they teach you like math, and science or?

EP: Oh, you want the.. yeah, our curriculum from the very beginning… American. The same thing as your education here. Because we were… so we use all your curriculum and everything. Whatever you have here, we were taught in English.

JG: Oh, so you were taught in English.

EP: Yeah.

JG: Oh, because you’re American… you’re American.. You’re American?

EP: We were under the American occupation at that time.

JG: Oh, okay

EP: Ready, we have a Commonwealth government. And everything was run by the Americans.

JG: So, if you were taught in English, did they teach you Tagalog at all or?

EP: No, no Tagalog.

JG: They didn’t teach you Tagalog at all?

EP: No, at that time, no. Kind of unique, right?
JG: Yeah. So you…
EP: And what is… What is so unique at that time is that we don’t have a national language.
JG: You don’t have a national language at that time?
EP: No, so in a different region, they have a different dialects.
JG: Mhm..
EP: That’s what… (Laughter) You can ask your mom.
JG: Wow.
EP: She speaks a different dialect than me. You know what is so good, Julie.
JG: What?
EP: When they established after the Japanese occupation.
JG: Mhm.
EP: They realized that we are all Filipinos and we cannot understand each other, so Tagalog became our national language, which is my dialect.
JG: Oh, that’s your dialect?
EP: Yeah, so we were lucky.
JG: You got lucky, you didn’t have to learn everything again.
EP: No… So the curriculum is patterned after the United States’ curriculum whatever they teach there in English. You want to know the subjects?
JG: Yes.
EP: The most important in that school is religion… in the morning for half an hour.
JG: Oh, so in the mornings, you had religion?
EP: Yeah, religion...(cough)
EP: And then we have English, which is language and spelling.
JG: And everybody had to take English?
EP: Oh, yes… Mhm… we have sciences… Oh, remember, Julie, we don’t have computers at that time. Mhm.
MG: Nothing.
EP: Everything done by hand.
JG: Everything by hand.
EP: Mhm, yeah. And this is the funny part. We have arithmetic, I don’t know if you know arithmetic.
JG: Yeah.
EP: We memorize everything.
JG: You memorized everything.
EP: Yeah, your multiplication. We had to recite that.
JG: Every single one?
EP: Yeah, we memorized everything… In grade six, we had history
JG: What year was this?
EP: Grade six.
JG: You had the history of the Philippines?
EP: Mhm, and then, one to four, you have the geography.
JG: Geography.
EP: You have physical education and good manners and right conduct.
JG: You had a class called good manners and right conduct?
EP: Yes.
JG: What did you learn in that class?
EP: Oh, how to respect your parents, how to respect the nuns, yup, respect the elders, not only the nuns too. The elders. And be courteous. Oh gosh.
JG: (Laughter) Did you learn stuff like table manners?
EP: Yeah. Like the etiquette.
JG: Do you think they should teach that here?
EP: Huh?
JG: Do you think they should that here in the States? Here in the United States.
EP: I think they should teach that here because the people here are… The students here are very rude.
JG: Really? What they?
EP: Yeah, because when I started teaching here in the United States, I said I’m not going to teach anymore.
JG: Why?
EP: Because they’re very rude. They don’t respect the elders.
JG: That’s terrible. When did you start teaching in the United States?
EP: Yeah.
JG: that’s when you came here?
EP: Mhm.
EP: Yeah, I was teaching in Madonna High School run by nuns also which is my teacher in the Philippines (Laughter).
JG: Oh, really?
EP: Yes, my very first teacher in the Philippines is my boss in here.
JG: That’s, that’s, that’s funny. Did you know that was going to happen?
EP: No. I only found out when I…
JG: When you came to work?
EP: Yeah, but no I came here as a student so I have to enroll.
JG: Uh-huh.. Wow.
EP: Yeah.
JG: Wait, what college did you go to here in the States?
EP: New Mexico. In New Mexico State University
JG: New Mexico State.

EP: New Mexico State in Las Cruces.

JG: Where is it?

EP: In Las Cruces. L-A-S C-R-U-C-E-S.

JG: Good, Thank you.

EP: It’s two words. The nuns were there.

JG: The same nuns?

EP: Mhm. Two of them were my former teachers. (Laugh)

JG: And what did you study when you were in New Mexico State?

EP: I’m taking my masters.

JG: Your masters? What was your master in?

EP: My master was in guidance and counseling.

JG: Did you study music too?

EP: No, I taught music.

JG: You taught music?


JG: Did you have to... Did you memorize things for music? Or how did you?


JG: That’s how you learned to do school?

EP: Mhm.

JG: And you, you started teaching grade six when you became a teacher?

EP: Yeah, now at first, what did I do? Yeah, the job was hard for me in public school.

JG: It was hard? Oh so, you taught in a public school?

EP: Yeah, I taught in a public school.

JG: Is that not the same as the Madonna High School?

EP: No, that was in the Philippines. When I became a teacher, I taught there at a public school. Music and grade six. You know in the Philippines, you are taught everything in one to four. In five to six, the teacher go from one room to the other because if the children go, you know it will take time…

JG: Yeah, because they’ll get distracted.

EP: Yes. Mhm. And I taught for eight years.

JG: Did you teach at Madonna High School before you taught at the public school? Or did you teach at the public school?

EP: No. no. I taught at the public school first in Batangas. I stayed there for eight years.

JG: Okay.

EP: And then…

JG: And then you went to the United States?

EP: No, I worked five years. I worked five years in the Office of the Division of the Superintendent of Schools… province.

JG: In what province?
EP: Batangas.
JG: Batangas.
EP: Mhm. My hometown is the capital.
JG: Okay.
EP: You got it?
JG: I got it. So you were eight years a public school teacher in the Philippines. And then
five years, you worked for the superintendent.
EP: As Division Guidance Coordinator.
JG: Division Guidance Coordinator, okay.
EP: Mhm… of my province
JG: Mhm..
EP: And then, my supervisor, the superintendent advise me “Why don’t you go to the
United States?” Because at night, I go to school. To study my
JG: To study your masters?
EP: Yeah, first year, my masters was also in St. Briget’s College night school. Mhm. I
stayed there for one whole year. And then I moved to the United States.
JG: And then, that’s when you started working at Madonna High School.
EP: Mhm, which is the school for the problematic children.
JG: Oh, so it was for kids with a lot of problems.
EP: Yep, and so I could my guidance with them. Mostly, they were from broken homes.
JG: From broken homes. And this is in the sixties?
JG: You met Lolo.
EP: I met your Lolo in Coronado, California, San Diego. I went there for vacation.
Christmas Vacation because I cannot go home. Like you I was working and saving the
money. Although, My first tuition came from my parents. I work here.
JG: What happened after that? Did you get married?
EP: Do you really want to know? I met him on December 20th and we got married on
January 7th of the New Year.
JG: That’s like seventeen days.
EP: That’s right. He won’t let me go back to New Mexico.
JG: So, you didn’t go back?
EP: No, I went back there to get my things and told my counselor, my advisor in college
that I am not going to continue. She said “What happened? You take vacation and now
you are quitting? You are not a quitter!” That’s what she said. But I’m quitting
JG: You told her that you got married!
EP: Yeah.
JG: And this is.. This is the Madonna High School, right?
EP: Yeah, the Madonna High School. And the nuns were so happy to see me getting
married because I was already thirty-four. You know the nuns actually…This is a secret,
huh… when I was there, I was thinking of entering the convent that why I boarded with them. To see how life in the convent really is. And then when I was there… For some reason, I had my patron Saint, Rita, the patron saint of the impossible. I was asking if this life was really for me send me a sign. And the sign was when I went to San Diego I met your Lolo. I don’t want to be alone (Laughter)

Yeah, and we got married so I discontinued.

JG: So, you didn’t finish your master?

EP: I was hoping I could continue that, but I got pregnant.

JG: So, you were no longer an, um… Did you teach again after that?

EP: Well I was thinking when we moved here, that I did that all the time for ten years nothing, but stay home and raise my children, just like your mom. Working. Well, I found out when we moved here, we really needed to work because your Lolo also sending money to his parents.

JG: In the Philippines?

EP: Nothing, I was thinking nothing would be left for us, because the children are growing. Every year I buy them new clothes. So I started thinking about when Eileen, you know my youngest was in kinder. That’s when I started working when she went to school. So, I applied for a job in the public school here in Prince William and they did not call me because they wanted all the new teachers graduated from here, but I consider myself graduated from the United States because of my master. But then I met my friend who said to me “Why don’t you join me? And we will work with you know those computers.”

JG: In computers.

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EP: I worked at night until the day. That’s a sacrifice I should take.

JG: Yeah, and so, you after you came, after you got married and had your kids, it was hard for you to become a teacher again?

EP: Yeah, because I… You know what I found out. After two years, they called me.

JG: After two years?

EP: After two years, they called me if I wanted to work as a sub. I said, “How much are the teachers making?” I am making more money doing the computer than to be a teacher.

JG: So, you started working with computers instead?

EP: Yeah, I started working with the computers, then I found another better one in McGraw Hill Books Company.

JG: Oh, the textbook company?

EP: Yes, but this are not doing the textbooks. They are doing a… what do they call it?

A book in real estate.

JG: A real estate book?

EP: A real estate book. I worked there for maybe only two years. And then your Uncle Bert says there’s an opening in Alexandria Hospital. They are doing charges that the patients use. So, the whole day, I do nothing but punch and key. And then at night, sometimes I brought my work my work and corrected them. They paid me. Mhm. I stayed there for eighteen and a half years.

JG: Oh, wow. At the hospital?

EP: Yes, until I retired.

JG: Wow. Did you? When did you? Where the Filipino public school different than the American schools when you were teaching?

EP: Well, I did not teach in the public school here, only the catholic private schools. So I cannot compare how it is in the United States, except when my children came, started going to school. I think the United States, they are better than the Philippines, because I will tell you this, Julie. When I left the Philippines, they started to teach the national language. The national language is harder to learn than the English.

JG: Oh, really?

EP: Oh, yes. They called it Filipino language. That is the name. I am more trained in English than the Filipino language.

JG: For school? Do you think learning in English made it easier to get jobs too?

EP: Oh, yes! Definitely…

JG: But, okay. You said that they taught the etiquette class. They taught that at your High School.

EP: They taught that through all the years from elementary. They used to, but not anymore.

JG: Not anymore?

JG: What? What did you notice?
EP: My children are all at first. They started from a Catholic School in Connecticut.
JG: In Connecticut?
EP: I was trying to put them in Catholic School here. I cannot afford it. For those two, I have to pay $250 and that is free. They pick them up from your doorstep by the bus.
JG: The public school or the?
EP: The Catholic school. This is a according to the nuns in Sacred Heart, it was a donation of the community in that town…. It was a donation that they all got a free ride right from the doorstep, so I don’t have to worry or anything. They went house to house. Maybe because housing at the time.
JG: So, it was expensive to send them to catholic school?
JG: But not in Connecticut? Because they had donations?
EP: No, they got that, what do you call that from the county…
JG: They got a grant? Or a loan?
EP: It’s like a… maybe you could say a donation… The county is give a private loan… So we got a lower tuition.
JG: That’s nice. I wish they did that here.
EP: I wish! I said no I cannot send them to private school here.. And then we bought a house at the same time…
JG: At the same that you moved, you bought your own house.
EP: Mhm.
JG: So you really couldn’t afford it anymore… So you sent them to the public school.
EP: I wish! I said no I cannot send them to private school here.. And then we bought a house at the same time…
JG: Did you like the public school?
EP: Oh no, at that time, I don’t like it. My first experience when I sent them here. You know what, they wanted to demote them to a lower grade.
JG: Why?
EP: Because they thought they, we, were Filipinos, that we don’t know English.
JG: The public school?
EP: Minnieville. (A road in the school county)
JG: Yeah.
EP: Eileen and I went there. I was so mad.
JG: Garfield? (A school)
EP: It’s on Minnieville, not too far from my place. So I just walked there because your Lolo Bert had the car. So I crossed the street. Just across Greenville. And then I went… The principal, he doesn’t know what’s going on, so they called the teacher… I said, “Why are you going to demote them? Give them a test and see. Because they were educated here. They were born here… And I got educated here.” And then when they heard that I could speak English, they changed their tune. Because I think there are not too many Filipinos that can speak English at that time. Yeah. And they thought because
we were Filipinos, we came from the Philippines. They were born here. They went to
school in Connecticut in the private school. And you know, Julie…
EP: … They are losing interest… Because…why are they teaching that here? I said
because… That was when they only started to do teaching here. They were so behind.
JG: What did they say?
EP: The school?
JG: The school?
EP: Yeah, the public school compared to the private school. Now they are giving tests to
the teachers, and if you cannot pass the teacher’s exam then you cannot teach.
JG: So, now they give a teacher’s exam. That’s better, right?
EP: Yes. To improve. They came to find out that Prince William County is always at the
end in Virginia. Oh yeah, at that time. I don’t know how they upgraded it. When Fr. Ed
graduated from Garfield High School. There was almost 1000 seniors.
JG: There was 1000 seniors in his graduation?
EP: 970. I think
JG: 18?
EP: In just one year.
JG: eighteen hundred?
EP: 970
JG: 970!
EP: Graduated.
JG: That’s a lot. That’s huge.
EP: And then they started building schools. You know. Because it was overcrowded.
JG: The one school.
EP: It was overcrowded.
JG: That’s good.
EP: After that, they only had Woodbridge High School and Garfield High School and
that was in 1976. So you can imagine what the learning was like. It was overcrowd. Too
many students. For some reason we moved here, so many militaries came here too. Most
of them were children of the militaries. And you know how it is. If you are lucky, If you
come here and you were like my children, ahead. Sometimes, they lost interest.
JG: Oh, because they’re ahead, they lose interest.
EP: Yeah. It’s good thing when they… you know when they got involved in music, they
have music education in here like in the Philippines, when they got involved with music,
they love to play their violins, so they don’t fight.
JG: So, they have something fun to do too.
EP: Yes, exactly. And your Lolo is the one doing all the homework. He made sure they
are doing their homework because you know I work on Saturdays and Sundays too. And
they changed schedules; I only worked four times a week. They changed it to ten.
JG: Ten times?
EP: Ten hours a day to complete the 40 hours in a week, which is good for me because I only have to travel four times a week.

JG: And then you get to spend more times with your kids.

EP: Yes, exactly. And by the way, I was working in, you know Leesburg Park in Tyson’s corner. I was working around there Route 7.

JG: So, did you prefer the education in the United States?

EP: Oh, yes.

JG: And it was because it was in English?

EP: Oh yeah, when I was in Alexandria Hospital, there were so many Filipinos there because they get their parents in the Philippines. They don’t speak English, the parents of these workers around here. So, I became a translator. Those nurses get me all the time.

JG: The parents and the kids?

EP: Mhm. It’s not the kids. It’s the parents.

JG: Oh, because they cannot speak English.

EP: Not very much. You know why?

JG: Why?

EP: First of all, I remember when I was growing up, before the Americans came, we were taught in Spanish because we were under the Spanish for 500 years. And then the Americans came… We were occupied by the Japanese for 4 years, we were taught under the Japanese language. Then the Americans came, back to English. I did not go to school during the war. So, after that they realized we need to establish a Filipino language sometime. Because when I graduated from High School, we didn’t have a Filipino Language. It’s very true that the Filipinos are unique. We can understand Spanish, we can understand English a little bit, and we don’t understand each other… Because they speak their dialect. It’s ok now. The Filipino language is taught in every school. That’s why when I was talking to what’s the name of the Hoonan.

JG: Ms. Zalna.

EP: What’s her dialect?

MG: Binisaya

EP: It’s different from us.

MG: Cebuano

EP: Cebuano.

JG: Oh, she’s form Cebu.
EP: I have a friend from here. Sometimes, she talks to me. We will be talking on the phone. She always integrated her dialect. I say “Nila, I don’t know! I know Tagalog!”

JG: Do you still think it’s a good idea to teach English in the Philippines today?

EP: I think so, back to the old thing. They are handicapped when it comes to the other countries. But according to them, they are the Filipino nurses because they can speak English. Like in Europe… they know English. And they can understand what they are saying.

JG: It’s still good to have a national language, right?


JG: But it gives them more opportunity for like nursing to know English?

EP: Yeah.

JG: So, you could be globalized?

EP: And not only that, you know English is spoken all over the world. You know that, don’t you?

JG: Yeah, it helps connect everyone.

EP: Mhm. I have a funny story about that. When my uncle died, one woman from another island with another dialect… When my uncle died, he wanted to be buried… the remains in Batangas… And then all of the cousins that we never met, they don’t know how to speak Tagalog, and I don’t know how to speak their dialect. They were just looking and pointing at us and they said “They are in school”. And then the mother said, “Why don’t we just speak English?” And then we understood each other.

JG: In English?

EP: Yeah, because think.

JG: That’s cool.

EP: Because we learned that in school. That’s the advantage of knowing English.

And by the way when we were under the Americans who established everything including a curriculum, it was all patterned after the states.

JG: The United States?

EP: Because of the Secretary of Education, or whatever, brought that over there.