

## Una confianza perdida, otra regenerada

*The work of the **Carolina Family Engagement Center (CFEC)** is focused primarily on underserved families and their students (low income, English learners, those with disabilities, those in foster care, migrants, homeless, and marginalized communities). Housed within the SC School Improvement Council (SC-SIC) at the University of South Carolina College of Education, CFEC provides tools, trainings, and materials statewide through its website and other venues.*

by Julia Beaty, MSW, LISW-CP

I knew this route by heart: one long stretch through the city, a turn onto a county road, and another turn onto the unpaved road, left muddied today, before I turned right — into the place where hopes and dreams hung cautiously in the air. With my fair-skinned face a visible mismatch in the community, for once I was grateful for my unmistakable, *obnoxiously* colored vehicle that no covert operation would use coming into this community.

Arriving as the sun's rays dimmed the wet, red clay leading to her home, I made my way to the familiar, weathered wooden steps, carefully minding the toys precariously placed, evidence of an afternoon of delight for her two young children. Two raps on the front door, then three, my usual greeting, followed by “*Hola, muy buenas tardes,*” through my native accent, native to *South Carolina* that is.

She welcomed me in, wearing a smile wearied by what I had come to recognize as the loving, faithful concern of a mother whose parenthood was a heavier journey than most. A pink, squealing swirl of a child peeked out from the corner, crumbs of *galleta* falling from her plump cheeks as she locked eyes with the funny *gringa* at the door, a mischievous smile of welcome quickly appearing on her face. Across the room sat the mother's eldest child, absorbed in the world of his sacred afternoon routine: a toy car and after-school snack of *galletas con leche* on the kitchen table.

We exchanged pleasantries as her day's anxieties quickly surfaced, with a question of when the new therapists would be able to come help, paperwork still tied up with a state-level office where I'd submitted it for review, part of my role as his case manager. His behavior, his communication, his stubbornness, and *that* teacher—all sources of distress for this mother—explained through an *almost* convincingly flat affect... but I recognized the imperceptible tightness in her face, holding back what might be an eternity of tears, waiting to be released.



Julia Beaty currently serves as a bilingual Regional Family Engagement Liaison for Upper Central South Carolina with the **Carolina Family Engagement Center**. Her experience includes work supporting children, adults, and families living with disabilities and special needs, as well as supporting children with histories of complex developmental trauma (and the adults supporting them) in a variety of settings. Julia holds a B.A. in Psychology and Spanish from Erskine College, a Master of Social Work from Washington University in St. Louis; and she has been trained as a Trust-Based Relational Intervention® Practitioner by the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development at TCU in Ft. Worth, Texas. Her commitment to children and families is rooted in the deep belief that with the right supports in place, children and their families can not only find healing and hope amidst adversity but also joy and relational fulfillment in their lives and communities.

Tears for her homeland, her extended family, her dreams of a physically present spouse, her vision of motherhood with typically-abled children, her ability to live without fear of questions about “papers” hiding behind every corner.

She poured herself out each day, rising early to soothe the soul of her anxious-hearted son, giving him all that she could before he was transported to school to begin another day of ~~surviving~~ learning. Her warm, loving embrace snuggled him close before she planted a kiss on his forehead above fear-filled eyes, his reluctance visible, despite the barely risen sun of late-autumn, rays filtering through tall pines. He trudged heavily up the steps: one, two, three, four, five, taking his seat with other students on the petite, orange bus, while prayers in her native Spanish covered him in blessings, petitions, and pleadings for merciful understanding from the teacher that would receive this mother's precious son for another day.

“*¡Por favor!*” she animatedly answered when I offered to attend the upcoming IEP meeting at her son’s school, after translating the letter that had been sent home—in *English*—with notice so short that her palpable anxiety started to make its way into my mind, too.

Knowing her desired expectations for her son and his learning experience, as well as a less than noteworthy history with his teacher over the prior school year, I realized I’d stopped breathing... I was bracing myself for battle: clarity, communication, power, resources, and trust on the line. One deep breath in, one out, wiggling my toes to re-ground myself amidst the swirl of thoughts, mental notes, and trepidation so I could offer her one gift of hope before leaving.

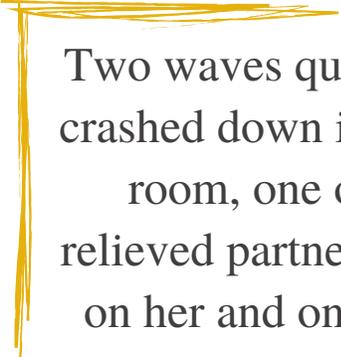
“*¡Sí, yo asistiré consigo,*” I said quickly, before losing the nerve to commit.

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It was a chilly morning, a slow-motion walk from my vehicle, filled with butterflies and mental rehearsal, scanning the horizon for her as I made my way to the front door. I pushed the button, stated my name, my purpose, showed my state-issued ID, and was then permitted entrance into the building. Would she be so fortunate with the unlabeled, impersonal metal button or the thick southern drawl communicating the same instructions I’d just heard?

As I passed through the door, I glanced over my shoulder to see her coming, the exhaust from a neighbor’s vehicle contrasted against the cold air of the morning as it drove away. Her red scarf and black winter coat jostled as her dark blue jeans and black tennis shoes ran toward the building, front door open for her, with my simple gift of a trusted, welcoming smile extended; she exhaled a relieved “*Gracias*” as she passed through the entryway and we walked, together, to get our visitor’s passes from the thicker-than-honey, southern-drawled secretary. “IEP Meeting” I stated, and we were given our passes and directions—in *English*—to the conference room where the administrator, staff, and professional team members were *esperándonos*, though we had both arrived ahead of the start time stated in the letter.



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With their stacks of papers in hand and conversation already in progress, we sheepishly entered the conference room, looking to see how we could fit a second chair next to the only empty one at the table. Six voices spoke over one another as she and I hurriedly made space at the table and took our seats. Introductions began quickly, and a wave of relief washed over me as he introduced himself: *el intérprete*! “At least that makes three of us,” I thought as we started the meeting, grateful for another ally at the table who would offer support.

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Overfilled schedules and intentions of leaving part-way through the meeting were announced by multiple team members; their expertise and knowledge of her son would be limited to the two-to -three-minute summaries of progress they could offer that morning. Frustrated by this meeting before it had really even begun, I started taking notes: names, roles, observations, and recommendations, writing furiously as the information poured out from the experts, their legs visibly readied to exit stage left the instant that their part in the drama had concluded. Intermittent flurries of Spanish traveled across the table with such sparse detail I was glad I’d been taking notes, wondering when *el intérprete* would share the summary of what had already transpired.

One, two, three left the room, and suddenly, the teacher, vice principal, and interpreter’s chairs were the only ones still filled apart from ours. I glanced over at her, noticing that the color in her caramel-colored cheeks had changed to a warmer, reddish hue and her eyes were filling with tears as the teacher’s explanation of her son’s limited participation and motivation in the classroom this semester was interpreted casually into Spanish, with a cool indifference in *el intérprete*’s voice. Before I knew it, tears and her voice, angered by misrepresentation of her son whose desires and capacities she knew better than anyone at the table, rose above the tenuous narrative that was being relayed. Love for her child, an insistence on justice, and a powerful, maternal confidence of her child’s needs and abilities filled the notably vacuous room as her impassioned voice spoke with authority in her native tongue, citing poor communication, failures on the teacher’s part the school year prior, and the empty promises that the teacher had offered to support her son over the summer.

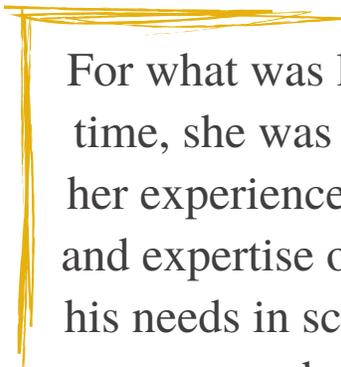
A paltry, anemic summary was offered by *el intérprete*, leaving me with doubt about what meeting *he* was attending.

I could feel my heart rate rising, an outcry of injustice and pressure to set the record straight welling up inside me and coursing through my veins, countered by an equally strong current of fear: being accused of misrepresentation, non-native linguistic status, and interjecting as an undesignated communication broker. “*Am I breathing?*” I wondered as time slowed around me, simultaneously taking in the detail of her worried expression, the casual posture of *el intérprete*, the now-worried expression of the teacher, and the suspiciously-raised eyebrow of the first-year vice principal, knowing all that was at stake for her son’s education, and the chasm between what had been *communicated* and what had been *interpreted*.

“*That’s not all she said!*” I exclaimed loudly, powerfully looking across the table at *el intérprete*, quickly turning my head toward the vice principal with unambiguous passion and conviction.

With those five words, emotional shrapnel went flying through the conference room as blood drained from *el intérprete’s* face, a mother’s deepest fears were validated, a teacher’s empty promises were exposed, and an administrator’s suspicions of incomplete details of a student’s barriers to learning were confirmed.

“I thought I wasn’t getting the whole story; what exactly *did* she say?” asked the vice principal. Locking eyes with *el intérprete* across the table, I dared him to *not* interpret every word and sentiment of this mother. Not overstepping my role, we exchanged a knowing glance that I was *oyendo a cada palabra*, so he’d better be precise, and he’d better be thorough. For what was likely the first time, she was able to share her experience, knowledge, and expertise of her son and his needs in school, and she was *heard*.



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With her pen moving quickly across the draft copy of the IEP, the vice principal made note of fears, desires, hopes, needs, dreams, and promises gone unfulfilled. Unsurprisingly to us, it became evident that with the fallout from the communication bombshell that had been dropped, we would *not* be signing a finalized IEP that day... unresolved concerns, unclarified needs, and unformulated strategies too numerous to count. With sincerity of heart in her eyes, the vice principal offered a full-length, fully-staffed follow-up meeting on a date of the mother’s choice, with the entire IEP team present and school district supports represented, alongside a sincere apology to us both for what had *almost* transpired: a casualty of federally-guaranteed services and supports for her son, lost to miscommunication.

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Now I sit at a desk in another part of the city, still working to support families—including ones learning English—and their relationships to their school communities. I’m a few wrinkles and several years closer to wisdom, and the plentiful work to be done in South Carolina remains. But with shared commitment to the heavy lifting of linking arms with organizations and agencies to build trusted partnerships for school communities, stories like this one are becoming *la excepción* instead of *la norma*.



This story is published as part of a storytelling retreat hosted by the *Center for Educational Partnerships (CEP)* housed in the *University of South Carolina’s College of Education*. CEP partners nominated practicing educators, administrators, and system leaders to share their stories. The *Center for Teaching Quality*, a CEP partner, facilitated the retreat and provided editorial and publication support. Learn more about this work and read additional stories by following [@CEP\\_UofSC](#) and [@teachingquality](#).