

**Chapter 16:
My Side of the Story**



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

*by José A. Cárdenas, 1994
IDRA Founder & Director Emeritus*

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Chapter 16: My Side of the Story

The basic reason for my spending so many years of my professional life in a student advocacy role is my realization that there are segments of the school population for whom little advocacy is found in the school.

Middle-class families easily master the techniques for the manipulation of social institutions. I believe that this is one of the main differences between the haves and the have-nots of the world and plays a major role in upward mobility and recovering from adverse situations. Middle-and upper-class members frequently fail to understand the inability of the lower social and economic classes to escape from the vicious cycle of poverty, since they commonly assume that all people have equal access to services and influence over social institutions.

The higher classes have a lifetime of experience in making applications, appealing decisions, exerting influence, applying pressure, obtaining legal redress and receiving services. If the garbage is not picked up, a call to City Hall or to the city councilperson we talked to at last Friday's reception is sufficient to remedy the problem. Unfortunately, the disadvantaged do not know who to call, do not understand bureaucratic hierarchies, have no way of applying pressure, and tend to resign themselves too easily to arbitrary or unfair decisions by authority figures.

The school as a social institution is no different in responding to its clientele in a manner consistent with the influence of the specific client. The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) has spent much of its resources these past 20 years as an advocate for disadvantaged, minority, limited-English-proficient, migrant and immigrant children, not because we feel that mainstream children are less worthy of our attention, but because we realize that parents, community, social and political organizations provide an extensive amount of advocacy for these mainstream children.

In my professional experience, I have never ceased to be amazed at how little advocacy for students is available in the school. Although this lack of student advocacy is very common for atypical students, it also manifests itself for almost every type of student in a problem situation.

A rule of thumb in dealing with schools is, "Once a student lands in a problem situation, the whole system closes ranks against that student."

I remember one time when I was serving as district superintendent, I received an emergency call from one of the high schools informing me that a student walkout was imminent. I drove to

the school to appraise the situation and was informed by the principal that the situation was well in hand. The reason for the pending student walkout was a protest over the quality of the food served in the school cafeteria. Administrative staff and faculty had worked out a plan of action. Everything had been addressed. Police had been alerted, an administrative official was prepared to meet with the news media if they showed up, teachers had been assigned to each exit to take down the names of the students who walked out, disciplinary procedures had been worked out, printed and handed out to the students, secretaries were prepared to call parents, etc. As I said, everything had been worked out to deal with the student walkout. I was impressed but did have one question. "How is the food in the cafeteria?" The principal responded immediately, "It's awful. I would never eat there."

One day, I was working in my superintendent office when the receptionist buzzed me and informed me that there was a high school student in the lobby who wanted to talk to me. I asked her to send him in.

"Are you the guy in charge here?" he asked me after giving me his name and the school he attended.

"Yes, I am. I am the superintendent. What can I do for you?" "I'm a high school student, and I have just been suspended for one week. Can I tell you my side of the story?"

"I don't see why not."

"Well, I had an incident in class with one of the girls, and she told the teacher. The teacher told me to report to the office. I asked the teacher if I could tell her my side of the story, and she said she didn't want to hear it. She took me to the vice principal's office and told him what the girl said I had done. He told me I was in serious trouble. I then asked him if I could tell him my side of the story, and he said, "No, just sit there until I meet with the principal and tell him what you did."

In a while, I was taken into the principal's office and told that I was suspended for one week. I asked him, "Can I tell you my side of the story?" He said, "No, put away your books and take this note to your parents telling them that you are suspended for one week, and you cannot return unless your parents come in with you. "

He then repeated his persistent question, "Can I tell you my side of the story?" "Sure," I replied, "go ahead." The student then proceeded to tell his version of what had happened in the classroom.

I asked him to wait outside while I called the school and got the school’s version of what had happened. After receiving the information from the school, I called the student back into my office.

“I heard your side of the story, and I heard the school’s side of the story. I think that they are not very inconsistent. As far as I’m concerned, the suspension stands, and you should consider yourself lucky that you didn’t get expelled.”

The student grinned. “I know it, but I just wanted a chance to tell somebody my side of the story.”