That is what I did to survive that first year.

My school days were often clouded by nights of searching through tenement hallways for my father. Finding him before the police did become my “homework.” Discovering him in a heroin trance with needles still in his arms made school an afterthought.

When I was told I was retarded, I acquiesced to the label. My grandmother’s moment of pride—“My granddaughter is very smart; she is in special education”—revealed the school’s inability to address my needs.

A social worker discovered my plight and advised us that another placement was worth pursuing. My family sent me to St. Paul’s parochial school, a large mission in the heart of Spanish Harlem. A mission filled with children like me, whose parents had fled the public school system to find protection for their children at great cost. Miss Mary Sheehan, a young teacher recently arrived from Dublin, led us on a journey of self-discovery. She dedicated her life to helping poor immigrant children.

She brought Hansel and Gretel to life. She told me that reading was my way out—a direct, accessible path to anywhere I decided to go! I loved reading with a passion. When I searched for my Papi late at night, I took a favorite book, *The Five Chinese Brothers* or *Heidi*, along for comfort and escape.

My grandmother gave me hope and unconditional love. I was the medium for her interaction with the English-speaking world; she was my inspiration for becoming a teacher. After all, I was teaching my family all the time. I would read to her in English, and she would teach me how to read in Spanish.

Abuelita gave me jewels—the diamond of optimism, the platinum of courage, the gold of love for the world, and the silver of determination.

The obstacles in my path were perfect training for a teacher.

My family arrived from Puerto Rico filled with the dreams that permeate immigrant thinking. With only naiveté to shield me, I entered P.S. 122 in Harlem.

The school system rendered me invisible. At six years of age, a foreign language enveloped me. English sounded like rocks dropping into a river. My teachers seemed to think that if they spoke in a very loud voice I would understand what they were saying. One called me stupid. I decided to keep quiet. I often brag that I can out-color any kindergartner in the nation; after all, that is what I did to survive that first year.

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After a beating from a neighborhood gang left my father blind, I became a teacher again. I helped my Papi navigate the darkness—reading instructions on medicine labels, reading the recipes for his meals, preparing shopping lists, sharing my favorite books.

After graduation from high school, I joined the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary in Staten Island, New York, a community of teachers dedicated to serving the children of Harlem in poor. My tenure was brief. I wasn’t called to become a nun, but I was called to become a teacher. I completed my undergraduate degree in secondary education and my master’s at the University of Kansas in 1973. The naysayers in my past were wrong: I was smart enough to study and learn. Now my career spans three decades, from the Black Hills of South Dakota to the rolling hills of Connecticut. Two years ago I helped to open a new school in Prince George’s County, Maryland, Cesar Chavez Elementary School.

I was born to teaching. My turbulent upbringing was preparation for my true vocation. It is a vocation that calls one to see beyond environment or race. It is the ultimate challenge to create lives of meaning and grace.

Yesterday I began my doctoral studies in educational leadership. Me, Adela A costa, described by many as a loser. Out there live other Adelas, waiting for someone to ask them to join the dialogue.

Adela A costa is the principal of Cesar Chavez Elementary School in Prince George’s County, Maryland. Her accomplishments were honored by First Lady Laura Bush with an invitation to attend the State of the Union Address in February 2001.

Readers are invited to send their telling tales from education’s front lines.