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The Professor Is a Dropout

Beth Johnson

Preview

After being mistakenly labeled “retarded” and humiliated into dropping out of first grade, Lupe Quintanilla knew she wanted nothing more to do with formal education. Life as a wife and mother would satisfy her . . . and it did, until she saw her own children being pushed aside as “slow learners.” Driven to help them succeed, Lupe took steps that dramatically changed her life.

Words to Watch

radical (16): extreme

plant (29): a person put somewhere to spy

renowned (36): famous

1 Guadalupe Quintanilla is an assistant professor at the University of Houston. She is president of her own communications company. She trains law enforcement officers all over the country. She was nominated to serve as the U.S. Attorney General. She’s been a representative to the United Nations.

2 That’s a pretty impressive string of accomplishments. It’s all the more impressive when you consider this:

“Lupe” Quintanilla is a first-grade dropout. Her school records state that she is retarded, that her IQ is so low she can’t learn much of anything.

How did Lupe Quintanilla, 3
“retarded” nonlearner, become Dr. Quintanilla, respected educator? Her remarkable journey began in the town of Nogales, Mexico, just below the Arizona border. That’s where Lupe first lived with her grandparents. (Her parents had

divorced.) Then an uncle who had just finished medical school made her grandparents a generous offer. If they wanted to live with him, he would support the family as he began his medical practice.

4 Lupe, her grandparents, and her uncle all moved hundreds of miles to a town in southern Mexico that didn't even have paved roads, let alone any schools. There, Lupe grew up helping her grandfather run his little pharmacy and her grandmother keep house. She remembers the time happily. "My grandparents were wonderful," she said. "Oh, my grandfather was stern, authoritarian, as Mexican culture demanded, but they were also very kind to me." When the chores were done, her grandfather taught Lupe to read and write Spanish and do basic arithmetic.

5 When Lupe was 12, her grandfather became blind. The family left Mexico and went to Brownsville, Texas, with the hope that doctors there could restore his sight. Once they arrived in Brownsville, Lupe was enrolled in school. Although she understood no English, she was given an IQ test in that language. Not surprisingly, she didn't do very well.

6 Lupe even remembers her score. "I scored a sixty-four, which classified me as seriously retarded, not even teachable," she said. "I was put into first grade with a class of six-year-olds. My duties were to take the little kids to the bathroom and to cut out pictures." The classroom activities were a total mystery to Lupe—they were all conducted in English. And she was humiliated by the other children, who teased her for being "so much older and so much dumber" than they were.

7 After four months in first grade, an incident occurred that Lupe still does not fully understand. As she stood in the



Guadalupe Quintanilla today

doorway of the classroom waiting to escort a little girl to the bathroom, a man approached her. He asked her, in Spanish, how to find the principal's office. Lupe was delighted. "Finally someone in this school had spoken to me with words I could understand, in the language of my soul, the language of my grandmother," she said. Eagerly, she answered his question in Spanish. Instantly her teacher swooped down on her, grabbing her arm and scolding her. She pulled Lupe along to the principal's office. There, the teacher and the principal both shouted at her, obviously very angry. Lupe was frightened and embarrassed, but also bewildered. She didn't understand a word they were saying.

8 “Why were they so angry? I don’t know,” said Lupe. “Was it because I spoke Spanish at school? Or that I spoke to the man at all? I really don’t know. All I know is how humiliated I was.”

9 When she got home that day, she cried miserably, begging her grandfather not to make her return to school. Finally he agreed.

10 From that time on, Lupe stayed at home, serving as her blind grandfather’s “eyes.” She was a fluent reader in Spanish, and the older man loved to have her read newspapers, poetry, and novels aloud to him for hours.

11 Lupe’s own love of reading flourished during these years. Her vocabulary was enriched and her imagination fired by the novels she read—novels which she learned later were classics of Spanish literature. She read *Don Quixote*, the famous story of the noble, impractical knight who fought against windmills. She read thrilling accounts of the Mexican revolution. She read *La Prensa*, the local Spanish-language paper, and *Selecciones*, the Spanish-language version of *Reader’s Digest*.

12 When she was just 16, Lupe married a young Mexican-American dental technician. Within five years, she had given birth to her three children, Victor, Mario, and Martha. Lupe’s grand-parents lived with the young family. Lupe was quite happy with her life. “I cooked, sewed, cleaned, and cared for everybody,” she said. “I listened to my grandmother when she told me what made a good wife. In the morning I would actually put on my husband’s shoes and tie the laces—anything to make his life easier. Living with my grandparents for so long, I was one generation behind in my ideas of what a woman could do and be.”

Lupe’s contentment ended when her children started school. When they brought home their report cards, she struggled to understand them. She could read enough English to know that what they said was not good. Her children had been put into a group called “Yellow Birds.” It was a group for slow learners.

At night in bed, Lupe cried and blamed herself. It was obvious—not only was *she* retarded, but her children had taken after her. Now they, too, would never be able to learn like other children.

But in time, a thought began to break through Lupe’s despair: Her children didn’t seem like slow learners to *her*. At home, they learned everything she taught them, quickly and easily. She read to them constantly, from the books that she herself had loved as a child. *Aesop’s Fables* and stories from *1,001 Arabian Nights* were family favorites. The children filled the house with the sounds of the songs, prayers, games, and rhymes they had learned from their parents and grandparents. They were smart children, eager to learn. They learned quickly—in Spanish.

A radical^o idea began to form in Lupe’s mind. Maybe the school was *wrong* about her children. And if the school system could be wrong about her children—maybe it had been wrong about her, too.

Lupe visited her children’s school, a daring action for her. “Many Hispanic parents would not dream of going to the classroom,” she said. “In Hispanic culture, the teacher is regarded as a third parent, as an ultimate authority. To question her would seem most disrespectful, as though you were saying that she didn’t know her job.” That was one reason Lupe’s grandparents had not interfered when Lupe was classified as retarded. “Anglo

teachers often misunderstand Hispanic parents, believing that they aren't concerned about their children's education because they don't come visit the schools," Lupe said. "It's not a lack of concern at all. It's a mark of respect for the teacher's authority."

18 At her children's school, Lupe spoke to three different teachers. Two of them told her the same thing: "Your children are just slow. Sorry, but they can't learn." A third offered a glimmer of hope. He said, "They don't know how to function in English. It's possible that if you spoke English at home they would be able to do better."

19 Lupe pounced on that idea. "Where can I learn English?" she asked. The teacher shrugged. At that time there were no local English-language programs for adults. Finally he suggested that Lupe visit the local high school. Maybe she would be permitted to sit in the back of a classroom and pick up some English that way.

20 Lupe made an appointment with a counselor at the high school. But when the two women met, the counselor shook her head. "Your test scores show that you are retarded," she told Lupe. "You'd just be taking space in the classroom away from someone who could learn."

21 Lupe's next stop was the hospital where she had served for years as a volunteer. Could she sit in on some of the nursing classes held there? No, she was told, not without a diploma. Still undeterred, she went on to Texas Southmost College in Brownsville. Could she sit in on a class? No; no high-school diploma. Finally she went to the telephone company, where she knew operators were being trained. Could she listen in on the classes? No, only high-school graduates were permitted.

22 That day, leaving the telephone company, Lupe felt she had hit bottom. She had been terrified in the first place to try to find an English class. Meeting with rejection after rejection nearly destroyed what little self-confidence she had. She walked home in the rain, crying. "I felt like a big barrier had fallen across my path," she said. "I couldn't go over it; I couldn't go under it; I couldn't go around it."

23 But the next day Lupe woke with fresh determination. "I was motivated by love of my kids," she said. "I was not going to quit." She got up; made breakfast for her kids, husband, and grandparents; saw her children and husband off for the day; and started out again. "I remember walking to the bus stop, past a dog that always scared me to death, and heading back to the college. The lady I spoke to said, 'I told you, we can't do anything for you without a high-school degree.' But as I left the building, I went up to the first Spanish-speaking student I saw. His name was Gabito. I said, 'Who really makes the decisions around here?' He said, 'The registrar.'" Since she hadn't had any luck in the office building, Lupe decided to take a more direct approach. She asked Gabito to point out the registrar's car in the parking lot. For the next two hours she waited beside it until its owner showed up.

24 Impressed by Lupe's persistence, the registrar listened to her story. But instead of giving her permission to sit in on a class and learn more English, he insisted that she sign up for a full college load. Before she knew it, she was enrolled in four classes: basic math, basic English, psychology, and typing. The registrar's parting words to her were, "Don't come back if you don't make it through."



Lupe enjoys a story with (left to right) her twin grandchildren, Alyssa and Christian, and a visiting friend.

25 With that “encouragement,” Lupe began a semester that was part nightmare, part dream come true. Every day she got her husband and children off to school, took the bus to campus, came home to make lunch for her husband and grandparents, went back to campus, and was home in time to greet Victor, Mario, and Martha when they got home from school. In the evenings she cooked, cleaned, did laundry, and got the children to bed. Then she would study, often until three in the morning.

26 “Sometimes in class I would feel sick with the stress of it,” she said. “I’d go to the bathroom and talk to myself in the mirror. Sometimes I’d say, ‘What are you doing here? Why don’t you go home and watch *I Love Lucy*?’”

But she didn’t go home. Instead, she studied furiously, using her Spanish-English dictionary, constantly making lists of new words she wanted to understand. “I still do that today,” she said. “When I come across a word I don’t know, I write it down, look it up, and write sentences using it until I *own* that word.”

28 Although so much of the language and subject matter was new to Lupe, one part of the college experience was not. That was the key skill of reading, a skill Lupe possessed. As she struggled with English, she found the reading speed, comprehension, and vocabulary that she had developed in Spanish carrying over into her new language. “Reading,” she said, “reading was the vehicle. Although I didn’t know it at the time, when I was a

girl learning to love to read, I was laying the foundation for academic success.”

29 She gives credit, too, to her Hispanic fellow students. “At first, they didn’t know what to make of me. They were eighteen years old, and at that time it was very unfashionable for an older person to be in college. But once they decided I wasn’t a ‘plant’^o from the administration, they were my greatest help.” The younger students spent hours helping Lupe, explaining unfamiliar words and terms, coaching her, and answering her questions.

30 That first semester passed in a fog of exhaustion. Many mornings, Lupe doubted she could get out of bed, much less care for her family and tackle her classes. But when she thought of her children and what was at stake for them, she forced herself on. She remembers well what those days were like. “Just a day at a time. That was all I could think about. I could make myself get up one more day, study one more day, cook and clean one more day. And those days eventually turned into a semester.”

31 To her own amazement perhaps as much as anyone’s, Lupe discovered that she was far from retarded. Although she sweated blood over many assignments, she completed them. She turned them in on time. And, remarkably, she made the dean’s list her very first semester.

32 After that, there was no stopping Lupe Quintanilla. She soon realized that the associate’s degree offered by Texas Southmost College would not satisfy her. Continuing her Monday, Wednesday, and Friday schedule at Southmost, she enrolled for Tuesday and Thursday courses at Pan American University, a school 140 miles from Brownsville. Within three years, she had earned both her junior-college degree and a bachelor’s degree in biology. She then won a

fellowship that took her to graduate school at the University of Houston, where she earned a master’s degree in Spanish literature. When she graduated, the university offered her a job as director of the Mexican-American studies program. While in that position, she earned a doctoral degree in education.

How did she do it all? Lupe herself 33 isn’t sure. “I hardly know. When I think back to those years, it seems like a life that someone else lived.” It was a rich and exciting but also very challenging period for Lupe and her family. On the one hand, Lupe was motivated by the desire to set an example for her children, to prove to them that they could succeed in the English-speaking academic world. On the other hand, she worried about neglecting her family. She tried hard to attend important activities, such as parents’ meetings at school and her children’s sporting events. But things didn’t always work out. Lupe still remembers attending a baseball game that her older son, Victor, was playing in. When Victor came to bat, he hit a home run. But as the crowd cheered and Victor glanced proudly over at his mother in the stands, he saw she was studying a textbook. “I hadn’t seen the home run,” Lupe admitted. “That sort of thing was hard for everyone to take.”

Although Lupe worried that her 34 children would resent her busy schedule, she also saw her success reflected in them as they blossomed in school. She forced herself to speak English at home, and their language skills improved quickly. She read to them in English instead of Spanish—gulping down her pride as their pronunciation became better than hers and they began correcting her. (Once the children were in high school and fluent in English, Lupe switched back to Spanish



Two members of the Houston police department learn job-specific Spanish phrases from Lupe. Lupe also trains the officers in cultural awareness.

at home, so that the children would be fully comfortable in both languages.) “I saw the change in them almost immediately,” she said. “After I helped them with their homework, they would see me pulling out my own books and going to work. In the morning, I would show them the papers I had written. As I gained confidence, so did they.” By the next year, the children had been promoted out of the Yellow Birds.

35 Even though Victor, Mario, and Martha all did well academically, Lupe realized she could not assume that they would face no more obstacles in school. When Mario was in high school, for instance, he wanted to sign up for a debate class. Instead, he was assigned to woodworking. She visited the school to ask why. Mario’s teacher told her, “He’s good with his hands. He’ll be a great carpenter, and that’s a good thing for a

Mexican to be.” Controlling her temper, Lupe responded, “I’m glad you think he’s good with his hands. He’ll be a great physician someday, and he *is* going to be in the debate class.”

Today, Lupe Quintanilla teaches at the University of Houston, where she has developed several dozen courses concerning Hispanic literature and culture. Her cross-cultural training for law enforcement officers, which helps bring police and firefighters and local Hispanic communities closer together, is renowned^o throughout the country. Former President Ronald Reagan named her to a national board that keeps the White House informed of new programs in law enforcement. She has received numerous awards for teaching excellence, and there is even a scholarship named in her honor. Her name appears in the Hispanic Hall of Fame, and she has been

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co-chair of the White House Commission on Hispanic Education.

37 The love of reading that her grandfather instilled in Lupe is still alive. She thinks of him every year when she introduces to her students one of his favorite poets, Amado Nervo. She requires them to memorize these lines from one of Nervo's poems: "When I got to the end of my long journey in life, I realized that I was the architect of my own destiny." Of these lines, Lupe says, "That is something that I deeply believe, and I want my students to learn it *before* the end of their long journey. We create our own destiny."

38 Her love of reading and learning has helped Lupe create a distinguished destiny. But none of the honors she has received means more to her than the success of her own children, the reason she made that frightening journey to seek classes in English years ago. Today Mario *is* a physician. Victor and Martha are lawyers, both having earned doctor of law degrees. And so today, Lupe likes to say, "When someone calls the house and asks for 'Dr. Quintanilla,' I have to ask, 'Which one?' There are four of us—one retarded and three slow learners."



Lupe surrounded by her children: Martha, Victor, and Mario.

BASIC SKILL QUESTIONS

Vocabulary in Context

- _____ 1. In the excerpt below, the word *flourished* (flûr'îsht) means
- A. grew.
 - B. stood still.
 - C. was lost.
 - D. remained.

“Lupe’s own love of reading flourished during these years. Her vocabulary was enriched and her imagination fired by the novels she read . . .” (Paragraph 11)

- _____ 2. In the excerpt below, the word *vehicle* (vē'î-kəl) means
- A. transportation.
 - B. loss.
 - C. means.
 - D. place.

“Reading,” she said, “reading was the vehicle. Although I didn’t know it at the time, when I was a girl learning to love to read, I was laying the foundation for academic success.” (Paragraph 28)

- _____ 3. In the sentence below, the word *instilled* (în-stîld') means
- A. frightened.
 - B. established.
 - C. forced.
 - D. forgot.

“The love of reading that her grandfather instilled in her is still alive.” (Paragraph 37)

Central Point and Main Ideas

- _____ 4. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the selection?
- A. Lupe, a first-grade dropout, eventually earned a doctoral degree and created a professional career.
 - B. Lupe Quintanilla’s experience proves that the educational system must be set up to accommodate somehow children who speak languages other than English.
 - C. Through hard work and persistence combined with a love of reading and learning, Lupe has created a distinguished career and helped her children become professionals.
 - D. In school, Spanish-speaking students may experience obstacles to aiming for a professional career.

- _____ 5. Which of the following sentences expresses the main idea of paragraphs 19–24?
- A. People at school, a hospital, and a telephone company rejected Lupe’s requests for an education.
 - B. Overcoming rejections and disappointment, Lupe finally found someone who gave her a chance to learn English by enrolling at a college.
 - C. Lupe discovered that the person who made decisions about who could go to college and who could not was the registrar of the college.
 - D. The tests Lupe took in first grade indicating that she was retarded were a barrier to her desire to learn English.
- _____ 6. Which of the following sentences expresses the main idea of paragraph 34?
- A. Lupe’s children blossomed in school as she continued to speak English to them and was a role model for them.
 - B. Lupe was afraid that her children would resent the busy schedule that kept her from spending as much time with them as she would have liked.
 - C. Wanting her children to know both English and Spanish, Lupe spoke Spanish at home once her children knew English.
 - D. After helping her children with their homework, Lupe would do her own homework.

Supporting Details

- _____ 7. Lupe realized that her children were not retarded when
- A. they got good grades at school.
 - B. they were put in the group called “Yellow Birds.”
 - C. she saw how quickly they learned at home.
 - D. they read newspapers, poetry, and novels to her.
- _____ 8. Lupe’s training for law enforcement officers
- A. teaches them to speak Spanish.
 - B. brings police, firefighters, and local Hispanic communities together.
 - C. offers a scholarship named in her honor.
 - D. teaches Hispanic literature and culture.

Transitions

- _____ 9. The relationship between the last sentence below and the two that come before it is one of
- A. time.
 - B. addition.
 - C. illustration.
 - D. cause and effect.

“In Hispanic culture, the teacher is regarded as a third parent, as an ultimate authority. To question her would seem most disrespectful,

as though you were saying that she didn't know her job.' That was one reason Lupe's grandparents had not interfered when Lupe was classified as retarded." (Paragraph 17)

- _____ 10. The relationship between the two sentences below is one of
- A. addition.
 - B. illustration.
 - C. contrast.
 - D. cause and effect.

"When Mario was in high school . . . he wanted to sign up for debate class. Instead, he was assigned to woodworking." (Paragraph 35)

Patterns of Organization

- _____ 11. The pattern of organization of Paragraph 1 is
- A. time order.
 - B. list of items.
 - C. contrast.
 - D. comparison.
- _____ 12. The main pattern of organization of paragraphs 3–35 is
- A. time order.
 - B. list of items.
 - C. definition and example.
 - D. contrast.

ADVANCED SKILL QUESTIONS

Fact and Opinion

- _____ 13. The statement below is
- A. a fact.
 - B. an opinion.
 - C. both fact and opinion.

"Today, Lupe Quintanilla teaches at the University of Houston, where she has developed several dozen courses concerning Hispanic literature and culture." (Paragraph 36)

- _____ 14. The word that makes the statement below an opinion is
- A. *reading*.
 - B. *learning*.
 - C. *create*.
 - D. *distinguished*.

"Her love of reading and learning has helped Lupe create a distinguished destiny." (Paragraph 38)

Inferences

- _____ 15. From the sentences below, we might conclude that
- A. although Lupe was not very intelligent at first, she became more intelligent once she learned English.
 - B. Lupe really did know English.
 - C. there are no IQ tests in Spanish.
 - D. an IQ test in a language that the person tested doesn't know is useless.
- “Once they arrived in Brownsville, Lupe was enrolled in school. Although she understood no English, she was given an IQ test in that language. Not surprisingly, she didn't do very well.” (Paragraph 5)
- _____ 16. We might conclude from the reading that
- A. a school system's judgment about an individual is always accurate.
 - B. it is often better for a child to stay home rather than attend school.
 - C. by paying attention and speaking up, parents may remove obstacles to their children's education.
 - D. working parents should accept the fact that they cannot attend important events in their children's lives.
- _____ 17. The last line of the reading suggests that
- A. retarded people can become successful professionals.
 - B. people should not blindly accept other people's opinion of them.
 - C. Lupe's children are smarter than she is.
 - D. all of the above.

Purpose and Tone

- _____ 18. The author's main purpose is to
- A. inform readers of the struggle Lupe and her children endured to gain an education and accomplish their goals.
 - B. persuade readers that the educational system needs to be reformed.
 - C. entertain readers with anecdotes about Lupe's adventures in school.
- _____ 19. The general tone of the reading is
- A. instructive.
 - B. sentimental.
 - C. admiring.
 - D. uncertain.

Argument

- _____ 20. One of the following statements is the point of an argument. The other statements are support for that point. Write the letter of the point of the argument.
- A. Lupe and others thought of her as being retarded because an educator gave her an IQ test in a language she didn't know.

- B. Putting Mario in a stereotypical career category, one teacher said, “He’ll be a great carpenter, and that’s a good thing for a Mexican to be.”
- C. Through lack of insight and perpetuation of stereotypes, educators became obstacles to Lupe’s and her children’s education.
- D. A teacher and principal shouted at young Lupe in a language she didn’t understand, bewildering and embarrassing her so much that she dropped out of school.

SUMMARIZING

Add the ideas needed to complete the following summary of “The Professor Is a Dropout.”

When Lupe Quintanilla was very young, she and her grandparents moved from Nogales, Mexico, to live with her uncle in a small town in southern Mexico that had no schools. When she was 12, _____

In Brownsville, Lupe was enrolled in school. After scoring poorly on an IQ test that was given in English, which she did not speak, Lupe was put in first grade. When _____

_____, Lupe begged her grandfather not to send her back to school. Lupe stayed home, where she read newspapers, poetry, and novels to her grandfather. At 16, she married, and within five years, she had three children. When her children were enrolled in school, they were grouped as slow learners, a fact that depressed Lupe—until she realized that at home, they didn’t seem like slow learners. That gave her courage to go to school and talk to her children’s teachers. When one suggested that _____

might help her children, Lupe began a search for a way to learn English that ended in attending college and then a university, where she earned a doctoral degree in education. And by speaking English at home, helping her children with their homework, and serving as a good role model, Lupe encouraged her children to do well in school as well. Today, Lupe has a distinguished career as a professor and emphasizes to her students that they create their own destinies. She is also a communications company president and law enforcement trainer. She has been a representative to the United Nations. But what means most to her is _____

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Lupe credits her fellow Hispanic students with being a great help to her in college. Is there anyone in your life—a teacher, family member, or friend—who has helped you through challenging times during your education? Explain what your obstacle was and how this person helped you to overcome it.
2. Lupe found that her school responsibilities conflicted with her duties as wife and mother. What kinds of personal responsibilities have you had to juggle as a student? These may include parenthood, a job, a difficult home situation, extracurricular school activities, or anything else that poses a challenge to your academics. How have you balanced these obligations with your role as student?
3. Lupe is an outstanding example of a person who took charge of her life. Would you say that you have taken charge of your life? Describe how, or describe what you think you must yet do to take charge of your life.
4. By the end of Lupe’s story, we see the serious mistakes made by those who called her “retarded” and her children “slow learners.” Was there ever a time when you felt people misjudged you? What did they say about you that was wrong, and how did it make you feel? Explain how you reacted to their judgments—did you accept their remarks, or did you fight to disprove them?

Note: Writing assignments for this selection appear on page 633.

Check Your Performance

Activity

BASIC SKILL QUESTIONS

Vocabulary in Context (3 items)

Central Point and Main Ideas (3 items)

Supporting Details (2 items)

Transitions (2 items)

Patterns of Organization (2 items)

ADVANCED SKILL QUESTIONS

Fact and Opinion (2 items)

Inferences (3 items)

Purpose and Tone (2 items)

Argument (1 item)

SUMMARIZING (4 items)

THE PROFESSOR IS A DROPOUT

Number Right

Points

Score

_____ × 4 = _____

_____ × 4 = _____

_____ × 4 = _____

_____ × 4 = _____

_____ × 4 = _____

_____ × 4 = _____

_____ × 4 = _____

_____ × 4 = _____

_____ × 4 = _____

_____ × 5 = _____

TOTAL SCORE = _____%

Enter your total score into the **Reading Performance Chart: Ten Reading Selections** on the inside back cover.