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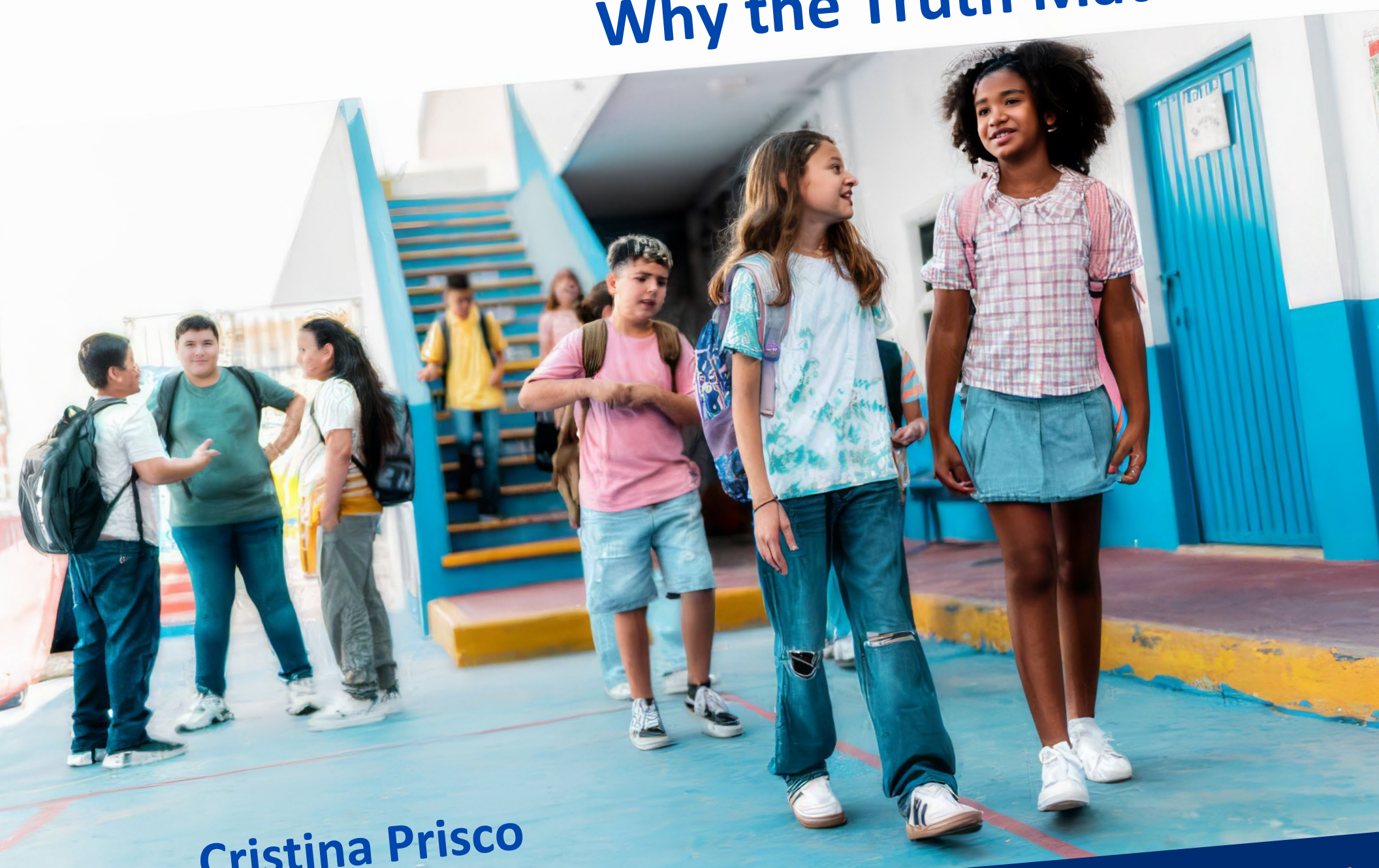
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TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

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SHOWCASE EDITION

Family Engagement Redefined
Why the Truth Matters



Cristina Prisco

Engagement as the Key to Education Transformed

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Family Engagement Redefined: Why the Truth Matters

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Cristina Prisco
Vice-President
Connecting Roots
League City, Texas



It started with a question I wasn't prepared to ask. One April morning in 2022, while I was having breakfast in my New York kitchen, I saw a story on Good Morning America that stopped me cold. It featured a firefighter from Houston who, like me, had been adopted from Chile. What he discovered changed everything. He had not been given up for adoption. He had been stolen (Lefferman et al., 2022). I remember the silence in the room after the segment ended. The kind of silence that feels heavy, like something has shifted but you do not yet understand how. My heart was racing. I kept thinking: *Could this be my story too?*

What happens when a system's official story silences a family's truth? At that moment, I did not know it, but one question would transform my understanding of family, identity, and what genuine engagement with families truly requires. Sometimes questions are where truth begins, and where real engagement starts.

For forty-two years, I believed I knew where I came from. The documents said my mother was young and poor. That she made the difficult but loving decision to give me up so I could have a better life. It was all written down, albeit in Spanish, but I understood what it said. There were official signatures everywhere. Judges, court magistrates, seals, and stamps on thin legal-size pieces of paper. Everything looked legitimate. Yet paperwork can create the appearance of truth while excluding the voices of the people most affected. At that moment, none of it felt certain anymore.

The Shift in Perspective

Within hours, I made a phone call that would change my life. Within days, everything I believed about my beginnings unraveled. Less than a week later, I saw my mother's face for the very first time. She didn't give me up. She lost me.

At first, it felt like something deeply personal, my story, my loss, my truth to uncover. It did not take long to realize this was never just about me. What happened to me happened to thousands of others. During and around the years of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, thousands of children were separated from their families through irregular, coerced, or illegal adoption practices. Chilean judicial records have identified approximately 20,000 cases of coerced or criminal adoptions, while advocacy organizations estimate that more than 50,000 Chilean families may have been affected (Alfaro Monsalve, 2022; Associated Press, 2024).

The Seminal Question

Hospitals, social workers, courts, agencies, and institutions meant to protect families were, in many cases, part of the system that separated them (Alfaro Monsalve, 2022). My documents told one story. My mother told another. Somewhere between those two versions is the truth that so many families are still trying to piece together.

What happens when families are expected to trust systems that do not fully see, hear, or believe them? What I once believed was a single adoption story is now part of a much larger history shaped by power, inequality, and silence.

Growing up, I was told my adoption was an act of care. A decision made for me, but never with my family. No one asked my mother what she wanted. No one explained anything to her. No one gave her a voice. She was told I could not leave the hospital because I needed medical care. When she returned for me, I was gone. She was told she had signed papers she had never seen. That is not engagement. That is erasure. That distinction matters far beyond my story.

We often talk about "family engagement" as involvement: meetings, communication, participation (Mapp and Kuttner 2013). My experience challenges that definition. What does engagement mean when families are misled, excluded, or silenced entirely? What does it mean when decisions are made behind closed doors through systems families are expected to trust?



Redefining Engagement

In schools and other institutions, engagement cannot simply mean attendance, compliance, or participation in systems already designed without families. Presence without power is not partnership. Research on family-school partnerships similarly distinguishes between inviting families into existing structures and building relationships in which families have the knowledge, confidence, connections, and influence to participate as genuine partners (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Mapp & Bergman, 2019). True engagement requires more than being present. It requires voice. It requires information. It requires transparency. It requires the ability to ask questions and shape decisions. Without voice, there is no real choice, only compliance shaped by power (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

The truth did not just change my past. It reshaped my understanding of who I am. For most of my life, I believed I was an only child. I built my sense of self around that experience. In one moment, I became a sister, one of ten children. For the first time, I saw my face reflected in others. The same eyes. The same smile. Features I had never seen anywhere else. It was both beautiful and overwhelming.

At the same time, I could not ignore another realization. The systems that documented my life were the same systems that falsified it. The official record, the one I was taught to trust, was not true. That realization changes how you see everything. If something so foundational can be wrong, what else can be trusted?

For educators and leaders, this raises an important question. How often do institutions rely on records, assumptions, labels, or narratives without fully understanding the experiences behind them? How often do we accept a single story when families may be carrying another?

There was always a quiet feeling that I carried, even as a child. A sense that something was missing. I could not name it at the time. Now I can. It was the absence of connection to my origins, my culture, and my family. A belonging interrupted before I ever had the chance to experience it. Finding my family did not erase that loss, but it gave it meaning.

Engagement as Belonging

Family engagement is also about belonging. It is about honoring identity, language, culture, and origin (Garcia et al., 2016). It is about ensuring that families do not have to leave parts of themselves behind in order to participate. When institutions honor who families are, they create the conditions for genuine partnership.

If there is one thing my story makes clear, it is this: Systems shape lives. And when they fail, the impact lasts generations.

For educators, leaders, and institutions working with children and families, this truth demands more than good intentions. It requires rethinking what partnership truly looks like. Transparency is not optional. It is essential. Families must be informed, not managed. They must be listened to, not spoken for.

That means communicating in families' home languages. It means ensuring informed consent. It means making decision-making processes visible and understandable. It means creating opportunities for shared problem-solving. It means making space for questions, concerns, and disagreement. Most importantly, it means recognizing that families are experts in their own lives (Garcia et al., 2016; Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

Expanding the Meaning of Family

My mother was never given the opportunity to ask questions, to understand, or to decide. Her voice was removed from the process entirely. What would have happened if someone had stopped and truly listened to her? What would have been different if the system had prioritized truth over efficiency and humanity over process, and what can educators learn from that today? Whose voice is missing from the conversation? Who is being spoken about but not spoken with? Where might systems unintentionally silence, manage, or assume rather than listen, inform, and partner?

Real family engagement means creating space for lived experiences, even when they are complex or uncomfortable. It means recognizing that families are not obstacles to navigate but partners to honor. Family engagement is not asking families to participate in decisions that have already been made (Mapp and Bergman, 2019). It is ensuring they have the truth, the language, the power, and the opportunity to help shape what happens. Family engagement begins with truth. Without truth, there can be no trust. Without trust, there can be no meaningful partnership.

Today, family means something much bigger to me than it ever did before. It spans continents, languages, and histories. It includes the parents who raised me with love and the mother who never gave up hope. Both are part of my story. Truth does not erase love. But it does demand accountability. Sharing this story is not easy, but it matters because there are still thousands of families without answers. Mothers who are still waiting. Adoptees who are still questioning.

If telling my story helps even one person begin their search, or helps one institution reconsider how it listens, then it is worth it. I move forward with a deeper understanding of who I am, but also with a responsibility to speak. Not only for myself, but for those whose voices were never heard. Because listening is not a courtesy. It is a responsibility.



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Cristina Prisco is the Vice President of Connecting Roots, a nonprofit organization that assists Chilean adoptees search for and reunite with their biological families. She is also an adoptee from Chile that was raised in New York where she currently resides with her husband and two children. Her profession is that of a Customer Service Representative, supporting school districts with their student information system; however her dream is to one day be able to work with Connecting Roots full-time.

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