



By Josef Alexander- A drawing of his family reading Lola by Junot Diaz together

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Cultivating Stories About Family Migrations

By Carola Suárez-Orozco and Verónica Boix-Mansilla, Harvard University

This post is part one in a [two-part](#) series on why cultivating narratives about family migrations matters and how we might do so in powerful ways.

Every day, children in our classrooms navigate multiple contexts—school, home and neighborhood, each contributing to their understanding of who they are, where they come from, and the roles they might play as members of multiple communities. Immigrant-origin children—who make up well over a quarter of our students—straddle cultures, languages, dialects and value systems at home, at school, and in cultural and religious institutions, making their lives particularly rich and complex.

Yet, all too often, the richness of children's home life becomes invisible at school. Their rich stories find no room in classrooms that view monocultural and monolingual English ways as the norm and other languages and cultures as deviations from the mainstream. At the same time, immigrant-origin families find themselves pressed to minimize their rich family stories and traditions in pursuit of effective adaptation to the new land.

Family stories matter for children and adults' well-being, to deepen family bonds, and for healthy social integration into the new land. Recognizing the growing invisibility of immigrant-

origin family stories calls for new ways in which schools and cultural institutions might rethink family engagement priorities.

Why are immigrant-origin family stories invisible?

Within the classroom, a focus on English language acquisition, a packed curriculum, and the demands of high-stakes testing make attention to culturally responsive practices (including attention to family cultural narratives, traditions and activities) seem trivial. Yet there is ample research and accumulated classroom wisdom showing that engaging young people's home cultures and languages outside school can serve to counter systemic inequities facing students of color by encompassing cultural affirmation, supporting social and emotional well-being, and nurturing interpersonal relations and civic efficacy for students in their everyday classroom experiences.[1]

At home, the wisdom, values and cultural assets that families bring to children's growth can be taken for granted, amid busy work schedules and chores. Here, too, family stories of a distant childhood "back home" might seem irrelevant when facing the urgency of supporting the family in a new albeit foreign land. Further, caretakers, who may have gone through traumatic circumstances, may wish to move on and shield their children from these past pains. In turn, children, in their rush to acculturate, may feel shame around their parents' old-country ways and feign disinterest in their lives before migration. Such budding intergenerational gaps complicate parents' sense of effectiveness in child rearing and dynamics of care.

The silence around family stories is problematic. When personal stories are left outside the classroom, students come to learn that they only matter as "English learners" or "math students." When family stories remain invisible in the home, the whole family may come to believe that such stories do not matter.

Much is lost in this silence. Teachers lose the opportunity to know their students, their interests, values and hopes. They also lose many teachable moments that can connect ideas across time and place, and engage learners. And peers lose the opportunity to learn not only what sets them apart but also what they may have in common. Students lose the opportunity to engage in important conversations that would allow them to learn about their family histories and cultural backgrounds and formulate positive social identities. They lose the chance to know their family members in meaningful ways beyond scripted roles and day-to-day demands. Students also lose many important opportunities to engage in dialogues that strengthen capacities in their multiple languages. Everyone loses the opportunity to engage in perspective-taking and empathy-building—two fundamental social/emotional skills for emotional regulation as well as for strengthening interpersonal relationships.

The value of 'moving stories'

In our work with immigrant-origin youth, families and their teachers, we have come to put a premium on "moving stories"—i.e., the stories of movement and change that permeate migration as our shared human experience. Arguably, telling, sharing and remembering family stories is essential for healthy, secure and adaptive child development as well as in the construction of

more inclusive learning environments and societies. **By engaging in “moving stories,” we interrupt the cycle of silence. Instead, we celebrate everyday family stories of migration.** By exploring family narratives of life before or during migration, we are planting seeds for students to learn about themselves and their families, enriching their linguistic, cultural and family belonging. Recognizing and exploring these narratives is a fundamental tool for helping students better understand and communicate with their families. And by sharing these stories with peers and teachers who respectfully and carefully listen in and **validate experiences, students may feel more visible and connected to one another.**

In short, then, family story sharing has the potential to:

- Provide spaces for mutual understanding—children of their family members; teachers of their students and their families; and peers of one another;
- Increase self-awareness as well as empathy and understanding the perspective of others;
- Nurture family relationships and story-sharing habits among children and family members in immigrant-origin communities;
- Celebrate and ensure the sharing of cultural values, languages, traditions, wisdom and shared experiences that serve to deepen family bonds, cultural roots and positive identity;
- Empower children and youth to share their family stories and express them through multiple languages at their disposal with their peers and educators; and
- Promote English and first-language literacy practices by practicing and engaging in storytelling.

How can we give voice to family migration stories?

We will now share some ways in which we at Re-Imagining Migration and Harvard Project Zero, have collaboratively developed strategies for educators to partner with families and students to share their migration stories. The first works well for middle and high school students; it begins with family interviews and takes the work back to classrooms to foster cross-group reflection and discussions (*see below*). The second is designed for younger children (preschool through early primary) and focuses on intra- as well as inter-family conversations (*see Part 2: Moving Stories at the Heart of Family Life*). These are inspirational models that can be locally tailored to suit your classroom needs.

Engaging in Classroom Conversations.

(Im)migration is an experience that almost everyone in the United States shares somewhere in their family history. Whether it is recent or took place generations ago; by choice or through forced migration; for adventure, to seek a better life, or for refuge—except for native peoples—migration is at the center of nearly every family history. Reflecting upon our moving stories, listening to one another explore, relating to those experiences, and learning from those narratives are powerful ways to find common ground.[2] This is ever more important as immigrant-origin students are experiencing polarized and stereotype-ridden public narratives about their (and their families’) place in our nation. Finding ways to connect, listen and engage around narratives of migration provides a crucial opportunity for immigrant-origin students to feel supported in their

social, emotional, academic and civic growth *and* for their peers to explore their own families' migration histories, their misperceptions around migration, and to find common ground.

We have established a series of practices designed to scaffold students through conversations with their families and peers to learn and reflect on migration. See the [Moving Stories Guide](#) for sample questions and detailed guidelines. Here are key steps:

1. Establish and agree to classroom discussion norms (provided in the guide).
2. Reflect on what it means to be a respectful, mindful and empathic interviewer, posing careful questions and thoughtfully listening.
3. Remind students that they should only share as much as they feel comfortable sharing.
4. To prepare for the class activity, students are encouraged to ask family members about things they might not know about regarding their family migration stories (as homework).
5. We provide a menu of questions designed to respectfully allow students to ask other students about their family's migration stories. These questions have been designed to allow students to learn about what may have prompted the migration as well as the adjustment after the migration.
6. After the interviews, students can participate in a series of activities that allow them to reflect on what they learned. Guided classroom discussions can allow reflection upon what was shared, revealed and learned during the exchange of moving stories. Students are asked to delve into points of both divergences and commonalities in experiences.
7. This work also lends itself well to project-based learning activities. At Re-Imagining Migration, Verónica Boix-Mansilla has led the development of a [Learning Arc](#) to guide conversations about migration. The kinds of projects students develop can range from an art project to an accordion book, to a report, to a video. This is the kind of work that is highly engaging to students, prompting their curiosity and creativity.

We live in incontestably contentious times. Listening and connecting across differences—whether ideological, social or racial—has become seemingly more difficult than ever. And yet, the stakes of not connecting and engaging in acts of understanding have deep and divisive implications for social and emotional development, human relationships, and our civic society. There can be no better place than starting at home and in the classroom by facilitating the exchange of moving stories!

This post is part one in a two-part series. See [part two](#) or an innovative approach to engage families themselves in collaborating with young children in the sharing of family stories.

Notes

[1] Banks, J. A., Cookson, P., Gay, G., Hawley, W. D., Irvine, J. J., Nieto, S., ... & Stephan, W. G. (2001). "Diversity Within Unity: Essential Principles for Teaching and Learning in a Multicultural Society." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(3), 196-203.

Gay, G. (2021). Culturally Responsive Teaching: Ideas, Actions, and Effects. In H.R. Milner IV & K. Lomotey (Eds.), *Handbook of Urban Education* (second ed., pp. 212-233). Routledge.

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Uccelli P. & Boix Mansilla V. (2022) Pedagogies of Voice: Re-imagining the Role of Language in Education for a World on the Move. Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies—Working paper

[2] See the *Re-Imagining Migration Moving Stories: An Educator's Guide to Connecting and Engaging Our Moving Stories* <https://reimaginingmigration.org/moving-stories-home/>

About the Authors



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Verónica Boix-Mansilla is a principal investigator at Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and research director at Re-Imagining Migration where she has led the development of RiM's curricular and pedagogical frameworks.

An international expert in global competence and interdisciplinary education, her research examines how to prepare young people for a world of growing inequity, complexity, diversity and mobility. Her most recent book *Big Picture Thinking: How to Educate the Whole Person for an Interconnected World* with Andreas Schleicher was published by the OECD in 2022.

She serves as an adviser at UNESCO, OECD, Asia Society, Smithsonian Institute, National Geographic and the Longview Foundation.



Re-Imagining Migration

Re-imagining Migration's mission is to advance the education and well-being of immigrant-origin youth, decrease bias and hatred against young people of diverse origins, and help rising generations develop the critical understanding and empathy necessary to build and sustain welcoming and inclusive communities.

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