



By Melissa – a drawing of the most interesting moments in Lola's story

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Moving Stories at the Heart of Family Life

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In the second segment of our [two-part](#) series, we place immigrant-origin family life at the center. We introduce a novel approach, that is both culturally and linguistically sensitive, to supporting family engagement through moving stories.

Family Stories Matter

Family stories matter. It is at home where children first come to understand who they are and who they can become. Children grow through thousands of micro interactions that collectively constitute the habits, culture or climate of the home. Deliberately and not, these interactions send messages that children come to embody, such as expected forms of solidarity and respect; preferred languages and communicative styles; behaviors that signal belonging; values to discern right from wrong; and repeated family anecdotes that ground collective identities. Such interactions represent the essential cultural assets that families bring to children's growth enabling healthy social identities.

Despite their importance, all too often these rich family cultural assets are silenced. They may be taken for granted, amid busy work schedules and chores—reducing daily interactions to brief exchanges: “Did you do your homework?” “Set the table!” Family stories may feel irrelevant amid urgent efforts to adapt to the new land. Perhaps most concerning, the cultural assets that families bring may be silenced by their very invisibility in schools and cultural institutions, where dominant culture and languages reign. Children seeking to adapt may increasingly serve as linguistic and cultural translators for parents and come to view stories about life before migration with shame or apparent disinterest. New, complex intergenerational dynamics slowly

silence culturally rich family conversations, weakening caregivers' and children's social identities and meaningful connections. As we mentioned in part one of this series, much is lost in the silence.



5 Steps for Creating Welcoming and Inclusive Learning Communities

Re-Imagining Migration explores and provides five ways to promote a welcoming and inclusive learning environment for students.

Engaging Families in Novel Ways

Responding to the challenge, school districts across the country are tasking their community liaison leaders with raising immigrant-origin caregivers' engagement with schools, which often means making personal connections, translating communications, making home visits and calls, and most typically offering adult English as a Second Language classes for them.

For this intervention, we took a novel approach. We together as leading practitioners at Fairfax Public Schools and the Smithsonian Learning Lab, and researchers at Harvard Project Zero-Re-Imagining Migration,[1] developed a simple program to engage a small group of immigrant mothers (of children ages 3-8) in conversations about family experiences in their countries of origin. Our goal was to help these mothers understand the importance of discovering, sharing and connecting with their children through family stories. To this end, we drew on the arts and children's literature and created a digital museum collection able to support further work.

The curriculum and an [accompanying digital museum collection](#) were designed around four key moments:

1. Opening meeting: Reflecting on the importance of family stories.

During this meeting, mothers had an opportunity to:

- Get to know each other.
- Describe the typical verbal interactions with their children.
- Explore the work of artist Carmen Lomas Garza depicting family members using “see, feel, think, wonder,” a Project Zero thinking routine to elicit spontaneous sharing of family stories past and present.
- Reflect on the experience, highlighting the importance of sharing family stories for identity, bonding and joy.
- **Follow-up:** Mothers took Lomas Garza's work home to “play” *see-feel-think-wonder* with their children, and they were invited to share their experiences with the group privately on WhatsApp.

2. Second meeting: “Meeting Lola” and learning about the joy of reading together

The second meeting deepened our bonds as a group and enabled us to begin to recast ideas about reading. During this session, mothers were invited to:

- Share and reflect on their experiences exploring Lomas Garza’s art with their kids. We also discussed images of their children cooking that they had shared online.
- Share stories and reflect on their own experiences with reading in school as children—spontaneous stories were at once funny, inspiring and heartbreaking.
- Explore new approaches to reading centered on discovery, conversation and bonding. Together, we began to read *Island Girl* by Junot Diaz[2]—the story of Lola, a girl who courageously overcomes the confusing feeling of not knowing her family story by seeking the help of her community to write their story of migration from the Dominican Republic to the U.S. “Reading” here involved visual exploration, anticipation, experiencing, and talking about empathy and mixed feelings when facing the difficult parts, as well as conversation and fruitful connections to personal family stories and stories of reading and schooling.
- **Follow-up:** With support and having received a copy of the book, mothers prepared to read the book with their children, and document the experience with images or via WhatsApp.

3. Third meeting: Preparing to share more family conversations

We arrived at the third meeting eager to hear about the mothers’ experiences reading *Lola (Island Girl)* and expand the repertoire of stories these mothers could elicit and share. During this session, mothers had an opportunity to:

- Share their documentation of children’s reading and listening; they shared children’s own drawings of moments in the book, of scenes of “reading with mama.” In some cases, this included photographs of children visiting and then “playing library.”
- Reflect on the stories they would want to share about their childhood with their children from selected mischievous adventures, to play, to singing to dances. We committed to teaching the children about these, through conversations in our mother tongue.

- Consider how they might document these stories to share with the group.
- **Follow-up:** Mothers embraced the challenge of exploring old games and traditions. They collaborated with their children to engage fathers, aunties and neighbors. Their documentation included videos of children practicing "rayuelas" (hopscotch), "yo-yos, traditional, Guatemalan dances, and wearing outfits.



By Ana Claudia – a video teaching viewers how to play coscoja (hopscotch)

4. Fourth meeting: A celebration of learning and the hope of making story sharing “the thing we do”

Facilitators arrived at this meeting with excitement and anticipation about a big outdoor potluck picnic designed to reflect on lessons learned and how story sharing and storytelling shape family bonds and daily practices. During this extended session, mothers, some fathers and children had an opportunity to:

- Play together as a group with a colorful parachute and share the food (and associated stories) each had prepared.
- Reflect on the story-sharing learning journey in intimate one-on-one and then group conversations anticipating how they might keep the story-sharing practices alive.
- The children had a chance to create painted rocks that were “magic story-sharing symbols” that anyone in the family could use to invite a moment of story sharing and play.

This simple intervention enabled facilitators to unleash the power of family stories opening space for families to reflect on matters of values, identities and belonging. Our premise was that mothers would feel more empowered to bring their cultural assets to school and become stronger partners in the education of their children.

Mothers' observations in parental exit interviews reflected their enthusiasm. They spoke of having greater cultural pride as well as agency in the construction of bicultural households.

"What I like is that when I am old . . . [my children] will know how to tell stories my mother told me. I don't want them to be ashamed—I want them to feel Hispanic and know their roots."

"As a mother, I can keep reinforcing and talking about not leaving our heritage behind. I want [my children] to know about both the days of celebration from there and from here."

Play, joy and shared quality time allowed mothers and their children to deepen their bonds. In turn, several children expressed joy in playing with mom, asking questions, and learning about Lola. Mothers felt better prepared to read with the children in engaging ways and to encourage multilingual lives.

"Before [the intervention], I had a more difficult time communicating with my son but now I spend more time with him. I play with him more, and we do things together and he enjoys and asks so many questions: 'How about this?' and 'How about that, mama?' I am also speaking Vietnamese with my son now, and my husband speaks in Spanish with him more too."

In Sum

In this two-part series, we proposed that immigrant-origin children in our classrooms navigate multiple contexts—school, home, 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. The two practical approaches we introduced, moving stories in the classroom and at the heart of the family, provide research-informed and actionable interventions that, in our view, hold the promise of reimagining how we engage immigrant-origin families and children in our schools. Working in the classroom, our "moving stories" approach gives voice to young people honoring their family life and experience. Working directly with families, the approach offers an opportunity for family members to strengthen their bonds, cultural pride and agency. Fundamentally, this approach invites immigrant families to "be seen" and appreciated on their own terms, connect with other families and begin to reimagine the role their cultural traditions might play in nurturing healthy and adaptive children in and outside of school.

Notes

[1] For this work, we are deeply grateful for the heartfelt and joyful facilitation and intellectual contributions by Micheline Lavallo, Claudia Estevez, Philippa Rappaport, Paola Uccelli, and the mothers and children of Fairfax County, Va.

[2] Note that the book is available in Spanish (under the name *Lola*), and there are read-aloud versions available online.

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.



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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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<https://sharemylesson.com/blog/moving-stories-heart-family-life>