

# Honoring

*One of the most powerful interventions that teachers can make for immigrant students is to celebrate the human and academic value of their stories.*

**Gerald Campano**

**M**y first lesson about exclusion, and its transcendence, came from family experience shaped through memory and narrative. When my Italian American grandmother and Filipino grandfather moved into their first apartment in a tenement in Queens, New York, a majority of the residents signed a petition to keep them out because they were a “mixed” couple and “foreign.” Against the protests of their future neighbors, they declined to leave.

I recalled this story when I took my first teaching position in an urban elementary school in Houston, Texas. The students came from mostly immigrant and migrant backgrounds. My own identity as the child and grandchild of immigrants began to inform how I understood my students’ education experiences. I became sensitized to

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# Student Stories

their vulnerability to exclusionary practices in school.

There exists in schools a subtle yet pervasive image of the ideal student. There is also its corollary, the less-than-ideal student, whose education is framed as a series of problems: of language, cultural integration, parental participation, school readiness, background knowledge, literacy, and classroom decorum, to name a few. To varying degrees, individual students in that school in which I first taught conformed or did not conform to the ideal. And those who did not conform to this misguided ideal—often poorer students from immigrant, migrant, and refugee backgrounds—received a different set of instructional and social interventions, such as tracking and remediation. These practices often barred these students from the kinds of rich curricular experiences necessary for success in higher education and beyond.

## Students as Global Citizens

A fundamentally different precept governs my own research into the lives and learning of urban and immigrant students: The increasingly rich diversity of our student populations is not a problem, but rather an opportunity that benefits all learners in a classroom community. The intermingling of identities in 21st-century classrooms is a generative condition for intellectual and ethical investigation.

Consider the following: Although schools tout the importance in their



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mission statements of preparing students for global citizenship, our youth are already global citizens. Many of our students are able to analyze issues, such as prejudice or child labor, through a comparative cultural, and often transnational, framework. They have crisscrossed political borders and negotiated boundaries of race, class, generation, and gender. They have lived the consequences—both positive and negative—of globalization. Many have an intuitive grasp of injustice because they have experienced it firsthand. They are heirs to rich literary and activist legacies. In contexts outside of schools, such as community-based activist organizations, many young people are looking at how U.S. policies affect other countries and regions, such as Mexico, the Philippines, the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

In short, the deepest intellectual resources in classrooms are the students themselves. And one of the most powerful ways students can share their knowledge, partake in their own education, and intervene on their own behalf is by telling their stories.

### The Power of Narrative

One of the purposes of inviting students to share their stories is to better understand how the students can use their background knowledge to gain access to curricular content. Stories also have an obvious interpersonal value because they enable students to weave their unique histories into the fabric of the classroom community. Nevertheless, for the most part, teachers still think of stories as a lower-grade cognitive phenomenon not necessarily conducive

## Students need to know that their storied knowledge counts in school.



to higher-level thinking and, at best, as a starting place for more serious academic work.

Student narratives are far more significant than that. They are vehicles for linking subjective experience to more complete knowledge about our shared world, especially for individuals who speak and write from buried or misrepresented histories or don't hear the echo of their own experiences in the traditional school curriculum.

Take one of my former 5th grade students, Ma-Lee (see Campano, 2005). As a result of testing, Ma-Lee had been labeled "low achieving," "at risk," and "limited English proficient." She was often pulled out of class for intervention

programs. Although she struggled to fulfill directives, her written responses to mandated writing prompts, such as "Describe your favorite snack," were often stilted and fell far short, not only of district standards and benchmarks, but also of the high standards she held for herself. Ma-Lee made progress in a piecemeal sort of way on discrete skills, but she was beginning to slide into a bureaucratically sanctioned remedial academic identity.

But things suddenly changed. Inspired by a series of conversations with her peers about culture and identity, Ma-Lee decided to recount her family's migrations. Her essay, "Autobiography of a Hmong Girl," begins by describing a traumatic memory—her early childhood in a refugee camp. Ma-Lee then elaborates on the challenges of adapting to her new home in California, her feelings of invisibility, the pain of being shunned, the value of her friendships, and

her desire to find a nurturing school. She concludes with an exhortation for others to learn about her culture and from her experiences:

Now I will tell you about my people. In our Hmong Culture, we have to wake up early and go to the garden. Even a little girl like me has to go. You have to sew your own clothes. You can put red, blue, yellow, or any color you like. You can go to the store to buy it, but it costs a pack of money for just one dress, so we prefer to sew our Hmong clothes. We sewed clothes for ourselves, but we didn't even have shoes to wear.

In our Hmong culture, they put babies that are born in blankets. They have intricate designs. The blankets may have a bird on a tree or a tiger sitting in the grass. They want the babies to be in blan-

kets so they won't get sick in the winter. When babies are born, they sometimes don't eat anything because often there is not much food. In Thailand, they didn't have any milk to drink. My mom told me that when I was born, I didn't eat anything, not even rice. My mom didn't know if I would survive. But I did survive. My family didn't have blankets, so my mom took her scarf off and used it as a blanket for my little brothers.

I want everyone to know about my life and know how to respect my culture to make our Hmong people full of freedom. I know someday if no one wants [to] go out there and talk [about] what they

believe, I will. I know everyone wants to live in freedom. If someday my dreams come true, the world that I live [in] will always be radiant and never be dim with prejudice.

This is what I believe in my heart.

Ma-Lee's lyric narrative is anything but provincial. It is at once profoundly personal and profoundly global. Her geographical and intellectual odyssey served as a point of departure for other students to learn about the world. We learned some particulars about the history of the Hmong and their forms of

artistic expression. We discussed the role that larger geopolitical dynamics, such as war, play in dislocating people. Perhaps most important, because of her intimacy with loss, hunger, and survival, Ma-Lee's voice began to acquire tremendous ethical and intellectual stature.

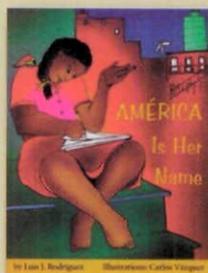
Ma-Lee knew something of the contingency and frailty of human security. From her personal experiences, she called up her own truth about the requirements for human well-being and the need for everyone to "live in

## Stories About Immigration

### *America Is Her Name*

By Luis J. Rodriguez  
(Curbstone Press, 1998)

Nine-year-old America Soliz, an undocumented immigrant of Mexican Indian heritage living in a barrio of Chicago, discovers how to express herself in poetry.



### *A Step from Heaven*

By An Na (Hand Print, 2001)

A young Korean girl and her family find it difficult to learn English and adapt to life in the United States.

### *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan*

By Mary Williams and Gregory Christie  
(Lee and Low Books, 2005)

A band of 30,000 Sudanese boys between the ages of 8 and 15 walk nearly 1,000 miles in search of safety.



### *Dia's Story Cloth: The Hmong People's Journey of Freedom*

By Dia Cha (Lee and Low Books, 1996)

Through the story cloth stitched by her aunt and uncle, the author recounts her family's flight from Laos to a refugee camp in Thailand and their subsequent immigration to the United States.

### *Esperanza Rising*

By Pam Munoz Ryan (Blue Sky Press, 2002)

A family tragedy forces a wealthy Mexican girl to immigrate to California, where she must adapt to a new country and a lower social class.

### *Friends from the Other Side*

*/Amigos del otro lado*

By Gloria Anzaldúa and Consuelo Mendez  
(Children's Book Press, 1997)

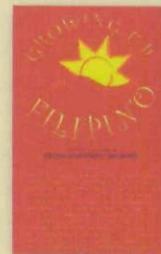
A Mexican American girl befriends a boy who has crossed the Mexican border with his mother in search of a new life.



### *Growing Up Filipino: Stories for Young Adults*

By Cecilia Manguerra Brainard  
(PAHL, 2003)

Twenty-nine Filipino American writers explore the challenges of adolescence in the Philippines and the United States.



### *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

By Julia Alvarez

(Plume, 2005)

Four sisters adjust to life in the United States after fleeing from the Dominican Republic.

### *La Mariposa*

By Francisco Jimenez and Simon Silva

(Houghton Mifflin, 2000)

Francisco, the son of migrant workers, has difficulty adjusting to a new school because he doesn't speak or understand English.

### *My Name Is Jorge: On Both Sides of the River*

By Jane Medina and Fabricio Vandebroek

(Boyd's Mills Press, 2004)

A collection of poems from the point of view of a grade school child from Mexico describes the challenges of adjusting to a new language and culture.

freedom” and in a world where there are blankets, food, medicine, and education opportunities. As a class, we began an inquiry into the relationship between nationhood and justice. The students discussed how all human beings, irrespective of citizenship status, should have access to high-quality schools, hospitals, and employment. Ma-Lee’s narrative gave some students in the class the ambition to articulate a universal set of human rights. Some of the 5th graders even joined an interfaith community organization that advocated for comprehensive health care for migrant workers and their families.

Ma-Lee did not spontaneously produce such poignant, sound writing simply because she had the opportunity to tell her story. There was a curricular backdrop to this work that she helped design. As a teacher researcher, I adopted in my work what Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle (2001) call an inquiry stance. This entailed developing literacy curriculums around the students’ own rich experiences, cultural resources, and interests. Accordingly, the students in Ma-Lee’s class were coinvestigators into such questions as, What is culture? and What is immigration? They became experts and intellectuals.

Ma-Lee gained confidence in school. The following year, in 6th grade, she earned a medal in a highly competitive academic pentathlon. She eventually became an honors student in her middle school.

Conventional skills-based academic interventions can certainly play a role in students’ academic development, but interventions conducive to the flourishing of all students in 21st-century classrooms must involve a more challenging, but ultimately more rewarding, project than merely honing instructional strategies or best practices. Interventions

must also encompass the complexities and promises of students’ identities. Allowing the diverse voices of a classroom community to surface and claim their truths entails a fundamental shift: Teachers move away from anxiety over difference and authority for control toward a sense of humility about the wisdom of the young people we teach. In the process of teaching them, we become part of their migration stories,

**“If someday my dreams come true, the world that I live in will always be radiant and never be dim with prejudice.”**

and they, in turn, become part of our own intellectual and professional odysseys.

### **Building on Student Stories**

How, then, can we honor students’ stories and experiences? Because teaching is about the creative alchemy and open-ended potential of a particular community of learners, there is no easy blueprint to follow. Instead, I suggest several approaches that can help educators develop a stance which supports and builds on immigrant students’ narratives.

■ *Familiarize yourself with books about the experiences of immigrant children and families.* Books about immigration validate students’ experiences and provide teachers with models and a springboard from which to solicit students’ own narratives. There are a number of wonderful examples, including Francisco Jimenez’s autobiographical novella, *The Circuit*, and the picture book *My Diary from Here to There/Mi diario de aqui hasta alla*, written by Amada Irma Perez

and illustrated by Maya Christina Gonzalez. Even for younger students, teachers may carefully select passages from adult novels, such as Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* or Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican*, both of which address experiences and histories excluded from the standardized curriculum. (See “Stories About Immigration” on p. 51 for more examples.)

■ *Allow students to make canonical literature their own.* Nobel Laureate and St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott stated, “The English language is nobody’s special property. It is the property of the imagination.” Students should be exposed to multicultural literature, but they should also have meaningful interactions with the Western canon. For example, William Butler Yeats’s “The Stolen Child” inspired many of my students to describe the nostalgia they felt for their homelands while living in the “fairyl-land” of the United States. I have also worked with secondary students who rewrote *Hamlet* as a bilingual script and set it in the context of the U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico.

■ *Learn from and provide space for students’ own rich storytelling traditions.* For some students, refugee quilts are a part of their family’s history. Stitched by hand, the quilts illustrate the flight from poverty and war and are found in such regions as the Andes, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia. Some students may have talk-story as a tradition, the Hawaiian

practice of sharing anecdotes through informal conversation. Some may be familiar with testimonial, a form of bearing witness to and documenting persecution and violence through firsthand accounts. Some may hail from West African griot, or oral storytelling, traditions.

In my classroom, students performed stories about social issues relevant to their everyday lives, such as overcrowded schools and tracking, using drama inspired by *El Teatro Campesino*, a form of political theater founded by migrant farm workers, and *Chicana Political Theatre* (Medina & Campano, 2006). In conjunction with the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, muralist and educator Eliseo Art Silva has developed innovative ways for children to reconstruct memory and tell visual stories through public art. For example, students dramatize scenes from their lives and bring in cultural artifacts from home that are visually incorporated into murals.

■ *Incorporate aspects of popular culture into the classroom.* Many youth are using alternative forms of creative expression, art, and music—such as underground hip-hop—to innovatively convey their knowledge and engage in trenchant social commentary. The hip-hop duo the Blue Scholars has tracks such as “The Distance,” which speaks to the challenges, contradictions, and disillusionments of immigration. The lyrics and beat offer a counter story to the conventional, triumphant immigrant narrative of upward mobility through hard work and sacrifice.

Literacy researchers (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005) have recently done some groundbreaking research on the value of incorporating popular culture into the classroom. They point out the intellectual merit and sophistication found in many forms of youth



cultural expression as well as the ways in which teachers can translate knowledge of popular culture into conventional academic standards and success.

■ *Share one's own stories.* Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1994) poignantly conveys the importance for elders—and this includes teachers—to make themselves vulnerable by passing along wisdom through narrative. Morrison retells a tale of a blind woman who initially responds

to the provocations of two young visitors with silence. The young people, in turn, respond by asking, “Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong?”

Teachers might, from time to time, step out of their institutional roles and share with students their own stories of struggle and change. I have shared with my students how my family members have had to overcome deeply rooted inequality, such as anti-miscegenation and Jim Crow laws, to provide for future generations. The students were able to see their personal struggles as part of larger, ongoing legacies of dissent and social change. Sharing stories like this signals to students both the human and academic value of personal experience.

■ *Acknowledge student narratives as intellectual resources.* Some of my students' most powerful writing began as oral stories they told me during “unstructured” academic time. I invited them to compose these stories more formally. This work often took place outside the confines of the mandated curriculum in what I call “the second classroom” (Campano, 2007), pedagogical spaces on the margins of the school day—before school, after school, during lunch, and at community events. Students need to know that their storied knowledge counts in school, is part of the intellectual dialogue of the classroom, and can serve as a departure point for further

inquiry. Teachers can promote these understandings by continually communicating to students that their experiences matter.

■ *Be mindful that stories are told within social and political contexts.* Not all stories may be appropriate for all audiences. Some expose students to risk. For example, why would a student share her family's migrant narrative if she is worried that her parents might subsequently be deported? Or why would a student use his native language if it is frowned on in school?

Stories are a form of rhetoric. An important aspect of storytelling involves

and the cultivation of wisdom. This opportunity is squandered if schools continue to perceive the robust diversity of our classrooms as a problem and if a single voice determines and standardizes instruction. One of the most powerful interventions we can make on behalf of our immigrant, migrant, and refugee students is to view them for what they rightfully are: cosmopolitan intellectuals whose perspectives and experiences edify all members of the classroom.

It has been more than 60 years since my grandparents moved into the building where they would eventually

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knowing what to say, how to say it, whom to say it to, and in what situations and for what purposes. Teachers need to create safe spaces where students know that their stories won't be used against them and where students feel empowered to cultivate their own critical perspectives. As Stephanie P. Carter (2001) has discussed, our students' silences tell us as much as their words do about how schools may exclude their points of view.

### Robust Diversity

Literary critic Satya Mohanty (1997) argues that a "robust multiculturalism" is a requisite for "inquiry into human good" (p. 241). Urban—and, increasingly, suburban and rural—classrooms are one of the few public spaces where individuals from a range of backgrounds coexist and, ideally, have as their goal not merely the acquisition of information but the production of knowledge

raise seven children. The demographic makeup of the complex has shifted dramatically over the years. My grandmother, approaching 90, still lives in the same apartment, and her neighbors are of Tibetan, Columbian, Irish, Mexican, and Hungarian heritages, to name a few. There has even been a recent influx of pioneer yuppies.

When new people move to the neighborhood, they are warmly welcomed. In addition, the neighbors have developed a social arrangement that fosters cooperation and care for the neediest. It's not a perfect place; the building is old, and poverty and inequality still exist. But there has been social progress. There is now, truly, a plurality of "voices from the village" and many new stories to tell to one another, from the elders as well as the younger generations, who file to school each morning to mix and mingle with perhaps the most diverse student population on the planet. **EL**

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*Author's note:* I borrow the phrase "voices from the village" from Sharon K. Miller, codirector of the Southern Arizona Writing Project, who coined it for the first annual Arizona Teacher Research Conference. This article is inspired by Sharon's tireless work on behalf of teachers and students. I would also like to thank Maria Paula Ghiso from the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education for her thoughtful suggestions.

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