



HEIS News

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ARTICLES

TELLING OUR STORIES IN PICTURES AND WORDS: DEVELOPING EMPATHY WITHIN THE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY AND BEYOND

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"I feel proud of myself because I got to make all of the things I wanted to tell everyone. Because people wants to know how I lived in Burundi."

—Aaliyah, arrived from Burundi in 2010

"I do it for the people. They need to see how I am in my country. You know, it's not good in my country."

—Ameer, arrived from Iraq in 2010

"I learned that the United States is made out of immigrants...I never knew that, and it was just really interesting to me because it just made me think about everybody."

—Keegan, whose ancestor arrived from Poland in 1912

These are just a few of the heartfelt reflections from students Grades 3–5 following the completion of their own family immigration stories, which they carefully crafted in pictures and in words (Olshansky, 2015). Newcomers reconstructed their family's recent journey from their native country to the United States; students whose families immigrated long ago reconstructed the imagined journey of their first ancestor to travel to America. Though students' pride in their published books was palpable, what also became apparent was the way this bookmaking project transformed not only the culture of the classroom and the school community, but also that of the greater community beyond the school walls.

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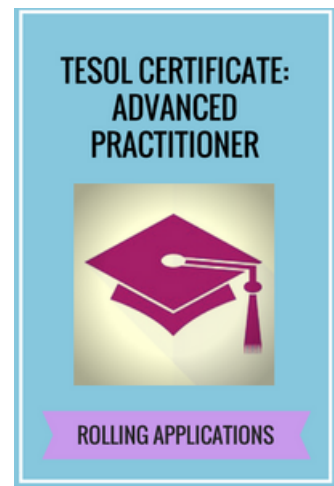
Abdullah displaying his work.

A Universal Language

The process used to create family immigration stories is known as “image-making within the writing process.” This collage-based approach to teaching writing and strengthening reading was originally validated by the U.S. Department of Education as an innovative and effective literacy program in 1993 (Olshansky, 2008). Because pictures serve as a universal language, the image-making process has found a natural home among English learners and their teachers. It has also been used by classroom teachers who recognize the diversity of learners within their own classroom community. Proven effective for a wide range of learners (Frankel, 2011) and easily integrated into the social studies and science curriculum, this enticing pictures-first approach to writing has reached new heights of personal engagement when applied to crafting family immigration stories.



Kara looking over her work.



A Unique Visual Approach to Literacy Learning

Unlike most approaches to teaching writing which focus on the written word, image-making within the writing process is designed to support students who, for one reason or another, have difficulty with written or spoken language. Visual tools for thinking, developing, and recording ideas are woven throughout the process.

Students began this immigration unit by watching a short video entitled *Our Stories in Pictures and Words as Told by Immigrant and Refugee Children* (Olshansky, 2010). During this 13-minute film, students are invited into the classroom of English learners in the process of creating their own family immigration stories using collage from hand-painted papers. While viewers were introduced to the process and the stunning books the English learners created, they also learned about the circumstances that resulted in families recently fleeing their country. This awareness helped set the stage for students to create their own image-making immigration stories. English learners saw that it was alright to share their stories and, in fact, witnessed the pride fellow newcomers experienced after creating their own books. As recent arrivals, they understood that it was an important, and particularly meaningful, personal accomplishment. In the video, Priyanka reflected, "In Nepal we didn't do like that. We don't have color to do like that. And we didn't have paper, and we didn't glue like that. I didn't think in America I do like that, to make that book" (Olshansky, 2010).

For students whose ancestors arrived long ago, watching the film of children their own age sharing their stories was particularly moving. Attending school in a rural New Hampshire community that lacks diversity, students found the immigration stories of their peers poignant and eye opening. Third grader Lizzy confessed, "I actually didn't know that there are people still immigrating and coming today." Leah acknowledged, "I learned that the Webster kids went through things that I could never imagine." Liam added, "If I were an immigrant and immigrating to a different country it would be really tough" (Olshansky, 2015). This was the first of many discussions in which students with well-established roots in this country displayed empathy and compassion for those students who had recently immigrated.

During this partnership between students from two very disparate communities, English learners discovered that almost everyone in the United States originally came from somewhere else. This helped to establish some common ground with others in their community. As for those students whose ancestors arrived long ago, most had never before considered where their families originated. This triggered a natural curiosity about their family stories. Alec explained, "Well I knew that the Pilgrims came for religious reasons, so I was wondering about my family, where did they come from and why" (Olshansky, 2015).

Quality Picture Books as Mentor Texts

Because the image-making process is designed to meet the needs of a wide range of learners, it relies heavily on use of the visual and tactile modalities. Teachers use quality picture books as mentor texts. These books, often historical fiction, depict their content in both pictures and words. This is particularly helpful for English learners, though the illustrations in these books are used as visual resources by all students when it comes time to depict various aspects of their own or their ancestors' journey.



Dennis and Ayat in discussion.

Constructing Story Shape by Shape

During this 2-month project, students undertook in earnest the process of reconstructing their own or their ancestral family immigration story. Unique to image-making within the writing process, students began by creating their own portfolios of hand-painted textured papers. Using a variety of simple art techniques, students experimented with color and texture in a systematic yet open-ended way. For our newcomers, some of whom had never had access to paints before, the process was particularly compelling.

Following explicit modeling of the process of crafting an immigration story page by page, students began cutting into their hand-painted papers and laying shapes onto a background paper. With the aid of thoughtfully designed storyboards, students created a sequence of collage images that captured key moments along the journey. Because of the universality of pictures, this pictures-first approach allows students to secure their ideas on paper before having to tackle creating the written text. This makes story drafting particularly accessible to English learners.



Anna reviewing her work.

Reading the Pictures

Once students' ideas are glued to the page, they are invited to read their collage images to access details and description. As students point to each collage and read that picture, the oral rehearsal process helps students to "practice their story." It also helps English learners identify and learn the words they will need to tell, and ultimately write, their stories.

The Power of Perspective

Both sets of stories, those created by English learners as well as those created by native English speakers, are written in the first person. Though this is an obvious choice for those who actually experienced the journey, writing from the first-person forces students who are writing ancestral stories to imagine and relive the journey of their ancestor as if it were their own. This helps to deepen their understanding of the immigrant experience.



Prajina showing her work.

Finding Common Ground

The experience of creating their own carefully crafted family story was personally meaningful for all students, and opportunities to share these family immigration stories resulted in positive impacts far beyond what was originally imagined. Newcomers and U.S.-born students discovered that their family stories had many similarities. Alec observed, “I noticed that today’s immigrants and immigrants from the past faced the same challenges.” He noted that many came for “pretty much the same reasons...for religious freedom, need more food, bad choices were being made in the country...” (Olshansky, 2015).

As our native English speakers tried to imagine the experiences of their first ancestors to come to America, they developed deep empathy and respect for those students who had recently arrived in this country. Zoey shared, “I think that the people who came across were really brave and stuff. I couldn’t really imagine doing that myself” (Jones, 2011).

When the students’ books were placed on display, other students, teachers, administrators, parents, and members of the greater community developed greater awareness and respect for what our newcomers have gone through. While the parents of English learners were visibly proud of the accomplishments of their sons and daughters, other parents and adults within the community were humbled by what they learned about the

challenges today's immigrant families face. They were also reminded that their ancestors experienced similar struggles and once benefited from the opportunities afforded them at the time of their arrival.



Zoey working hard at writing.

Lessons Learned

At this time in history when immigration has been an explosive political issue and some politicians seem to have forgotten that they are here today because their ancestors were once welcomed into this country, this classroom immigration project served not only to develop greater awareness but also to build compassion and empathy within the community. Eight-year-old Alec, wise beyond his years, reminds us, "I learned that if our ancestors didn't come over here at the exact period of time that they did, pretty much all of our lives would have been different." Leah realizes that if her grandfather hadn't arrived exactly when he did, "he wouldn't have married who he did so I wouldn't have been born" (Olshansky, 2015). For English learners and U.S.-born students alike, this deep dive into the study of immigration, in the most personal way, provided students with a deeper understanding of the role their families play in shaping history.

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