



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, February 2026

"Putting children at the center of learning."

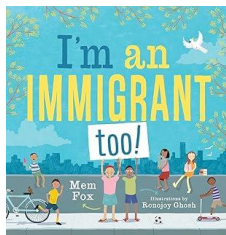
We All Have an Immigrant Story

Immigration is at the forefront of our nation's news and minds right now. Our children are hearing it, too. How can we help children understand their own and our nation's immigration history and tie this topic to our social studies standards, class meetings, and current events lessons in school?

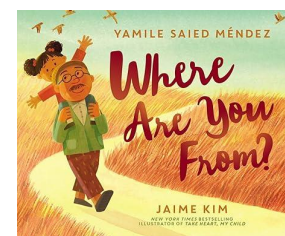


My (Krista's) grandfather was born in America but spoke Swedish for the first years of his life. His parents, my great-grandfather and grandmother- who spoke only Swedish her entire life, immigrated for the opportunity to farm in Iowa. Many Swedish immigrants in rural Iowa came to America at the turn of the century to take advantage of the Homestead Act. My grandfather learned English in school, much like many of my multilingual students do now. His parents also sent him to "Swede School" in the summertime because it was important to them that he maintain his Swedish culture, heritage, and language.

Dana's ancestors immigrated from Scotland to Ireland and then to the United States in the early 1800's - one hundred years before mine. They weren't Catholic, which was problematic in Ireland, and came to America for religious freedom. I imagine that each of us can share our own family stories. I predict each of us is either an English learner, has learned/is learning another language, or has ancestors who were English learners or learners of another language. We can pull from these experiences in our approach to classroom instruction.

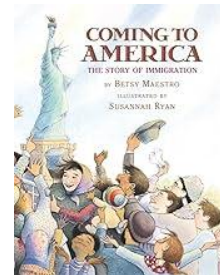


In the United States today, 49% of our student population is minority, or non-White. Many of our minority students are multilingual learners, meaning their guardian reports that they speak one or more languages other than English at home. Some of these students qualify for English-language support in school based on their English proficiency. At the same time, only 20% of teachers are minorities (non-White). This discrepancy in ethnicity between



teachers and students requires us to be intentional about culturally relevant teaching and to view culture, race, and ethnicity as assets for classroom learning.

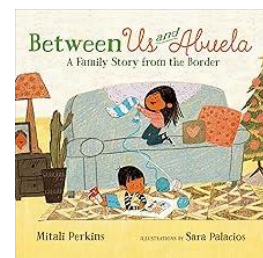
A main tenet of constructivist teaching is meeting children where they are. With multicultural and multilingual learners, we start with what is known and build from there. Naturally, then, it is imperative that teachers embrace a culturally responsive approach to curriculum reflecting our current society - the one we live in and the one for which we are preparing our students.



We all have an immigrant story. Our multicultural society is part of our past, present, and future, and many social studies and geography teaching standards address this topic in American and World History, Geography, and Community studies. When I reflect on the students in my classrooms over the 30+ years I have been teaching, I recognize that I have taught students of color whose families immigrated to the United States 100+ years prior, as well as students whose families immigrated that very same school year.

As a teaching tool, I rely heavily on children's literature to help students understand our nation's immigrant roots and history as well as life in America today. These stories help us develop a classroom community where we learn about the cultures of our students, our school, our community, and beyond. Well-written, original stories can help us have this conversation with our students. Here are some books from my own collection that can be used in the classroom to teach history and culture. Most center on a child's experience, as I have found that high-quality children's literature often tells a larger story through one child's eyes, making the story relatable to the reader(s).

Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border by Mitali Perkins & Sara Palacios

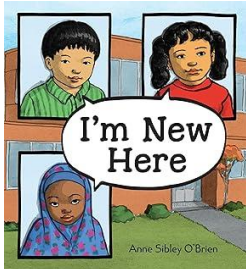


The story starts, "Abuela stars in all of Mama's stories, but my only memory is a voice calling me 'angelita.'" We haven't seen my grandmother in five years. But today is La Posada Sin Fronteras, and we are taking a bus to the border to meet her." This family takes a long drive to the border every Christmas to celebrate Las Posadas, honoring Mary and Joseph's journey to the inn at Bethlehem. Through the border fence, they exchange gifts and catch up with family in Mexico. Gorgeous illustrations depict the journey through the child's eyes.



Coming to America: The Story of Immigration by Betsy Maestro and Susannah Ryan

Focused on the developing history of immigration to America, this book begins with the first nomadic settlers and moves through the centuries, telling the stories of each major wave of immigrants who contributed to the fabric of the United States.



I'm New Here by Anne Sibley O'Brien

“At their new school, everything is different...

Back in Guatemala, Maria knew the language.

Back in Korea. Jim could read and write.

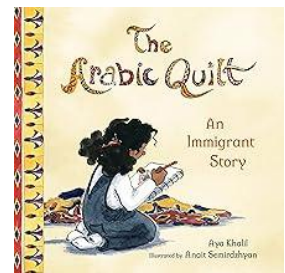
Back in Somalia, Fatimah felt like she fit in.

Now, in the United States, there are new words and new ways. But with a little support - and a lot of courage - Maria, Jim, and Fatimah begin to find their way.”

When the author was seven, she moved from the U.S. to South Korea. She was raised bilingual and bicultural and has cofounded a project that promotes the use of children’s literature centering on new immigrants and their experiences.

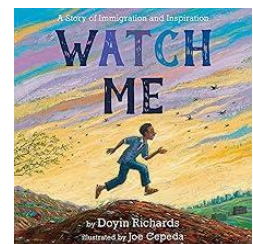
The Arabic Quilt: An Immigrant Story by Aya Khalil and Anait Semirdzhyan

Kanzi’s family has moved from Egypt to America. On her first day of school, she leaves her kofta sandwich for lunch at home because she wants to fit in. When Kanzi’s mother brings her sandwich to school, students start to tease her. A treasured quilt made by Kanzi’s grandmother gives comfort to Kanzi and, ultimately, helps her find new friends.



Watch Me: A Story of Immigration and Inspiration by Doyin Richards and Joe Cepeda

“Joe grew up in Sierra Leone, a small West African country. He had nice manners, got good grades, and, like you, always listened to his parents. Well, maybe not always. Joe had goals and dreams, like you...” This story is a tribute to the author’s father, sharing how he came to America and, through hard work and determination, succeeded when many thought he would fail.

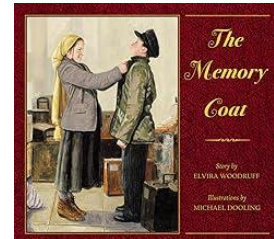


Where Are You From? By Yamile Saied Mendez and Jaime Kim

The story of a child and her abuelo finding the answer to the yammering question many of us are often asked: *Where are you from?* The story offers an answer that is larger than we think.

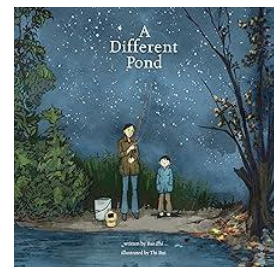
The Memory Coat by Elvira Woodruff and Michael Dooling

A Jewish family immigrates to America at the turn-of-the century. Grandma Bubba tries to convince Grisha, her grandson, to leave behind an old coat that might prevent him from being accepted at Ellis Island upon the family's arrival in America. The coat is special, and he refuses to leave it behind.



A Different Pond by Bao Phi and Thi Bui

The author, a Vietnamese writer, tells the story of learning about his father's homeland, Vietnam, while going fishing with his father as a child in Minneapolis. The rhythm of community and conversation at the pond, and the pride in helping provide fish for dinner on an ordinary day, make this book extraordinary.



I'm an Immigrant, Too! By Mem Fox and Ronojoy Ghosh

What journeys we have travelled, from countries near and far!

Together now, we live in peace, beneath the Southern Star.

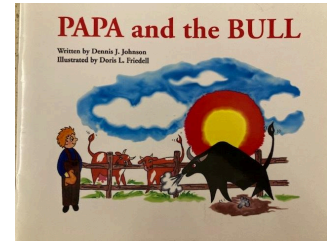
Inspired by the plight of immigrants around the world, Mem Fox was moved to write this song-like exploration of the many ways immigrants have enriched her home country, Australia.

These examples are a drop in the bucket. You can find many, many more titles with a range of immigrant stories. Reading and discussing immigrant stories with our classroom community helps all of us build on our understanding of our community, state, nation, and, most importantly, our neighbors. When we tell our own immigrant story, others feel comfortable telling theirs. We become a community of learners who all have a story.

Now back to my immigrant story. My uncle retold an event in our family's history in a children's book. The story is about his father as a child and his father's father (who immigrated from Sweden for land and prosperity), taking a bull to market. I heard my grandfather tell this story about his childhood many times, as did my mother before me. The book, titled ***Papa and the Bull***, written by my uncle, Dennis Johnson, was



illustrated by Doris Friedell. When my grandfather was little, around 1910, his father asked him to join him in taking a bull to market. The story explains the exciting details my grandfather would share with us about when he was young, from feeling grown-up and honored to be asked for his help, to the long walk and new sights of the city, selling the bull for a good profit, and getting a treat at the end of the long day - strawberry pop that delightfully fizzed up his nose.



My grandfather died in 1976 and his father in 1938, but this story lives on in our memories, our hearts, and the wonderful book my uncle penned for future generations. It is a piece of my immigrant story. We would love to hear yours.



We All Have an Immigrant Story Reflection Questions:

- ★ What is your immigrant story?
- ★ How do you embrace the history, culture and ethnicities of your classroom and school community?
- ★ How can you incorporate immigrant stories into your social studies and social-emotional learning curricula?

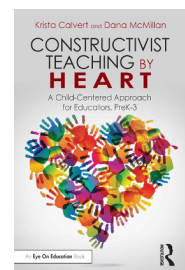
We want to hear from you!

*Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **We All Have an Immigrant Story**, [here](#).*

PONDER BOX

“Classrooms become inclusive when teachers use texts and instructional practices to honor students’ cultures, communities, and the world. In classroom conversations throughout the school day, a constructivist teacher welcomes and affirms the cultural diversity of the class.”

-Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3, p. 130.



Teaching with High-Quality Children's Books

I have been reading recently about middle and high school students marching (sometimes walking out of class) for their beliefs, which can raise questions for some of the younger students we teach. Some students have concerns about their families' immigration status. Others worry about their neighbors. One way to discuss this topic is to use children's books that help students understand their own options for standing up for others or for what they believe. Here are a few outstanding read-alouds that could provide a starting point for the conversation.



Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here!](#)

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