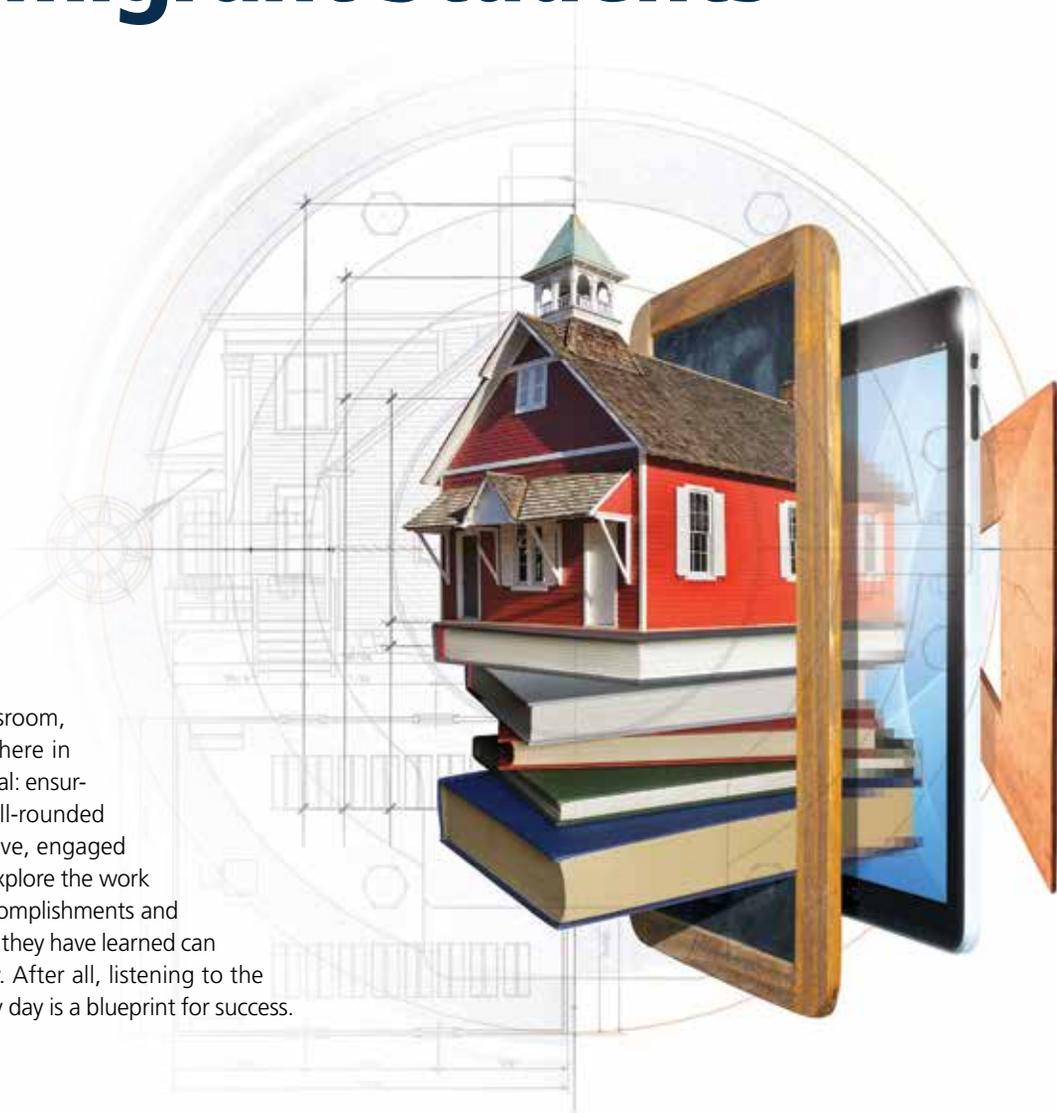


# Celebrating the Voices of Immigrant Students



Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

BY MARY ANN ZEHR

**S**tories matter. They illustrate our successes and failures, joys and heartbreaks. Telling our stories helps us understand ourselves and each other, and build community. That’s why storytelling belongs in the classroom, especially mine. All of my students are English language learners (ELLs), and many have experienced trauma in the process of immigration. Telling their stories helps them to heal and to understand who they are. That, in turn, helps make them resilient and, no less important, helps them progress academically.

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My school’s leaders stress that I need to teach my students how to write analytically. They ask teachers of all disciplines for samples of formal “evidence-based writing” several times a year to ensure students can produce such work. I agree that high school students need to learn how to write analytically so they can succeed in college and careers, and so I assign my students several analytical essays each year. But to support them in their social and emotional development, I give them opportunities to tell their personal stories too.\*

In doing so, my students realize they don’t experience the angst of immigration and adolescence alone. They see that many of their peers have also survived trauma or have had similar difficulties adjusting to a new school or a new language and culture.

\*For more on social and emotional development, see the article on page 16.

Sharing in this way also can improve their fluency in English and lets them see themselves as writers, which builds their confidence and builds community as well. I hope this article encourages other teachers to assign this kind of writing, too.

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I teach English and history in the International Academy at the Francis L. Cardozo Education Campus in Washington, D.C. The academy, part of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, enrolls students who have arrived in the United States in the last several years. Many crossed the U.S.-Mexico border as unaccompanied minors, coming from El Salvador, Honduras, or Guatemala, but some come from other countries, such as Eritrea,

I began to incorporate storytelling during my first year at Cardozo in classes for 9th- and 10th-graders. For a unit on immigration, students read excerpts of the book *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother*, by Sonia Nazario. Spanish-speaking students who had just arrived read the excerpts in Spanish as well.

The book tells the true story of an impoverished teenager from Honduras who rides freight trains across Mexico and crosses the Rio Grande to reach his mother in the United States. Enrique's journey is treacherous. While Enrique is riding a freight train, some men beat him up badly enough that he almost dies. Eventually, he recovers from his injuries and reunites with his mother in North Carolina, after not seeing her for more than a decade.



## Telling our stories helps us understand ourselves and each other, and build community.

Sierra Leone, and Vietnam. My students' lives in this country are not easy. Quite a few juggle work and school. And those who are undocumented feel especially isolated amid the current anti-immigrant rhetoric.

When I first started working at Cardozo's International Academy in 2015, I hesitated to ask students to share their stories. I worried it might create distrust in the classroom or cause them to relive trauma. But when I eventually—at first, cautiously, and then, over time, more confidently—provided open-ended opportunities for them to talk about their lives, they responded positively.

Writing stories has played a powerful role in my own life. One of the reasons I majored in English in college was to explore my identity through writing. I was raised as a Mennonite, and some of my family's cultural practices differed from those of my peers in the public schools I attended. My elementary and secondary teachers did not create opportunities for students to write and share their stories. Nevertheless, as a child I kept personal journals, and in college I had chances to write and reflect on my life in assignments. Writing helped me decide which parts of Mennonite culture to keep and which to discard. I want to give my students, who may feel torn between cultures, an opportunity to sort out their identities through writing.

After earning a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in journalism, I became a journalist. For 14 years, I wrote for *Education Week*, a national publication focused on schools. There, I interviewed young people to illustrate how education policy plays out in practice. For more than a decade, I specialized in writing about ELLs, and it was their stories that prompted me to become a teacher. One student I recall meeting was Morry Bamba, a teenager from the West African nation of Guinea. Bamba, who hadn't attended school in his home country, began to learn English—and even how to read—at the age of 15, after moving to the United States and enrolling in a New York City public school. He expressed immense gratitude for how his teachers had helped him, and I wondered if I too could make a difference in young people's lives through teaching. In 2011, I became a teacher of English as a second language in the District of Columbia Public Schools.

In response to the readings, I asked students to share with the class something that happened on their trip to the United States. Quite a few said that, like Enrique, they had traveled on freight trains to cross Mexico, on their way to the United States. Although some chose to relay details as unrevealing as "I ate Mexican food," others discussed their journeys at length. One student recalled the three hours he traveled while crammed inside a box in the luggage area of a bus. Another student captivated us with his story of a Mexican cartel kidnapping him and demanding a ransom. His parents, who lived in the United States, sent money to the kidnappers to attain his release. Given that he had survived this harrowing experience, he relished the chance to share it. This student often wasn't engaged in class, but I was struck by how animated he became while telling his story. When he and his peers shared such traumatic experiences, I listened respectfully and always made sure to tell each one of them, "I'm sorry that happened to you, and I'm glad you are now safe."

Based on *Enrique's Journey*, I asked students to write an essay on whether, given the myriad risks, immigrants should come to the United States. Everyone in the class wrote that immigrants should come. Many shared that immigrants from Central America leave their countries because they feel as if they have no choice: they are poor and want a better life, or they fear gang violence. In assigning the essays, I gave students the option not to share their own stories if they felt uncomfortable doing so; they could write about their own experiences or those of classmates they had interviewed, or they could use information about immigrants from other sources.

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The following school year, I switched to teaching English to 11th- and 12th-graders, and I incorporated another project to engage students in writing their stories. I called it a "collective diary." I particularly liked how this project enabled students to reflect on any aspect of their lives. While some students chose

to write about immigration, others wrote about completely different topics, such as their experiences working in D.C. restaurants.

Seniors kept diaries in class about daily events. They also studied those written by other teenagers. They read diary entries collected by Alexandra Zapruder in the book *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*. I asked students to reflect on this essential question while reading: "How do the diary writers express their humanity?" After we finished the unit, I "published" diary entries from 46 seniors in a collective diary titled "Everyday Cardozo."

How did I ensure this unit was challenging? For one, the diary entries included sophisticated syntax and vocabulary. Students had to look up new words and learn how to use them. Also, I engaged students in discussions as part of a Socratic seminar.

"You may not think your lives are interesting, but they are," I told them, urging them to imitate the writers of *Salvaged Pages* by sharing facts, emotions, and opinions. "What do you want to tell the world?" The deep reflections of the teenagers from this book inspired my students to engage in some deep reflection of their own.

"I want Americans to know that as an immigrant, I also have feelings," one of my students wrote. "I can feel the pain of being far away from my family. I also get scared, knowing I can be deported to my home country. People in this country don't know that if we come here it is because we don't have other options."

As was true of the diary writers from *Salvaged Pages*, my students didn't sugarcoat their experiences. In the book, Moshe Flinker, who was living in exile in Belgium after fleeing his home country of Holland, wrote, "During recent days an emptiness has formed inside

me. Nothing motivates me to do anything or write anything, and

no new ideas enter my mind; everything is as if asleep."

With a similar melancholic tone, one of my students wrote about his feelings: "Some days I feel sad to be in this country. I feel alone. I miss my family a lot. When things get hard I just want to talk with somebody. ... I feel really tired many days but I have to work. I have to do something. Bills won't get paid by themselves. I really wish my real family could be here with me. I am really sure that could help me a lot."

Some diary entries were lighthearted. I learned that a common experience of my students who work as food runners in restaurants is to accidentally take a plate of food to the wrong table. Some managers take such mistakes in stride. Others don't.

Zapruder visited my classes through the PEN/Faulkner Writers-in-Schools program,\* and students discussed the book with her. They shared that they could identify with the fear and uncertainty expressed by some of the diarists during the Holocaust because they also feel uncertainty and fear about their future. (Zapruder visited in February 2017, when students were hyper-aware of President Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric.)

For the collective diary, I asked each student to submit three entries, and I chose one or two from each person to publish. I gave students a draft copy and asked for their approval to publish it. I wanted students to feel safe in sharing, so I didn't include their names. When one student decided he didn't want to have a diary entry published, I honored his request. I made 70 copies of the publication and slipped each one into a shiny pocket folder provided by my administrators. My students agreed I could invite teachers and staff in our school to open houses for readings of "Everyday Cardozo."

On open-house day, I set out juice, cookies, and muffins and displayed the publication on a table dressed up with a tapestry from Guatemala and a bouquet of red-orange roses. Attendance by the seniors on that day was stronger than it had been for a couple of weeks. Some students chose to read aloud their own diary entries, but most read entries written by others. Several visitors, including the principal, attended.

I could tell students were excited at the prospect of sharing their work. During the open houses, they used formal manners, introducing themselves before they read, applauding for each other, and listening attentively. No one refused to stand up and read a diary entry, and no one betrayed to the visitors who had written what. To me, that signaled their respect for the stories and for each other. When one staff member visited a class after the students had completed their readings, the students volunteered to repeat the program just for her.

After the open houses, every student took home a copy of "Everyday Cardozo." Over the years, I've noticed that if students don't care about a text or handout, they "accidentally" leave it behind. But that didn't happen this time. Some students even asked if they could take home individual roses from the bouquet on the publication table, and of course I told them they could. I could think of no better way for them to capture the moment. To me, the flowers fittingly symbolized their budding recognition of the beauty of their own self-expression. □



\*For more about this program, see [www.penfaulkner.org/writers-in-schools](http://www.penfaulkner.org/writers-in-schools).