

# Immigration in Childhood: Using Picture Books to Cope

MARCIA BAGHBAN

**ABSTRACT.** The United States is currently experiencing the largest wave of immigration in its history. This contemporary immigration is unprecedented in its diversity of ethnicity, class, and countries of origin, and large urban areas are no longer alone in absorbing arrivals. The author reviews children's picture books about dilemmas that immigrant children face, such as being different, coping with great and small changes, responding to one's name, learning a new language, relating to previous generations and traditions, maintaining ties with distant relatives, and visiting their homelands. Classroom materials relevant to the social and cultural experiences of children generate interest in and enthusiasm about learning. When teachers include books about the negotiation of another culture in the curriculum, children learn through reading that stories can be about people like them, that stories of their experiences are worthy of being in a book, and that other children have felt the way they do.

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*MARCIA BAGHBAN is a professor of elementary education at Queens College of The City University of New York.*

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**T**he United States is now in the midst of the largest wave of immigration in its history (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001, 55). This contemporary immigration is unprecedented in the diversity of ethnicity, class, and countries of origin of the immigrants. New York City, for example, is experiencing one of the greatest periods of immigration in its history (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 2). Nearly two-thirds of the city's residents are immigrants and their children. Of all school-age children, 48 percent come from immigrant-headed households (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 2), and 56 percent of New York's 1.9 million children have at least one foreign-born parent. More than one hundred forty languages and two hundred countries are represented in its schools, with more than 13 percent of public school students learning English as a second language (Milano Graduate School 2004). Half of New York's eight million residents speak a language other than English. Spanish speakers are the most numerous, but some of the other languages are French, French Creole, Italian, Portuguese, German, Yiddish, Greek, Russian, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Armenian, Persian, Hindi, Urdu, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Cambodian,

Thai, Laotian, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Hebrew, Arabic, Hungarian, and various African, Pacific Islander, Scandinavian, and Native American languages (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

Large urban areas such as New York City are not alone in absorbing arrivals from other countries. Indiana, Nebraska, Kansas, Georgia, Arkansas, and Oregon have seen increasing numbers of newly arrived English language learners as well. One-fifth of all school-age children in America are immigrant children, and they speak more than one hundred languages (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001).

## Problems Immigrants Face

Many immigrants enter the United States because their families are fleeing persecution or searching for a better economic life. Whatever the motivation, the act of immigration can destabilize family life. Children may be left behind in the care of relatives, or they may be sent ahead while the rest of the family prepares for the journey. Years may pass before the nuclear family is reunited. In addition, in the new country, adults and children assume new roles and experience new ways to relate to each other. By any measure, immigration is one of

the most stressful events a family can undergo (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001).

Some immigrants are well-off financially, but, for many working immigrants, poverty is a long-term reality. Recent immigrants especially tend to be very poor. For example, 40 percent of legal permanent residents entering New York City after 1996 had incomes below the federal poverty level, a rate double the city as whole. More than one-third of adult immigrants with limited English proficiency had incomes below the poverty line in 1999–2000 (Milano Graduate School 2004). Many immigrants who arrive with exaggerated expectations of opportunity must come to terms with a starker reality (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001).

One-third of children with immigrant parents live in families that have difficulty affording food. Fifty-seven percent of New York City's children of immigrants live in low-income households, and poverty is closely linked to limited ability to speak English (Milano Graduate School 2004). Language leads to the construction of selfhood through socialization, but ties to a heritage and identity are brought about through the heart as well as the mind (Gonzalez 2001). Faced with such emotional ties, children may feel disloyal learning a new language while simultaneously recognizing that English proficiency is necessary for the survival of their families. Moreover, without the sense of cultural competence, or *map of experience*, that language brings, children can feel disoriented (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001).

These survival issues may inhibit children's academic progress as they struggle to adapt to their new life contexts and inevitable cultural differences. In their homes, children may no longer fit in, because they usually change behaviors and attitudes faster than adults. At school, immigrant children not only feel different, but also are different, and they are often reminded of how different they are, even by other immigrant children. The English language is the family's personal mountain, but language is only one of the

changes with which children must cope. Children also experience rapid daily changes while relating to the traditions of previous generations and maintaining ties with distant relatives, absentee parents, and a homeland they may not remember. The ability to draw on a variety of coping strategies is an important asset.

Few researchers have systematically studied the psychological experiences of immigrant children (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001, 66). Moving between the worlds of school and home, children need examples of other children who have navigated such issues. For elementary school children, picture books can help with their acculturation to the United States. However, many children's books include "a lot of folklore and legend and very little of the real life issues or the day to day lives" (Aaronsohn 2000, 2). In this article, I highlight books that focus on the day-to-day experiences of immigrant children and discuss important issues of learning how to live in a new world.

### Being Different

All children live between the worlds of home and school, but for immigrant children, there is a clear disparity between their home and school worlds. Behaviors such as lack of eye contact and soft speech that are appropriate for children at home may not help the children succeed in classrooms. At school, differences in clothing, lunches, hair maintenance, and head covers make them stand out, even in mixed urban schools. Immigrant children face an environment that reminds them that they do not fit in and their achievement is precarious. They must learn how to balance the worlds of home and school.

The picture book *Nadia's Hands* (English 1999) captures a Pakistani child's ambivalence about her desire to participate in her aunt's wedding, which requires henna designs to be painted on her hands, and her reluctance to go to school with the fading brown designs, which her classmates might see as dirt. Caught between her participation in two worlds and trying to keep the members

of both worlds happy, Nadia is living through a situation that immigrant children may face. The resolution is simple and involves a sensitive teacher. The book prompts class discussion about feeling different and about henna—why Nadia must wear henna to the wedding, what the designs look like, and why henna stains. The children make connections between social studies and science and can add examples of when they had to do something, wear something, or eat something that made them feel trapped between their school and home lives.

Many immigrants live in neighborhoods with other immigrants of the same or similar backgrounds. Seeking out others with similar backgrounds provides a source of comfort in what is often perceived as an uncomfortable or even hostile environment. However, when immigrants comprise the only foreign-born family in a neighborhood, children can feel uncomfortable in their lives after school. *The Ugly Vegetables* (Lin 2001) is a story about feeling different when a child's home is unlike the homes around it. A girl's mother plants a garden, which makes the girl feel good until she sees that their shovels, irrigation, and sprouts are not like those of her neighbors. She becomes particularly embarrassed in the neighborhood when their vegetables appear as lumpy, bumpy, and yellow. When the vegetables ripen, her mother makes soup and invites the neighbors over to share the soup. They come to share the soup, and some neighbors bring flowers from their gardens. Sharing a meal promotes friendship and knowledge about one another among the neighbors, but readers may wonder if such a meal would actually occur. Economically, the family would probably need its produce and could not afford to share it with people who might waste it. The neighbors may not be interested in getting to know the family or in sampling their unusual food. If the neighbors came, they may not like the soup, and the meal may be awkward. In addition, they might not be interested in the names of the vegetables or the soup recipe. The story

presents a lovely idea, but it is fraught with unrealistic overtones.

*The Ugly Vegetables* is reminiscent of the many international food days celebrated in schools. The children wear national costumes, which they may or may not own and which may seem foreign to them, and bring in a dish to share from home. Most children make a bee-line for the dish they brought from home. Food preparation and particular foods or meals in the contexts of particular cultures are vibrant parts of the material culture of a country. Without knowledge of such elements, the food exchange becomes superficial. *The Ugly Vegetables* attempts to deepen the experience of sharing a meal by providing the names of the vegetables in Chinese and the soup recipe. Nevertheless, immigrant children have difficulty identifying with the little girl or her situation. In the text, the author names neither the mother and child nor their country of origin, perhaps hoping that in this way any reader would be able to identify with the characters and situation in the story. Unfortunately, the lack of names and background brings distance between the girl and readers of her story. The most common response to the book from children has been that foreign food is “funny,” and they may not realize that others may believe their native food is “funny.” The author dedicated her book “For my mom and her ugly gardens.” This dedication should be included in class discussion to personalize the story and prompt discussions about the girl’s embarrassment, different foods, and acceptance by neighbors.

### Coping with Changes

Schools and neighborhoods provide contexts for immigrant children to become aware of how they differ from their new environment and how much they want others to accept them. However, acceptance works in two directions: immigrant children must accept their new environment.

Many children feel helpless regarding immigration. The move is not their decision, and often the family does not ask

for their opinions. The transition may be more difficult for children from warring countries. Iskander in *The Silence in the Mountains* (Rosenberg 1999) leaves Lebanon, and, despite the war there, wants to return home. When Iskander experiences the silence he used to hear in the mountains in Lebanon in his new home, he finally accepts the move. Once children accept the move to a new

and how many family members are now with them to celebrate holidays.

### Responding to One’s Name

One’s name is central to a sense of self. In many countries, names reflect culture and heritage. When children change cultures, their names are the first identification tags they must pronounce

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## Immigrant children are different from their peers at school, and they want to be accepted. However, they also must accept their new environment.

home, they can begin to cope. The conflicting emotions inherent in immigration can also include delight in new discoveries. In *Good-Bye, 382 Shin Dang Dong* (Park and Park 2002), Jangmi worries about her family’s move but finds parallels between her old life and new life. Children easily respond to her observations. They can draw or diagram her story and make connections between their previous and new lives. They understand when Jangmi says, “My heart beats in two places” (32).

Children must also make adjustments to specific differences. Customs that families practiced in their homelands are often revised when transplanted. For example, in *Lights for Gita*, Rasha Gilmore (2000) ironically sets Divali, the festival of lights, during an ice storm when there is no electricity. Gita experiences anticipation for the event, disappointment that the celebration will not measure up to the Divalis she has experienced in her homeland, and then understanding that hope fills the darkness with light no matter where she celebrates the holiday. Gita learns an important lesson about the essence of a particular custom, and children who read her story can recall family get-togethers that changed after they moved to the United States. They can also discuss where their family or family members were one, two, or three years ago

and explain. The reactions of others have profound effects on children’s feelings of self-worth.

In *Hannah Is My Name* (Yang 2004), Na-Li, whose name means *beautiful* in Chinese, describes her family’s journey from Taiwan to the United States. Her adjustments to a new life include relinquishment of her Chinese name and her responses to her new English name, Hannah. The new name added to a new life surely must add to disorientation. However, the issue is not handled and the story remains upbeat. In *The Name Jar* (Choi 2001), Unhei is willing to have a more American-sounding name, but her mother reminds her that when she was born, her grandmother visited a name master in Korea to obtain her name. Unhei thinks about this important event in her family history and decides to keep her name, no matter how mispronounced it may be. *My Name Is Yoon* (Recorvits 2003) discusses meanings of names in different cultures. Yoon means *shining wisdom* in Korean. Yoon’s teacher encourages her to practice writing her name in English, but Yoon decides it looks happier in Korean. She does not like the way the alphabet letters stand alone in English. She substitutes English names such as *cat*, so she can hide in a corner, *bird*, so she can fly back to Korea, and *cupcake*, to gain her classmates’ approval. She finally recog-

nizes that no matter how she writes her name, she is still Yoon. She decides to keep her Korean name.

Both Unhei and Yoon keep their birth names and maintain unique pieces of their heritage with their enriched sense of self. Many immigrant children come from cultures in which they know the meanings of their names and their name selection has a history. They are happy to share the stories of how they got their names with classmates using drawings or crafts. Such activities reinforce and secure children's identity in their inner lives during the tumultuous times they are experiencing outside themselves.

### Learning a New Language

*I Hate English!* (Levine 1989) is a classic story about the fear of identity loss after immigration. To protect herself from such loss, Mei Mei refuses to learn English. When life gets to be too hard without speaking English, she speaks English for twenty-two minutes without stopping and realizes that she can speak Chinese or English whenever she wants. She weighs what she can gain by communicating against her fear of what she loses and accepts the new language. Her breakthrough in English marks a significant adjustment to her new life because English proficiency will let her bridge the gap between two cultures.

When shyness creates difficulty in attempting to speak English, drawing can provide a communication bridge. In *Marianthe's Story* (Aliko 1998), Marianthe receives help from a sensitive teacher who lets her paint in class. From her drawings, she learns to speak English by telling about her life in Greece. Her life story becomes the story of every child who has ever been uprooted, brought to a new country, and faced with a new school, new customs, and new language. In *The Color of Home* (Hoffman 2002), drawing also helps a young child find a voice. Hassan, an immigrant from Somalia who speaks no English, discovers that he can communicate through painting. Both books make powerful recommendations for teachers to use artwork to

support children who speak little or no English.

### Relating to Previous Generations and Their Traditions

Children must understand and cooperate with their families' older generations who may seem strange to them. Family stories help. *Coolies* (Yin and Soentpiet 2001) begins with a grandmother and her grandson participating in the Ching Ming Festival to honor their ancestors. The grandmother tells about the family's immigration to America. While telling the story, the grandmother emphasizes not only the harsh truths for Chinese laborers, but also the love and loyalty between two brothers who were determined to survive and succeed. When she is finished with this episode of family history, she asks her grandson if he is ready to honor his ancestors. Her story has been so powerful that he knows that he will never forget them. A similar respect for older generations comes by example to Katie in *Love as Strong as Ginger* (Look 1999). After spending a day with her grandmother in a crab cannery, Katie understands her grandmother's hard life and the sacrifices she has made to give her granddaughter a bright future, "[m]ade with love as strong as ginger and dreams as thick as black-bean paste" (32). In *Coolies* and *Love as Strong as Ginger*, grandmothers play an important role in passing on the messages of sacrifice and hard work so that contemporary children realize their places in the family lineage. After reading these books, children can collect stories from their grandparents or other relatives. Many schools organize Grandparents' Day, Parents' Day, or Special Adults' Day to celebrate such stories.

Family stories cultivate love and respect, but such stories do not imply that living with older generations is easy. In *Apple Pie, Fourth of July* (Wong 2002), a young girl reminds herself that her parents do not understand American life when they insist on selling their Chinese food on the Fourth of July. Despite the happy ending, the author

poignantly communicates how difficult it is for children to be more aware of cultural differences than their parents are and how immigrant families must manage their new life needs every day. This book gives children, who often act as family interpreters and go-betweens, an opportunity to voice their frustrations and to gain insights into their parents' hardships in coping with a new country.

### Maintaining Ties with Distant Relatives

What happens to children's understanding of their place in the world when relatives live far away? Not all relatives can immigrate at the same time; families are often divided. *Dear Juno* (Pak 1999) tells about the correspondence between a boy in the United States and his grandmother in Korea. They communicate with drawings, photos, and objects, and he can hardly wait for her visit. In *The Stars in My Geddoh's Sky* (Matze 1999) Alex's grandfather, or *Geddoh* in Arabic, visits from Egypt. Alex is anxious at first, but soon they become good friends. When Geddoh has to leave, Alex is sad, and Geddoh tells him, "Your sky, your moon, your stars are mine too, *habibi*, my dear. And as you look up . . . my thoughts will fly to you" (32). Alex's relationship with his grandfather demonstrates that love endures beyond time and space.

Visits from relatives, even distant relatives, are important parts of the lives of immigrant children, and children can share their adventures with the relatives who visit them. Occasionally, the visitors are invited to classrooms to talk about life in their homelands.

### Visiting the Homeland

Children and their parents may also visit their homeland. *The Trip Back Home* (Wong 2000) describes the preparations of a mother and daughter for a visit with relatives in Korea and their stay in the family's native village. By the end of the visit, the child learns that even when family members are far away, they all share love. Other times, only one member of the family can travel. Desta's

father in *Faraway Home* (Kurtz 2000) receives a letter from Ethiopia that tells the family Desta's grandmother is sick. As her father prepares for his trip to Ethiopia, Desta worries that he may not come back to her. The author captures the warm relationship between Desta and her father, and his memories help Desta understand his childhood. Such awareness cultivated in children helps them realize that they are not alone in making adjustments to a new environment. Their parents, because of their age, have more memories of the homeland, and children can ask them questions to deepen understandings of their origins.

*Journey Home* (McKay 1998) describes a poignant trip for a mother and daughter. The mother, abandoned as an infant at a Saigon orphanage, travels from the United States to Vietnam to look for her birth family. Her ten-year-old daughter, Mai, tells the story as she accompanies her mother. Mai notices that she looks like most of the people in Vietnam. She wonders where home really is and decides that it is in her and all around her wherever she is. Each child must undertake such a journey to belong and to find a home. However, the undertaking may be particularly difficult for children who travel across cultures. The resolution of this story helps children understand that home is where you are and hopefully where you are loved. Children who visit their homelands are often encouraged to keep reflective journals of their visits or scrapbooks of photographs to share in school.

### Finding Their Lives through Reading and Writing

Reflecting the themes in these children's books, Haemi Balgassi (2000a) writes about her experiences as an immigrant from Korea in 1975. She was eager to see her grandmother who had raised her in Korea. When they were reunited, she spent hours listening to her stories about Korea now told in America. Her grandmother recounted her life as a young woman and how, in the harsh winter of 1951, she escaped war with

her three young daughters on the icy roof of a southbound train. When Haemi started second grade, she struggled to speak English. Her classmates' contempt turned to indifference, and she withdrew, speaking neither at school nor at home. She hoped that her silence would show her family that they did not belong in this new country. She wanted to go home. One day her class went to the school library, and books became the friends she needed. Her career as a reader and writer was launched. As an adult, she wrote the picture book *Peace-bound Trains* (2000b) to honor her mother and grandmother and share her family's story with other immigrant families and particularly children of war.

Julia Alvarez, author of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (2005a), moved to America from the Dominican Republic when she was ten years old. She affirms that coming to this country made her into a writer. Her imagination became her portable homeland after she suddenly lost a culture, a homeland, a language, and a family. In her most recent book, *Writing a New Place on the Map* (Alvarez 2005b), she asserts that she is mapping a country that is not on the map, or identity within a global society.

Reading and writing helped these authors cope with the unresolved issues brought on by immigration in childhood (Baghban 2000, 2002). As adults, they continue to understand more about who they are, where home is, how they are different from those who came before them, and how they are the same. Immigrant children are at the beginning of this process of self-definition. There is a significant need for more books to help them on their journey.

### Conclusion

Educators support cultural matches between the assumptions of nonmainstream students and the assumptions of school (Au 1980; Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Igoa 1995). Lev Vygotsky (1986) emphasizes that learning happens in social interactions and activities that are inherently culturebound.

Curricular materials relevant to the social and cultural experiences of children engage interest and generate the enthusiasm to keep learning. When books about cultural issues are included in the curriculum, readers learn that stories can be about themselves, that the stories of their experiences or similar ones are worthy of being in a book, and that others have felt the way that they do (Hade 2002).

We must never underestimate the power of stories in our educational processes: stories of self and stories of others . . . stories have a history behind them, are embedded in contradictions and struggle, and interrogate our assumptions about the shared quality and boundedness of human groups. (Gonzalez 2001, 187)

To be able to read a story empowers a reader. To be able to read a story with examples of children who navigate a new life empowers immigrant children.

Sonia Nieto (1999, 2001) proposes that we think of *culture* as a verb. She describes the learning process between students and teachers and teachers and students who culture each other. Through exchanges of worldviews in their relations with each other, teachers and students can begin to understand each other and help with each others' struggles.

### NOTE

For further information and curriculum ideas, see the Web sites of the International Reading Association's Notable Books for a Global Society, Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group (<http://www.csulb.edu/org/childrens-lit/>) and The Cooperative Children's Book Center (<http://www.soemadison.wisc.edu/ccbc/>).

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