



Bank Street Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2018
Number 39 *Supporting Young Children of
Immigrants in PreK-3*

Article 9

April 2018


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Recommended Citation

Koplow, L., Dean, N., & Blachly, M. (2018). Over the Hills and Far Away: Inviting and Holding Traumatic Stories in School. *Occasional Paper Series, 2018* (39). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58295/2375-3668.1171>

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Over the Hills and Far Away: Inviting and Holding Traumatic Stories in School

Lesley Koplow, Noelle Dean, and Margaret Blachly

Thousands of young immigrant children enter school each year, bringing their immigration stories with them. They enrich the communities that receive them, bringing hope and new perspectives, new languages, and experiences of other worlds to share with peers. Sometimes their stories include experiences of loss and trauma in their lives prior to entering school. Studies estimate that more than 51% of immigrant families have experienced at least one traumatic event or loss, and at least 15% of immigrant parents and children present with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Aragona, Pucci, Mazzetti, Maisano, & Geraci, 2013). These traumatic histories can include difficult events and/or losses that occurred in children's countries of origin, during immigration journeys, or as part of the acculturation process, when poverty and regressive immigration policies often exacerbate existing vulnerabilities (Aragona, et al., 2013). Refugee children and families have an even higher incidence of traumatic history, with PTSD rates up to 75% (Rousseau, Measham, & Nadeau, 2013). Societal obstacles such as social and emotional isolation have been a common experience for immigrant families, who may have limited social networks, which increases their risk for depression and poor adjustment.

Young children who come to school with traumatic immigration histories may experience barriers to learning that may not be readily visible to their teachers. Children may be preoccupied, experience fight-or-flight reactivity to social challenges, or be hyperalert to the externals of the environment, causing them to be distracted from the school's academic readiness agenda (Holmes, Levy, Smith, Pinne, & Neese, 2015). In addition, difficult behavior resulting from trauma triggers may distract teachers from the underlying issues that fuel some children's outbursts and disruptions. Frequently, teachers and other school support staff react in frustration to children's difficult-to-manage behavior and then seek to remove the children from the classroom and/or school settings. Those children then find themselves further isolated and stressed.

This paper features an innovative school-based approach employed by the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice (ERP) at Bank Street with groups of young children who have a traumatic history. In the cases documented here, the children had traumatic immigration stories and had experienced trauma and loss as a part of their immigration history. The purpose of the ERP approach is to have

foundations of child development as well as an understanding and appreciation of how children's life experiences inform classroom interactions. ERP tries to uncover the root of children's behavior and its connection to traumatic histories so that underlying issues of trauma can be addressed instead of ignored or dismissed.

ERP techniques are meant to change everyday classroom interactions and routines. They include using reflective language to heighten awareness of emotional states and using stuffed teddy bears as transitional objects to encourage attachment and enhance children's self-comfort capacity to buffer trauma (Koplow, 2008; Sadeh, 2008; Winnicott, 1953). Emotionally responsive curriculum includes pretend play, storytelling, and bibliotherapy that invites young children to dictate, draw, and write their traumatic stories as well as expressions of their fears, dreams, and fantasies. These techniques are woven into classroom practice. In addition, the program offers teachers and parents similar expressive outlets for their own trauma or for the secondary trauma that caring for traumatized children can evoke.

Traumatic Journeys Come to School

Because very young children are unable to comprehend the complexity of traumatic events, it is often assumed that they are protected from the effects of trauma. Research finds the opposite to be true. Very young children are the most vulnerable to insidious effects of trauma because they have not yet created the foundations for self-comfort, self-regulation, and stable identity development separate from the parent (Chu & Lieberman, 2010; Enlow, Blood, & Egeland, 2013). While older children may regress in the aftermath of trauma, infants and toddlers may fail to meet expected developmental milestones as a result of traumatic experiences, a phenomenon that can easily be mistaken for developmental delays of unknown origin when psychosocial histories are not provided or taken into account.

When young immigrant children enter pre-K, kindergarten, and first grade, their psychosocial stories may not have been communicated to school staff or may have been shared with a school social worker but made inaccessible to classroom staff due to confidentiality issues. This can result in young immigrant children who have experienced trauma becoming isolated with their traumatic immigration stories at school, leaving them feeling disconnected and distracted, as well as vulnerable to experiencing threat in the classroom setting (Kagan, 2010; Malchiodi, 2015).

Traumatized children may cope with the heightened perception of threat by becoming preemptively

aggressive or dissociated. They may be overwhelmed with high stress hormone levels while in the school building, enhancing reactivity and diminishing capacity for deep thought. Paradoxically, teachers who invite trauma narratives within curriculum can improve the young child’s feeling of well-being in school, because the young child then no longer feels all alone with the traumatic events (Koplow, 2002, 2007). In highly attuned settings, the early childhood and early grade classroom can become a sanctuary for the young child’s immigration story.

ERP work has taken place over several years with many groups of young children and parents. Here, two ERP practitioners, Margaret Blachly and Noelle Dean share vignettes from their work that demonstrate how the use of literacy, play, song, and art activities can foster the development of symbol and the creation of metaphor to communicate and hold traumatic immigration stories within the classroom. Each vignette is told from the point of view of the ERP practitioner who participated in the research.

Two Kindergarteners’ Traumatic Journeys

I had my eye on Cristopher¹ from the beginning—he stood out. I described his behavior in these words in my notes from November: “Regular crying, wanders through school building, ‘to look for mother,’ or to find his cousin on third floor. Cristopher screams when he is brought back to his classroom by security guard. Tantrums at times; his mother has been called. He is a very recent arrival from Honduras, his teacher explained. There was a traumatic border crossing that he experienced with his mother who was detained for 2 weeks: left sisters behind.”

—Margaret

I was a visiting practitioner in Ms. Ernesto’s kindergarten class at a school where our ERP program had been contracted to help the community process trauma related to Hurricane Sandy. Soon after I began, I learned that several children in the classroom were recent immigrants, and that some had crossed the US/Mexico border on foot. Others had been detained at the border. These children had actually missed the natural disaster in New York City, but they arrived in the classroom haunted by their own stories and their own traumas.

I was glad to be able to bring teddy bears into this class as a way of providing comfort to children whose lives were impacted by the storm. I hoped I would find a way to use the comfort objects with the recent immigrant children as well. I hoped that I could invite the immigrant children’s stories

1 All names of students and teachers throughout the vignettes are pseudonyms.

of leaving their countries of origin and traveling to the United States as part of the work we were doing about separation, fears, change, loss, and trauma that reflected the experience of local children endangered and displaced by the flooding.

This kindergarten class was a dual language classroom, with many children learning English as a second or third language. One day in early December, I decided to read Amy Hest's *Kiss Good Night* as a way to address fears of the dark, which had become extreme for many children after days, weeks, and months of no electricity after the hurricane. I planned to ask the children about their teddy bears' nighttime fears, and to invite them to create blankets for the teddy bears that would help the teddies feel safer if they felt afraid. I read the story in Spanish, hoping to engage more children. I showed the illustration at the beginning, which depicted trees and leaves bending and blowing on a dark and stormy night. I read the title in Spanish, *Un beso de buenas noches*.

Without warning, Cristopher offered up, "*¿cuándo me fui a los Estados Unidos de Honduras, caminamos mucho por un bosque oscuro, y habían cocodrilos y serpientes!*" (When I came to the United States from Honduras, we walked through the dark woods and there were snakes and crocodiles!). Trained in the ERP approach, I responded reflectively and acknowledged his statement, saying that it sounded like a scary experience. I also told him that after we read the book, he could stay and tell me more about his own story, if he wanted. Internally, I remarked to myself on the power of invitation: this invitation had worked without my even having extended it. Simply by being in the presence of the teddy bears, being with a teacher who was talking about feeling scared, and seeing an image that triggered his memory, Cristopher took the opportunity to share his own experience.

When his classmates went to work on their blankets at the tables, Cristopher was eager to draw and tell his story (see Figure 1). David, another child in the class, stayed nearby, moving around in a way that distracted me: I was initially flustered because I was so eager for Cristopher to tell his story and so anxious to be able to listen carefully to it. Ms. Ernesto was close by and asked, "Did you know that David just arrived, too? He also crossed the border by foot." With the new information that David, like Cristopher, was a recent immigrant, I quickly adjusted my plan and invited David to join our small group. I gave him paper to draw on and slid the book *Bear Feels Scared* by Karma Wilson under the paper so he'd have something to lean on as he drew. He was captivated by the picture on the book cover (which depicts a bear with a scared expression on his face in a dark, windy, rainy forest) and said, "I want to read THIS book!" I promised him we would read it next week.

I hadn't noticed much about David before now, except that he felt compelled to make everything neat and orderly. David listened and responded to the text as I continued to read *Kiss Good Night*, both boys spontaneously offering up their own stories and responding to each other's. Christopher described a train that rocked back and forth and was very crowded and made him sick. David described crossing a river in a plastic boat and seeing another child's shoe fall into the water. He tried to reach it but he couldn't. Christopher described a "pirate" on a boat he rode on, who looked scary but then treated him kindly. While Christopher had come to the United States with his mother, leaving his sisters behind in Honduras, David had left his mother behind when he came to the United States. He chatted matter-of-factly:

. . . mi tía estaba llorando por todos los días que se iba a encontrar con mi mami, pero no pudimos, porque nos vinimos por acá . . . pero tengo una mamá aca que me cuida. (. . . my aunt was crying every day, [because] we were going to find my mother, but we couldn't, because we came here . . . but I have another mother here who takes care of me).

The boys continued to tell their stories, Christopher drawing as he wrote, David not drawing until the end when he copied the rainbow that Christopher drew on his second page of paper. I asked them to take turns telling about their journeys and interjected a few questions or comments as they spoke. They were so engaged in this process of telling their stories that sometimes they were talking at the exact same time, finding it hard to wait for a break in the conversation. Their stories seemed primed to come out, and as Christopher and David responded to the invitation created by the book's imagery of a bear feeling lost and scared in the woods, the familiar Spanish words, and the comfort of the actual teddy bears that sat in their laps, their stories continued to emerge.

Figure 1. The Long Journey. A search helicopter overhead and a sad crocodile in the water.



When I looked back and reflected on my documentation of the conversation later on, I was struck not only by what felt like the children's urgent need for space to tell their actual stories, but also by the fact that the boys, in a developmentally sound way, had also begun to use *storytelling*. That is, at the end of their narrative, they had used fantasy to develop a joint narrative which provided wished-for solutions to the feeling of helplessness that their journeys had engendered. The image of a shoe floating away from a rubber raft was especially poignant, and David returned to it, commenting that he had tried to reach the shoe, but had almost fallen into the water himself. Soon after, the theme of power vs. powerlessness, which is almost always found in the fantasy play of three- to six-year-olds (Koplow, 2002, 2007), entered his narrative (excerpted and translated below) with the boys in an empowered role:

Teacher (ERP consultant): Were you scared? (not being able to find mother)

David: No . . . just a little.

T: I'm thinking that your aunt was probably scared.

Christopher: Yes, men don't get scared, and boys also don't get scared.

T: I would be scared.

D: And if there are men, and a gun, and they shoot it at the airplane . . . boom, boom, boom! and then the airplane is going to fall, it's going to land, and if the men come down and give us the airplane, and we go to Honduras, with an airplane!

C: I had a toy gun that really shoots, and I shot it at the crocodiles and they died! There were crocodiles very close . . .

T: I see that you drew the crocodiles here (see Figure 1)

D: Get out of the helicopter! They get arrested and I laugh at them! They stay there and say, "Hey! Give us our airplane and our helicopter!" "No, never!" So, then I go up to the helicopter and shoot at a police officer, boom! Then he will be in a dark forest with bears, and spiders, like tarantulas! And if there are people, they will kill them! A real monster there!

T: The forest is so scary. The next time I come, I will read a story about a bear who gets lost in the forest.

C: (showing his full paper) I'm not finished. (T gives him a second sheet of paper)

D: And look... we walked a long time, and there was a monster, and a bear . . .

C: (trying to break into D's narrative) And I'll show you where my house is . . .

D: (not to be interrupted) And then we killed all the police officers . . . trrrrr!

Watching David and Christopher enact their stories and listening to their tones of voice and the energy in their movements, it was apparent that through their storytelling, the boys were playing with feeling powerful. David conquered the police, who did not represent safety in his immigration journey; he also returned to Honduras in a plane, exerting some imagined control over his destination. Christopher's fantasy expressed power over the crocodiles that he uses to express danger. Christopher focused on drawing, which may have kept him more grounded in the "real" story, while David entered a narrative of dramatic play, bringing the scenes of action under his own control. The time and space the boys had for sharing their traumatic stories in the context of literacy and art allowed the developmentally salient capacity for fantasy play to lessen Christopher and David's feeling of helplessness and provide freedom from their preoccupied state.

As I ended the session, putting away the books and drawing materials, I saw that Ms. Ernesto had been sitting nearby. She had listened to the whole interaction and had a look of shock on her face. "I can't believe what they've been through!" she breathed, shakily. I nodded. "Those were big and scary stories," I said, reflecting the fact that our experience, as listeners, had been intense. We spoke briefly before I had to leave to go to my next class session. I could tell that something had shifted for Ms. Ernesto, but at that moment, it was hard for either of us to articulate it.

I asked myself, what difference would this storytelling session make in the long run? One observable thing that developed from it was Ms. Ernesto's attention, through social studies, to the children's countries of origin. She had the children bring in flags and artifacts from their native countries and frequently named the countries where each of them or their parents were from. Now respectful of the children's difficult journeys, Ms. Ernesto implemented a routine where the children held their teddy bears and wrote in journals when they returned from the cafeteria (a time when many of the children felt overwhelmed and disconnected, and thus, during which there were often behavior problems).

Ms. Ernesto had not had a lot of experience with ERP techniques before, but in learning the children's stories, she recognized the salience of the children's prior experience and now gave those stories a place in her classroom. She seemed to understand fundamentally that in telling the stories, these boys

were bringing their traumatic experience into relationship with their teachers and with one another and were then less alone with the fears and worries that seemed to previously preoccupy them. They were now able to be more present in the classroom. Through hearing stories, being read storybooks, telling personal stories, drawing, and creating play symbols, children shared traumatic experiences and established stronger relationships.

After December break, Christopher returned to school still very connected to his teddy bear. He was trying to draw the teddy and was feeling frustration that he was not able to draw it the way he wanted to. I told him he could just tell his teddy bear's story without a drawing. He dictated, "*él tiene miedo en la oscuridad, y él se siente bien cuando está en su casa.*" (He [the teddy bear] feels scared in the dark, and he feels safe when he is in his house.) Christopher had made a house for his bear before the vacation break, using a shoebox decorated with images that would help his bear to feel safe. Before I left the classroom on my way to the next class that waited for me, Christopher asked me to draw a heart on his hand and write, "*¡basta pronto!*" (see you soon!). So easily upset by transitions initially, Christopher was now able to use a symbol of connection to tolerate separation and to remain connected. Since the time that these events took place, Christopher has been able to function well in school and maintain connections to adults and children. He is in third grade this year and is reunited with Ms. Ernesto, now his third-grade teacher!

Crying for Home

I felt really sad and frustrated in the classrooms during the fall months. Children would cry and scream, throw up, and pee on the floor, traumatically separating without the possibility of being comforted. No one was able to speak to them the few magic and consoling words they needed to hear: "mommy will come back," "you are safe here," or "you feel scared." Children who hear those words implicitly know that the adults understand them. This is the essence of reflective language. —Noelle

Language as Mirror. Beginnings in early childhood classrooms are fraught times, primarily because children who are three, four, and five years old are acutely struggling with the task of separating. During the two years in which I worked in early childhood classrooms in one predominantly Chinese American neighborhood, I witnessed how recent immigration experiences compounded this developmentally common challenge. Referred to as "satellite babies" by Canadian researcher Yvonne Bohr, the children I met were part of a rising trend in transnational immigration patterns within the Chinese American community (Bohr & Tse, 2009). Born in New York City, infants are brought to China to be raised by grandparents or other family members as part of a culturally accepted three-generation tiered method

of child rearing. It isn't until children are old enough to begin going to school for a full day (sometimes until they are three or four years old) that they return to New York City to reunite with their parents.

While raising children through multigenerational, extended family structures is very common in traditional Chinese (and many other) cultures, it has mostly been implemented when grandparents live in rural villages and parents can easily work in cities while returning often to bond with their children. But now we are seeing this same practice on a transnational level, introducing new challenges to keeping parents and their babies connected. The result is a deeply felt dislocation: physical, cultural, and most vitally, emotional.

Here in the classrooms in which I worked, many of the children had arrived to the United States just days before the beginning of school. Families had become accustomed to giving their children American names when the children entered American schools with the hope that that might ease the difficult transition. However, this meant that children were addressed by a name many of them had never heard before, exaggerating an already felt sense of dislocation and invisibility. In essence, the self that they had inhabited their entire lives was meant to be left at the door of the school building. Making things worse, the teachers and assistant teachers rarely spoke the Chinese dialects (nor did I), leaving the children virtually alone in their sense of loss and worry about the unknown.

Knowing that what children urgently needed was to communicate their experiences, I contacted a Chinese graduate student to help with the initial phases of the project. She agreed to spend one day a week in one of the classrooms. She spoke the soft comforting words “mama will come back” all day long to tearful and terrified children. The student struggled with whether or not she did more harm than good being there because every time that she had to leave for the week, the children inevitably fell apart again. I encouraged her to stay. I felt that she offered them the greatest hope for comfort: to be understood.

Finally, after four weeks in the classroom, the student saw a glimpse of the important impact she had made on the children. Karl, a three-year-old who had grown very attached to her over the months, began to comfort other children around him. In Mandarin he would calmly whisper, “mama come back” to the other children as they cried. His ability to console the others was testament to the power of familiar words and culture.

Body Language: To Be Seen and Known. The very first reflective caretaker-infant dyadic conversations occur when primary attachment figures accurately read and mirror their baby's feeling states (Stern, 2000). Through these call-and-response body-based conversations, babies form the beginning of a sense of self. They are affirmed as they see a reflection of their internal selves in the faces of their caretaker.

Knowing that many of the children in this classroom had experienced profoundly disrupted attachments, I felt it essential to begin our work with a focus on supporting teacher/child attachment. With this early developmental phase in mind and with a lack of resources to fully communicate verbally with the children, I focused our beginning work on the intersection between body language and verbal language so that we could begin having reflective conversations, similar to those of the early caretaker-infant dyad. To do this, I decided to sing "If You're Happy and You Know It" with the children. We sang this song with affect variations, such as "if you're (sad, angry, scared) and you know it." We attached facial and body expressions to each feeling word and practiced over and over. We sang the song each week.

Through the embodiment of feeling words, we created a shared understanding of internal experiences. For example, we expressed sadness with sorrowful facial expressions and crying sounds, tilting our heads downward and pulling our shoulders inward. For months, children relied on the embodied experience of the feelings to communicate. This shared language gave teachers a window into knowing children more deeply and thus strengthened both the teachers' and children's capacity to be empathic. When a child named Hannah was brought to school midyear, new to the country, new to her parents, and new to the school environment, she was angry. She curled her brow, crossed her arms, and stomped her foot. The other children, who for many weeks had been singing the song and stomping their feet, almost in anticipation of this moment, would say "she angry!" And just like that, Hannah's experience was understood.

While the children took my lead in learning these rudimentary feeling words in English, the teachers and I learned to interpret the physical signs that expressed more complicated experiences. For example, when Danny came in as a new child midyear, he cried for about four weeks. He held his hand up to his ear and brushed it against his cheek as he cried, which for a moment reminded me of an infant's rooting reflex, but which I soon came to understand was his mimicking holding a cell phone. The assistant teacher noticed him and wondered if he was trying to tell us to call his mother. When she picked up her cell phone and pretended to call his mother and continued to "talk" to her about what Danny was doing at school, he took a deep breath and stopped crying. This game of pretending was an urgent metaphorical way of communicating. Three-year-olds were finding ways to express the vastness

of their fear through body language, and teachers, in turn, were able to communicate the primal message of safety and connection through their actions.

Creating Story Narratives: Going Away and Coming Back. One of the hallmarks of ERP is the practice of bibliotherapy, the use of books relevant to children’s therapeutic needs (Betzael & Shechtman, 2010; Montgomery & Maunder, 2015). Our belief is that children who find resonance with books are not only more apt to be organically interested and motivated to learn to read and write, but also more likely to feel emotionally connected to their teachers, their peers, and to school as a whole. By being read what we refer to as reflective books, children are given the chance to find themselves in the stories they hear. Often children feel validation in reflective books and comfort in being known by teachers. Read-alouds become opportunities to decrease children’s feelings of isolation. Through class conversations around these books, children see that they are not alone in their experiences.

Finding reflective books for these classrooms was challenging. I could not find any that accurately mirrored the children’s particular life stories. I also felt limited by my inability to read books in Mandarin or Cantonese, and so I mostly used toddler-aged books with limited language. One of the books I brought in was a simple rendition of the song “Five Little Ducks,” which I chose because it spoke to the bigger issues related to the children’s disrupted attachments and multiple goodbyes. They worried about their grown-ups returning, and so we focused much of our early work on the ideas around “going away and coming back.” We sang “Five Little Ducks” and we read *Five Little Ducks* weekly for months:

*Five little ducks went out one day
Over the hills and far away . . .
Mama duck said quack quack quack quack
But only four little ducks came back.*

My hope was that the children would see themselves in the story of the ducks, and that they would learn language around their experiences of coming and going, of missing and being missed.

One day at lunchtime, right after we had read *Five Little Ducks*, four-year-old Lucy found her voice around the articulation of her story. Lucy’s story was a slight variation of that of the children who had been raised by grandparents. While Lucy’s mother worked in another state, Lucy lived with her aunt and her cousins. She rarely saw her mother, and sometimes referred to her aunt as “mama” and

her cousins as sisters. Lucy had been in the United States for longer than most of her peers (about a year) and spoke a limited amount of English. At her small table, as she picked at her plate of peas and carrots, she could be heard saying, “I don’t have mommy. Mommy over the hills and far away.” As she spoke, her hands gestured the familiar movement we had devised to accompany the words to the song, following the imaginary contours of a steep hill, and then moving across her forehead as she pretended to look out into a distant land.

Later that day, Lucy found a way to extend the expression of her story into the realm of literacy and self-narrative. We had brought teddy bears to the classroom at the beginning of our work together. As part of our teddy bear curriculum, children had used the bears in a combination of ways: as comfort objects when they needed to feel more secure, as transitional objects when they missed their grown-up attachment figure, and as self-objects (alter-egos) through which they could express parts of themselves with the safety of some emotional distance. Now that Lucy had found language to tell her story (“Mommy is over the hills and far away”) and the knowledge that she was not isolated in her experience of missing someone (the ducks could relate), she was able to think about her story as a more integrated, coherent narrative. She had words she could use to capture her internal experience and imagery to use as metaphor.

Later, when I offered Lucy paper and crayons to draw bear pictures, the bear she drew had an expression of sadness (see Figure 2). When I came over to take dictation, I asked, “Can you tell me about your picture?” These were her words: “My teddy bear feels sad. My teddy bear don’t have mommy. Her mommy still far away. She don’t come back. Her waiting for her mommy. One day come back far away.”

Figure 2. Mommy still far away



Lucy, Danny, and Hannah brilliantly found a way to tell their stories. Children are wizards at finding vehicles for communicating what is meaningful to them, even when that seems impossible. Communicating internal experiences through co-created language is an organizing and healing force. It is what lies at the heart of literacy.

Connecting the Dots

Early childhood programs and elementary schools often show ambivalence about their role in holding and addressing children's psychosocial stories. These stories are collected only when there are serious concerns about a child's academic performance, but they are rarely used to inform practice. Instead, schools typically lock children's psychosocial histories in a file drawer and focus on enhancing academic performance while targeting challenging behavior. Paradoxically, this practice leaves young children alone with their traumatic experiences. Trauma and unattended loss continue to interfere with attentional capacity, impair memory function, promote distractibility, enhance behavioral reactivity, and diminish the ability to think deeply, generally resulting in poor school adjustment (Cook, Blaustein, Spinazzola, & van der Folk, 2003; Fox & Shonkoff, 2012; Goodman, Miller, & West-Olatunji, 2012). It is often impossible for children to thrive academically and socially when they are overwhelmed by fear, traumatic memories, and grief. Immigrant children with a traumatic history are especially vulnerable to becoming isolated with these traumatic effects because social networks and supports may be minimal.

At the time of this writing, immigration policy is changing in the United States in ways that are unprecedented in recent history. Undocumented immigrants are being targeted for deportation even if they have children who are American citizens and even if being returned to their countries of origin would put them at extreme risk. These regressive policies often threaten immigrant children and families who have escaped danger in their native countries. Teachers of children in public school are hearing children talk about their fears of being deported, losing their parents to deportation, or having immigration police invade their homes and neighborhoods.

These two stories of immigrant children and their teachers capture the process of inviting young children to engage in symbolic avenues of expression as a way to voice loss and trauma. Through sharing stories, creating art, responding to reflective books, singing songs with meaningful lyrics, and creating representational play opportunities with transitional objects, the children were able to connect to others in the classroom around their traumatic experiences.

In each of the scenarios included here, the trauma and loss experienced by the children had initially resulted in adjustment difficulties at school. Several of the children could not manage the daily separation from their families; they screamed and cried, tried to run out of the room, and were inconsolable. Children as well as parents often seemed stressed, depressed, highly anxious, easily upset, disconnected and preoccupied. However, after participating in ERP activities including story sharing, storytelling, reading, writing, drawing, and creating pretend scenarios as a voice for trauma and loss, the children were more comfortable within the school setting, less emotionally and socially isolated, and more receptive and available for learning. This receptivity may have developed because the children were no longer alone with traumatic memories.

Schools that connect the dots between behavior, learning, and psychosocial history respect what they know about the power of children's and parents' life experiences and use it to inform their practice. They offer children a bridge to self-expression that can reach beyond any language barriers that exist. Instead of insisting that young children turn their attention away from the loss and trauma that claims their mental space and prevents social connection and learning, this approach allows children to weave their own trauma narratives into an expressive tapestry of literacy, art, and symbolic play within school-based relationships that are strong enough to hold their stories. In this way, children are able to connect with others as they work on integrating their own psychosocial stories.

The stories presented in this article are told by psychoeducational consultants and social workers from the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice at Bank Street who were supporting the teachers in an urban community. However, as time went on, the classroom teachers themselves began to integrate some of the reflective techniques that these consultants brought into the classroom, and the relationships between teachers, children, and parents became stronger. Developing teacher capacity to hear children's immigration narratives is essential during this time of heightened insecurity for undocumented immigrant families. Children who can communicate their fears and anxieties through symbolic play and art activities do not have to act out to free themselves from pain and isolation. They have other viable ways of communicating within the classroom and they have their teachers as partners in holding their stories. These creative interventions help create classroom community and strengthen the protective factor of empathic adult-child relationships at school. When teachers and school leaders are able to listen to and acknowledge a child and family's traumatic immigration experiences, children feel held, and school becomes a safer place to grow and learn.

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