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# Translanguaging space in a bilingual program in New York City Chinatown middle school

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**Abstract:** This study explores how translanguaging pedagogy was practiced in a New York City Chinatown middle school to engage emergent bilingual students (EBs) with diverse language literacy backgrounds in their study of the grade level social studies curriculum. The data were collected over the past two decades while we worked with classroom teachers in search of effective ways to improve EBs' school performance. We revisited this data utilizing a translanguaging lens to reconceptualize this past work and reframe our analysis to deepen understanding of translanguaging teaching praxis. Therefore, this research not only seeks possible ways to meet challenges in the education of EBs in U.S. schools but also to add to a research method that looks back at past data as an approach to looking ahead in scholarship.

**Keywords:** Chinatown; emergent bilingual; middle school; translanguaging

Translanguaging theory validates bi/multilinguals' everyday communicative practice. Instead of focusing on language systems, translanguaging focuses on users of languages—how they strategically and creatively intermingle features of their linguistic repertoire to meet their communicative needs in different contexts (García 2009). Translanguaging pedagogy positions this natural practice of bilinguals in the classroom with an approach that creates spaces and opportunities for emergent bilinguals (EB) to have language freedom to maximize their learning potentials. Thus, translanguaging is geared toward language development as well as content proficiency. In this article, we explore the educational context and theoretical grounding for the usage of translanguaging to assist EB students with their academic lives in the United States.

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# 1 Problems with transitional bilingual education

Over the past several decades, bilingual education has been adopted as one solution for addressing the educational needs of new immigrant students in public schools in the United States, particularly in areas with high concentration of immigrant populations (de Jong 2011). Most bilingual education programs in U.S. public schools are transitional (García 2009). Such programs use home languages to build subject content knowledge for EBs while developing their English language proficiency. As their proficiency in English grows, the use of home languages as a medium of instruction is phased out and students join English-medium classes where they learn the grade-level curriculum along with their English proficient peers. After decades of implementing this kind of bilingual education, grave challenges continue to face schools and teachers in meeting the needs of EB students in their formal education (Fix et al. 2000).

## 2 Theoretical framework

García (2009) explains that the 20th century saw the development of bilingual educational programs which reflected the knowledge and sensibilities of the time: “with diglossia as the theoretical construct to operationalize it, and monolingualism in each of the two languages as the norm” (115). However, bilingual pedagogy needs not be “two solitudes” or functioning from a language isolation approach (Cummins 2008). Rather, this endeavor needs to be grounded in García and Li’s (2014) notion of translanguaging, where individuals flow among languages within a heteroglossic repertoire in a single communication. In essence, translanguaging as presented by García (2009) is “an approach to bilingualism that is centered not on languages as has often been the case, but on the practices of bilinguals that are readily observable” (44). There is movement and change, where meaning and communication is unscripted, dynamic, and palpable.

Thus, translanguaging is an apt description of the discursive and communicative practices of bilinguals, which embody a dynamism and uniqueness as bilinguals use the entirety of their language knowledge to make sense of the world and participate in conversations. In this way, language and communication are understood as living (Bakhtin 1981), given breath and individuality from the unique ways meaning is formed. Bilinguals, especially EBs who are new immigrants, can thus form unique speech communities wherein specialized meaning is enacted for language (Rampton 1999).

Translanguaging practice is therefore situated in this dialogic conjunction, the space where emergent and experienced bilinguals wade between two or more named languages, conjuring unique meanings through novel utterances to broker their interactions. Their languaging practices “do not emerge in a linear way or function separately since there is only one linguistic system” (García and Li 2014: 14). In effect, there is one heteroglossic linguistic repertoire that contains all of the practical communicative elements useful for any speaker’s messaging. This system allows speakers to utilize any trait from that repertoire to optimize expressivity and fidelity to their personal meanings.

As a practice, translanguaging deliberately breaks “the artificial and ideological divides between indigenous versus immigrant, majority versus minority, and target versus mother tongue languages” (Li 2018: 15). The rigid boundaries between vernaculars and cultures diminish due to the open flow of belief systems and orientations, articulated by the use of any language in the entire linguistic repertoire of the interlocutor. An individual’s ability to capture meaning in communication with others is bolstered given the speaker’s ability to utilize both home and dominant languages in tandem, consequently also breaking the artificial borders defined by ethnic/cultural/national identities that partition our humanity.

For this study, we have adopted a translanguaging lens, an emerging theory to re-analyze the data collected in the past while working in a New York City Chinatown middle school. The application of a translanguaging lens in the present study shifted our analytical gaze from the monolingual goal of improving English proficiency as indicated in our past studies (Fu 2003, 2009). This shift allowed us to re-view our data with an eye toward identifying spaces in which classroom communities were leveraging the entirety of their linguistic repertoires to communicate and to pursue school learning and were enacting the discursive practices of bilinguals. We see this revisiting as added consciousness to our research over time, which also indicates the fluidity of our scholarly work and its cumulative quality (Mitchell et al. 2011).

### **3 An intervention engaged study**

This research reports on our work in New York City schools over the past two decades. The data was collected while we were working with bilingual and ESL teachers in those schools in immigrant communities, such as Chinatown and Spanish Harlem, while seeking effective ways to improve the academic performance of new immigrant students. In this report, we have reanalyzed data collected in the past through interviews and classroom observation while exploring an innovative reform adopted by the bilingual program in one

Chinatown school involving the fluid use of English and home languages in social studies classrooms. This study is an intervention engaged study, qualitative in nature (Creswell et al. 2007), with its main purpose on teaching and learning improvement, as a scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1996) that advocates connections between scholarship and public service. During our years of work in this school, the intervention was the main purpose of our school engagement while we collected data for the purpose of teaching and learning improvement.

This study sought to explore the reformed instructional practices in a bilingual program at Sanya Middle School [pseudonym] in terms of its curriculum, teacher pedagogy, and student interaction and performance, with particular attention to the languaging practices dictated by the program, teachers, and students themselves. The research focus for this study would be: How did the teachers create translanguaging spaces to meet the needs of the students with diverse language and literacy abilities and backgrounds? We used a reflective narrative approach to present this study because we believe the culture and context of the class is “shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives” (Webster and Mertova 2007: 2). In studying this space of a culture within a culture, these stories need to be at the forefront for elucidating the lived realities so we can “present experience holistically in all its richness” (2).

### 3.1 The research setting

Sanya Middle School was located in New York City’s Chinatown in lower Manhattan. This Chinatown was established in the 1850s and has grown from a dozen Chinese to thousands, and has expanded to two more Chinatowns in Brooklyn and Queens. According to the 2012 U.S. Census, New York City is home to by far the highest Chinese population in the United States, with an estimated 573,388, and has tripled in size since 1980. It is known to house the largest metropolitan Chinese population outside of Asia, with continuous large-scale Chinese immigrant influx.

At the time of the study, Sanya Middle School had about 1,400 students, 86% of whom were Chinese. Half of the Chinese student population was placed in the bilingual program. Of these, most had been in the U.S. for anywhere from a few months to three years. The bilingual program for the Chinese students in this school was called the Chinese Language Arts (CLA) program, where students studied Chinese literature, history and geography. It intended to help students develop their home language and culture with the belief that strong first-language literacy would enhance new language literacy learning in English (Cummins 1989). The bilingual program was transitional. This meant it only served recently arrived immigrant students and those who were identified as needing ESL services.

Besides studying in the CLA program, these students attended ESL classes designed to support their English development, while studying other subjects required by the grade level curriculum, such as science, math, music, art and PE, in English. Once the students in the bilingual program passed the requisite English test, they would fully transition into the mainstream program, where they would study all subjects in English.

### 3.2 Data collection

Data for this study was collected over the period of three years while working with the bilingual teachers and coaches in the school in search of effective ways to improve teaching and learning. One of us visited the school 3 days a month and collected classroom observation data in three 6–8th grade bilingual classrooms, conducted interviews with the teachers, and gathered artifacts of student work.

Classroom observation data took the form of fieldnotes taken to document classroom setup/materials, teacher instruction (language use, materials, etc.), and student interaction (seat work, group work, hands-on, etc.). Using observation notes, we conducted debriefing meetings with the teachers after classroom observations. The debriefing meetings, which were highly interactive, were videotaped and transcribed. As part of our intervention work, we also joined faculty and PTA meetings and talked with the students and staff whenever we had a chance. We wrote notes and research memos after every interaction with teachers, students, parents or school staff. We also collected writing samples and worksheets from students to trace their learning progress. Often copies of homework and classwork were collected by teachers to share with us or use at the debriefing meetings for discussion.

### 3.3 Data analysis

For this study, translanguaging theory was adopted as a lens to revisit the data we had collected and reinterpret the past study in the context of the insights from new theories, and aim to give new life to past work and also deepen understanding of the phenomenon. Data analysis focused on the value of flexible language practices in supporting EBs' academic development. Therefore, this research not only seeks possible ways to meet challenges in the education of EBs in their formal education, but also for a novel research method that looks back at past data as a means for looking ahead in our scholarship.

Data analysis was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved open coding (Khandkar 2009) through which we used descriptive labels to code data.

Major codes that emerged included Chinese language, English language, translanguaging, Chinese culture, US culture, cross-culture, socioeconomic status, family, school and friendship. In the second phase, these codes were documented on an Excel spreadsheet to note patterns, significance, and conceptual connectedness. Through this process, the descriptive codes were organized in categories and merged into major themes like: translanguaging spaces in instruction, mixed language in group discussion, reading and writing, cross-cultural comparison, and cross-social studies.

## 4 The bilingual program: challenges

The bilingual/CLA program stood alone at the school. The content of the program had no clear links to any other subject students took at school. When students came to class, it was as if they entered an island which was disconnected from everything else (Fu 2003). Each of the three teachers of the Bilingual/CLA program had their own grade curriculum (6th–8th grade) and rarely communicated with each other or shared their work with faculty outside of the program. Few staff members, including administrators, were aware of what they were teaching. Our conversations with the CLA program's teachers and students suggested that studying in this program made students feel stigmatized, especially those who had been in the school for a few years. Students felt ashamed to be placed in the bilingual/CLA program, as that indicated that they were not qualified to study in regular classrooms. Students' outburst of "I feel dumb to be put in this program!" was reflective of the patterns we observed.

According to the CLA teachers and the principal, parents were often unhappy about their children's placement in the bilingual program. They thought being in the CLA program delayed their children's English development. A parent encounter narrated by the principal was illustrative of this attitude: One day, a parent came to the principal's office, waved her child's CLA work written in Chinese, and cried out emotionally: "My kid came here in September, now it is March, but he still can't speak a word of English. How come? What does he do at this school?!" On their end, the faculty members appeared frustrated with their work with newcomers. One social studies teacher complained: "I don't know how to start to teach them our grade curriculum. When I asked them where New York was, they pointed at New Mexico on the map. When I talked about the American Civil War, they thought it took place in 1945. They have no basic knowledge of this country." The ESL teachers also struggled to integrate subject-area content into their curriculum: "They can barely read English, so how can we have them read books with the social studies content required by the grade level curriculum?"

Even the teachers in the CLA program complained: “Some students are at the first-grade level in Chinese. How can I work with these students using the grade-level curriculum I have to cover? With 36 students in class, I don’t know to how to get them all to read and learn from the same textbook.”

In response to these challenges, the principal, who was already the fifth the school had hired in the past three years, with a faculty-leader team, decided to redesign the bilingual program thus:

- Integrate the CLA program with social studies curriculum;
- Build the students’ content knowledge so as to enhance their overall school learning along with the skills students needed in order to feel part of the new homeland.

## 5 The new bilingual program: a fundamental shift

To implement the proposed changes, the bilingual program was redesigned to integrate requisite social studies content. Based on the most pressing needs of the new Chinese immigrant students, the faculty decided to focus their social studies bilingual curriculum on US history, geography, government and New York City. They believed that this content knowledge would help these new immigrant students gain knowledge of both the society and city they now called home.

Finding books and other materials in Chinese on these social studies topics was a challenge, however. In addition, given the wide variation among students in their home and English literacy/language backgrounds, the faculty determined that it would be impossible to reach all students if the instruction was restricted to the traditional “one language only” policy or used one textbook for all. To address these challenges, the CLA/bilingual teachers (speakers of both Chinese and English) decided to give up depending on a single textbook for their instruction and shifted to utilizing trade books of different readability levels in both English and Chinese, as well as digital reading/video materials available online. The classroom library of the new bilingual program was stocked with trade books (picture and chapter books), other reading materials (magazines and textbooks), video resources and dictionaries in Chinese and English at different levels and on various topics.

### 5.1 Translanguaging spaces in instruction

In the sections that follow, we synthesized observation data from three bilingual classrooms, interview and debriefing notes with the teachers, students and staff, and student-created artifacts to compose narrative descriptions of how



translanguaging spaces were created in the reformed bilingual classrooms in reading, speaking and writing.

### 5.1.1 Reading

A clear indication of a shift to translanguaging spaces was the selection of linguistic resources available to students. Whereas, in the past, instruction in CLA was based on a single textbook, in the new bilingual program, students could choose to read books written in either language on the topics they were studying. For instance, during the unit on the US Civil War, we saw some students read Chinese books on the US Civil War, while some read picture or chapter books in English on this topic. Still others watched videos on the Civil War in either English or Chinese. This free-choice of reading aimed to reach all students' potentials and interests at different levels. In the past, with the whole class reading a single textbook in Chinese, the students with low Chinese literacy struggled to follow instruction. In contrast, students reported having choice of texts allowed them to feel that they were learning sophisticated content knowledge.

Regardless of their Chinese and English abilities, most students were able to gain content knowledge and develop both their Chinese and English language literacy as indicated by their improved performance in assessments and as attested by their teachers in debriefing meetings. Many students reported satisfaction with this change in informal interviews. As a student noted: "The new bilingual program is really a bilingual program as we can develop both English and Chinese in studying social studies contents rather than learning only in Chinese about China."

### 5.1.2 Speaking

Collaborative-group discussions took place in every class period in the new bilingual program. The teachers posted questions in Chinese and English on the whiteboard to guide the discussion, and students were allowed to use any languages in their responses. The teachers sometimes let students form their own discussion groups, and sometimes arranged groups based on shared topics. Notably, most of the group discussions were carried out in Chinese, a discursive decision which we theorize may have been influenced by the sophisticated content of the interactions and the fact that it was the stronger language for most students in the program. However, English was also present in those interactions, most often used by students who read English texts. During our observations, we often noticed English terms (e.g. "checks and balance", "the Gulf War" and names of the states) mixed in the Chinese, during class discussions.

### 5.1.3 Writing

After each topic, students were expected to write essays related to the topics studied. Similar to their oral contributions to discussions, in writing, the teachers also let students choose any language they liked to present their learning in their notebooks and final essays. Translanguaging practices were evident in the students' written work; some were written in Chinese, some in English and still others in mixed English and Chinese (see Figure 1). Notably, our data suggests that these fluid languaging practices in writing were accepted and appreciated through such formal channels of evaluation as grading and posting on classroom walls and hallways. When asked about this, one teacher responded: "I am just happy they all want to write. As long as they can express their understanding of the subject contents, I don't mind what language forms they used. My goal is on social studies contents." Our observations and teacher comments in debriefing sessions indicated that the freedom to write in any languages corresponded with fewer student complaints about writing assignments. In addition, analyses of students' writing suggested steady gains in their subject learning and writing abilities.

The writing samples in Figure 1 are indicative of the essays written at the end of a social studies unit on Western Exploration by students with diverse language and literacy abilities and with different lengths of time studying in the US. The first sample (Chinese) was written by a student who had recently arrived in the US and was at the beginning level of learning English,; the second sample (English) by a student who had been in the US for two years and still needed ESL service, and the third piece (in Chinese and English) by a student who had arrived in the US a year before and tried every chance she could to practice her English writing. The writing composed during class time, in combination with the quality of the learning of the subject contents demonstrated in their written work, clearly suggested that all students benefitted in some way when given free choice in their reading, speaking and writing in the new bilingual program.

In the past, the teachers had faced, as one teacher put it, "challenges in meeting the needs of the students on opposite ends": those students with below grade-level Chinese literacy and students with relatively strong English proficiency. Our observation data showed that given choice in resource language and complexity, the students chose to study texts and videos that allowed them to access the curriculum and meaningfully engage with the content. For instance, students with below grade-level Chinese language literacy often chose to read picture books and watch video resources, building adequate content knowledge to follow along with and contribute to the class lesson. At the same time, the students who had been in the U.S. for a while tended to read more complex books in English or Chinese. When asked about their choices, students consistently reported feeling

Day 4 Cross the Mountain

经过昨天惊险的一天新的一天又开始了。我们继续出发。我们穿过了森林后就要爬山了。我们上山了。今天天气好冷又下雪了。就好像整个人冰冻了一样。我们就穿了很多衣服。但因为雪太大很多人被雪淹没了，也有人冻死了。到处都是白白的雪，我们一家人撑到山顶后越来越冷。但很多人都被雪困在半山中。我们一家人撑不住了就先休息一阵。但过了一会，我们又继续上路了。这时雪也慢慢减少了。我们继续下山因为下雪了路很滑我们差点跌倒了。但我们一样都撑过去了。而我们也终于下山了。到了晚上我们找个地方休息准备明天上路。

丁悦兰

Day 1 Prepare to the West

Today is a fine day. I came home then my Mom and Dad wanted me to prepare some things. I went to bring my clothes and some things to use that we need on our trip to the west, where there were more land and the better life. Because many people already moved to the west to find the better life. First we went to buy the wagon and take some things in the wagon that we have to use. The place we have to go is Oregon. We have to travel many days and the journey will be hard but we have to find the better life. Also I want to know how the Oregon looks like and can we find the better life. I am very curious. But I think the journey will be hard but I am very happy about it.

Day 1 My family go to west

My name is Qian Lin. My home altogether four people, my family very poor, I want to move to a very beautiful's place. I go home, I see my father and my mother in discuss what, 我就问 my father and my mother 在说什么, my mother's 脸上 very happy 地告诉我 "We move to a beautiful's place," 我听了很不 happy, then my sister go home, 我就把一切发生的事情告诉 my sister, my sister 听了很不高兴。到了 7:00, 我的家人先去吃晚饭。吃完了, 到了晚上 12:00, 我梦见 my grand father 对我笑, 我 I and my grand father said: "my family 要 move to a beautiful's place."

Figure 1: Writing samples of essays on Western Exploration.

that they were learning content knowledge as well as enhancing their English academic language development. On this issue, several teachers noted that resource choice enhanced student engagement in class. As one teacher stated, “their learning engagement brought them joy and confidence as learners in the bilingual program.”

## 5.2 Becoming biliterate in the new bilingual program

The Social Studies curriculum in the bilingual program under study followed grade-level expectations and was focused on fairly U.S.-centric topics such as the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Given this, it would not have been surprising for lessons to maintain this focus and treat students’ non-U.S. based knowledge and histories as irrelevant. However, our classroom observations suggested that the new bilingual program with its diverse resources and translanguaging norms in oral and written communications also created a translanguaging space for a cosmopolitan treatment of these topics. Indeed, making explicit connections between what they were learning about with respects to the U.S. with the knowledge of their home country was a frequently encountered pattern in both group and whole-class interactions. The students leveraged their bilingual, bicultural and transnational backgrounds, to initiate and develop comparative conversations which appeared to not only support their learning about their new world but also gain a better understanding of their homeland with which they were closely connected emotionally. When new learning is synthesized with prior knowledge, the new material is given greater relevancy and endears itself to the student. The following essay below is an illustrative example:

It is not good that brother fight against brothers because it makes a family no safety and peace. It is a good thing that after the Civil War the American people understand this and they never fight against each other again. This is why the United States is the most powerful country in the world today and so many people want to come this country.

China is a big country. Chinese people are smart. But China is not a very rich and powerful country in the world. Why? My father told me that there are too many civil wars in Chinese history. Fighting kills people and damages economy. I think this a reason why China is not strong like America. I hope people in China understand this and be friendly with each other. I will write letters to my friends in China. I will tell them brothers in a family should not fight against each other. People in a country should not fight against each other. No fighting a family will be safe and happy. No fighting a country will be strong and powerful. (written in April, 2005)

Similarly, during their unit on various eras of US history, students connected distinct ideas from U.S. history with comparable facets of Chinese history. These

conversations also became fertile ground for critical literacy explorations regarding point of view, historical silences, and bias. For example, our fieldnotes include conversations comparing the U.S. colonial era with China's imperial era, and conversations contrasting democratic governments with authoritarian ones. During the WWII unit, many students were miffed that content on Japanese aggression was confined to the Pearl Harbor attack, leaving out Japan's atrocities throughout Asia and asked "Why was the Japanese invasion of China not mentioned?" In addition, such explorations occasionally led connections with family histories as in the case of a student who contributed information about his grandfather's participation in the anti-Japanese war.

Our observations also suggest that students' engagement as bilingual and bicultural individuals in the bilingual program enabled them to be more engaged with national and global events. Students inquired about hot social topics such as immigration and civil unrest due to police brutality, poverty, and the corruption of big business and government. They also initiated conversations on global issues like genocide, disease, religious warfare, terrorism, and the effects of natural catastrophes. They became unsettled after learning about the worsening climate crisis, the depletion of natural resources, and the poisoning of waters around the world. Engaging with these issues across various formats using various languages gave these students unique resources to enact their individualities as Chinese-Americans and as human beings in our world. By translanguaging, they were also transculturating amongst nations and realities, using diverse languages, to tell their stories. They were laying the foundations for an interconnected future, where their lives, their stories, and their languages came together to share one global voice, which is more important in the current world situation than ever.

## 6 Discussion

A translanguaging approach was practiced in the new bilingual program, though its conceptualization and utilization was still inchoate. The program adopted a common bilingual practice into instruction to maximize the learning potentials of the students. This practice, now conceptualized as translanguaging (García 2019), is how these bilingual/emergent bilinguals communicate in their everyday lives in their bilingual world: at home, on the streets, in their community or at school with their peers. When their everyday translanguaging practice is validated as a learning tool or approach in their formal education, these EB students are using their language resources and potentials to learn, to engage, to meet challenges in their new world authentically. Their teachers, being bilingual themselves, can also use their biliterate competence and ability to guide students to reach their

potentials in learning. Translanguaging practice connects students' home and school ways of learning, and allows them to use their full language repertoire to function as learners. It satisfies their learning desire and needs, and affords them choice to regulate their own learning progress.

Even though translanguaging was not the term this school faculty used then in their pondering of more effective ways to support EB students nearly two decades ago, the reinterpretation of the data presented in this paper clearly shows that they had actually adopted translanguaging ideas and practices to enable their students to maximize their learning potentials in developing their biliteracy competence. The new bilingual program became a dynamic bilingual context where there were bilingual books, reading and reference materials on the bookshelves, and bilingual posters, notices, word walls and students' work on the classroom walls. Writing and discussion in both languages permeated throughout the day in the bilingual classrooms. In this bilingual learning community, both teachers and students were working and learning together as abled bilingual and biliterate beings.

By reinterpreting our data through a translanguaging lens, we have found that after being given a choice of languages, EBs were able to fully engage in and benefit from their learning. The bilingual resources and the freedom of language choices served as a bridge within their bilingual and bicultural worlds. Translanguaging as a practice can incorporate the full range of the diverse and complex linguistic repertoires of bilinguals. Translanguaging imagines these linguistic practices as not emerging "in a linear way or function[ing] separately since there is only one linguistic system" (García and Li 2014: 14). Rather discourse becomes liberated to engage in many directions, with the present, with the students' futures, and with their pasts.

In effect, the new bilingual program had become a space for the newly bilingual students, a safe space where each of their languages and full language repertoire were validated and can exist together meaningfully without trepidation. Where their former bilingual classes partitioned their languages, almost bordering off Chinese within its confines, this new space allowed a free-flow of languages to inhabit its walls. Rather than living on the margins of U.S. society, forever feeling like a foreigner, students in the new bilingual program felt empowered to broker languages and meaning feely to come to a dynamic mediation of realities.

In essence, this reframe is most similar to García's advocacy of a single heteroglossic linguistic repertoire where students can adapt their idiosyncratic language usage to the occasion. There is no longer a transference between languages but rather refocuses communication as employing multiple languages, all equally valid in the conveyance of meaning. If school administrators viewed languaging from the framework of a single linguistic repertoire, instead of alterities interfering with the acquisition of English, then minority languages and voices would be

sanctioned. There would not be a consternation of using heritage languages in classrooms, but a valuation of all language usage. Via a translanguaging space, minority children can reclaim pride in the voices of their families, in the stories of their homes.

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