## Building Connections through Exploring Stories of Migration

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"Have you noticed that although life has gotten socially better over the decades, there are still a lot of modern-day problems? We need to build hope throughout the world because without it the world would be miserable. If there was no hope everyone would live their lives accepting their fate and the problems going on in the world, which wouldn't do anything but make these problems progress." So starts a student's essay after examining multiple sources to explore the best ways to build hope and fight systems of oppression.

I teach eleventh-grade English, ages 16-18, in an urban public high school in the heart of a vibrant multicultural close-knit community located in the Fruitvale district of Oakland, CA. As such, it is essential for all of us, students and teachers, to learn about the multiple perspectives of others and the rich tapestry of cultures making up our world. In our school, we have roughly 72% Latinx students from countries including Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and more. We have approximately 16% Black students and the remaining 12% are from Tonga, Cambodia, Yemen, and more. About 40% of our students are recently-arrived immigrants who moved to the U.S. in the last 3 years. After engaging in a year-long process of gathering data from surveys, interviews, student shadows, and focus groups, a need that students directly identified is learning about diverse cultures and histories. Additionally, in the pandemic, many students expressed feelings of despair and stress which were exacerbated with the news of various injustices involving police brutality against Black people and people of color.

Considering students' feelings, needs, backgrounds, and interests and considering my learning from participating in an online global education course as part of a Fulbright fellowship, I created a unit with the essential questions: (1) "How do we resist systems of oppression?" (2) "How can we build hope when the world around us seems to be falling apart?" During the unit, students explored these questions and gathered evidence from our sources in order to respond to one of these questions in a final essay.

My student teacher and I curated sources and created lessons encouraging students to explore these questions through examples reflecting their local communities and global communities so they could experience and interact with the diversity of cultures they were asking for. We studied several themes which could answer our essential questions. For example, one theme students explored was how education could be a possible way to resist systems of oppression or build hope. Another theme we looked at was how music could be a possible source of hope or resistance. I included a variety of sources including articles, art pieces, audio recordings, multimedia, and social media to provide multiple points of access to the information, to expand literacy skills on different types of sources, and to teach students the use of various sources as evidence for our essay.

## Incorporating Migration Stories: Black Migration within the United States

After attending the NEH summer institute in Tucson, I enhanced a part of my unit to incorporate migration as a possible form of resistance and hope. I started our exploration around migration by

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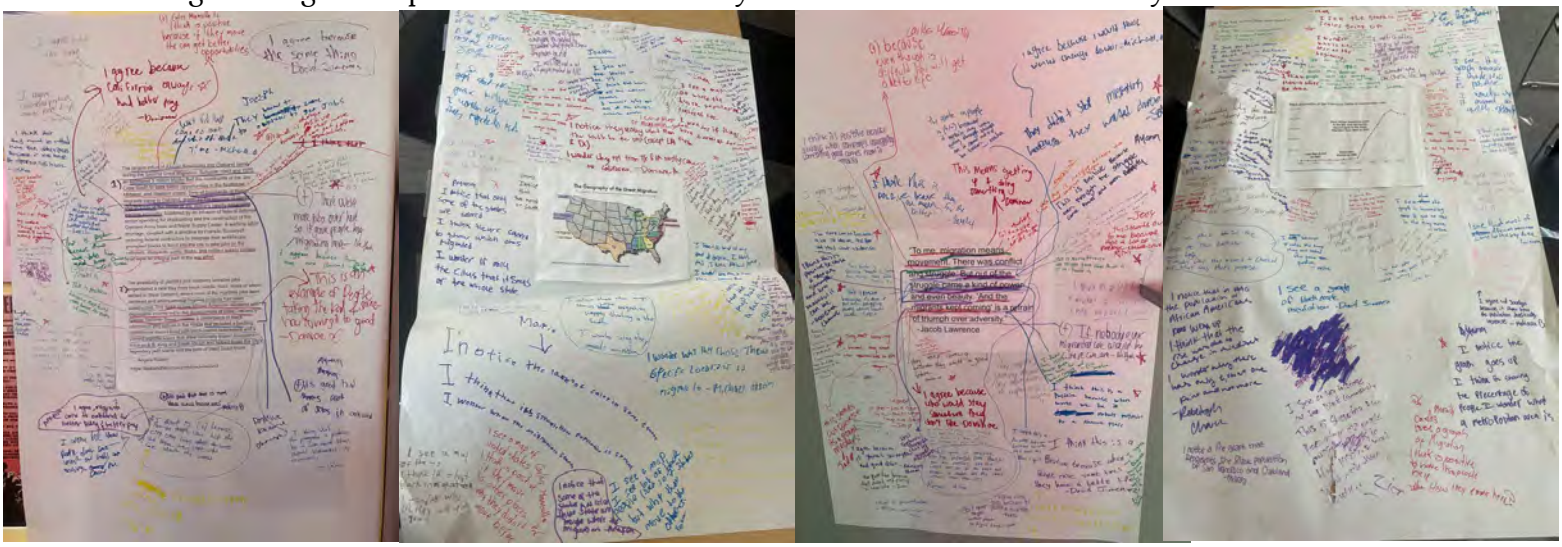
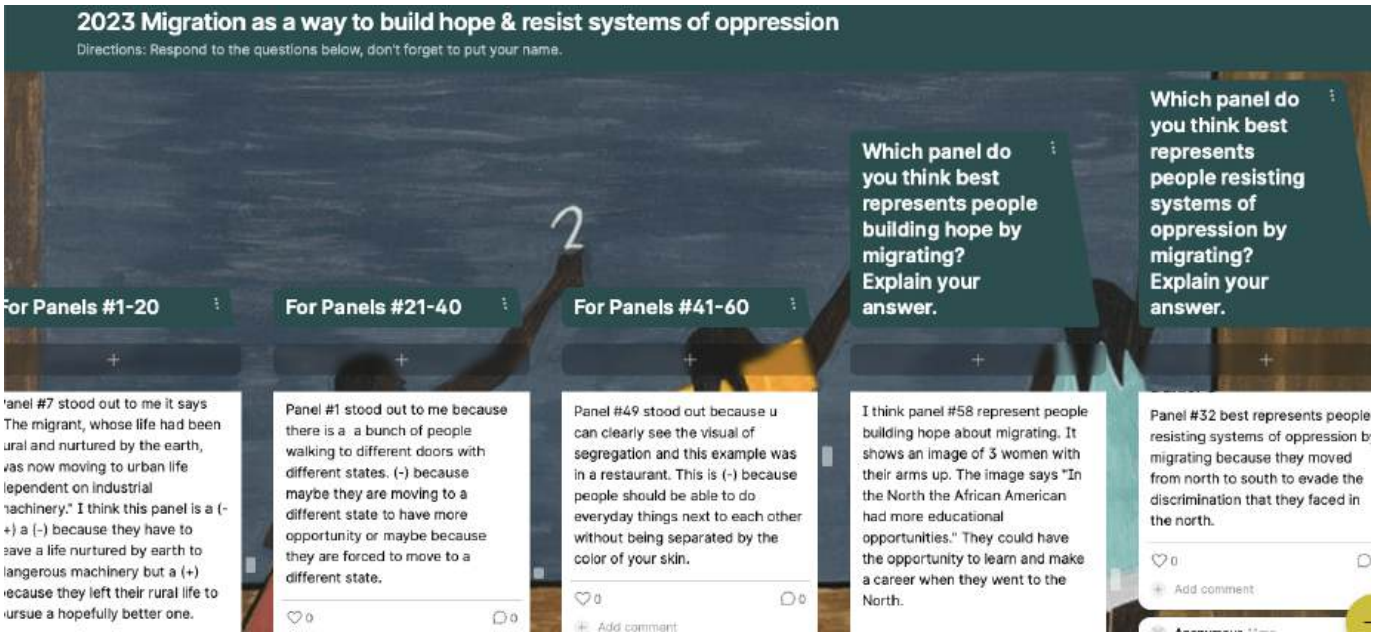
asking students how they arrived in the Bay Area. Some students had immigrated from various countries in Latin America, Yemen, Tonga, or Asia. Others had moved from other parts of the United States or had been born and raised in the Bay Area with either their parents or grandparents moving from other parts of the United States. I showed them a map illustrating the Black population in the United States in 1900. I reminded students of what they had learned in their U.S. History classes about the oppression of the Jim Crow laws in the United States. I asked students what they would do in this situation and whether they would choose to migrate to a new place. Many students, having had first-hand experiences of moving to a new place, felt choosing to migrate was a positive choice and that migration could bring the possibility of a better life. At the same time, students also discussed the difficulty of having to leave home and their family and friends.

Using this discussion as a starting point for engagement, students then analyzed quotes about migration and brief descriptions of the Great Migration. We also examined a migration map from the Great Migration depicting the migration of Black families from the South to the North and the West, including the migration pattern into our own city of Oakland and the wider Bay Area.



This exploration was especially important because many students indicated that they did not know people could migrate within the U.S. and they thought migration was only something people in other countries did. With this background, I introduced the artwork of Jacob Lawrence. Students could explore all of Jacob Lawrence's panels from his Migration Series as a kind of virtual tour (https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series) of The Phillips Collection at the American Museum of Modern Art in Washington DC.

Lawrence has 60 panels with brief captions depicting the Great Migration of Black families moving from the South to the North and the West. In this way the artwork helped students visualize the process of migration which included the struggles and pain as well as the hopes and dreams of the migrants. I created a padlet where students chose different panels that stood out to them and they commented on the panels that most demonstrated migration as hope and migration as an act of resistance in the face of systems of oppression.




Once students had these visuals to aid them, we read excerpts from Isabel Wilkerson's (2011) T*he Warmth of Other Suns* so students could examine and connect with eyewitness accounts of the move from the South to the West Coast. For example, while reading about the journey of Dr. Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, students discussed and reflected on his dilemma and ultimate decision to migrate from Louisiana to California. Because of segregation, as a Black man, Dr. Foster was not allowed to practice surgery in Louisiana, and this influenced his decision to move. One student reflected, "This is both negative AND positive. This is negative because he even felt the need to leave because he wasn't allowed to practice surgery, even though he had the knowledge, because he was black. This also positive, though, because he's leaving for a fresh new start." Another student said, "I agree that moving away could help his life get better because it could take a lot of negative energy away from him and he could focus on his dreams more." After reading, when asked if they would also choose to migrate to California, one student said, "Yes I would have because I would like to chase my dreams." Another said, "I would move to the west for more job opportunities." Finally, another said, "I liked that he thought about his son, and he wanted to follow his dream."

## Incorporating Migration Stories: Guatemalan Migration to the Bay Area

After reading and discussing both Lawrence's and Wilkerson's works, I paired these sources with an article on immigration from Guatemala (https://norcalpublicmedia.org/capital-public-radio-latest-news-rss/do-you-speak-mam-growth-of-oaklands-guatemalan-community-sparks-interest-in-indigenous-language) since I also have many students who immigrated from Guatemala. Students were surprised to learn that Guatemalan immigrants shared similarities to Black Families from the Great Migration and later some chose evidence from these sources for their essay. This positively impacted student learning because students made connections to their own cultures, but also connected to the experiences of other cultures with which they were surprised to find similarities.

One student said, "Some similarities between migration of Mam families from Guatemala into the United States versus migration of Black families form the South to the North of West Coast are that both

have situated themselves in other cities besides their own home countries to escape from war and discrimination against them. Also, both have migrated from afar just to have the opportunity to live in a much better environment that isn't surrounded with violence, war or discrimination." Another student said, "The same way they [Guatemalan immigrants] made themselves feel at home [once they moved to Oakland] is the same way Black people would make themselves at home [when they moved to the West Coast during the Great Migration]."

## Final Reflections

Considering the diversity of this class, I was reminded of how valuable it is to create learning experiences where students discover connections with others. After exploring the Great Migration through maps, art, and text, students learned a lot about the migration experience of Black families within the United States. By pairing this study with the article on Guatemalan immigration, students made a lot of connections between the families of the Great Migration and the more recent immigration patterns of Guatemalan immigrants to Oakland and the Bay Area. This brought not only more connection between students but also more empathy as they realized perhaps our whole class consists of families of migrants who are hopeful for a better life — whether they migrated recently to the Bay Area or years ago.

Moving forward, I want to incorporate more experiences like this where students can find connections beyond their own cultures. I especially recommend finding ways to connect the learning material to the local community. Studying migration patterns to the Bay Area helped students connect more personally to the lessons. Additionally, I highly recommend incorporating more art and maps into units before diving into more text heavy works. The art and the maps allowed students to visualize the history of the Great Migration in a way that made it easier to access the Isabel Wilkerson reading later because the students already had a mental image of the history and more background knowledge on the topic.

At the end of the unit, some students named migration as one of the best ways to build hope and to resist systems of oppression. One student wrote, "we can build hope through migration because we build communities with it." I certainly agree.

## References

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