Supporting Immigrant Students:

Trauma-Informed, Relationship-Centered Strategies for Teachers

Re-Imagining MIGRATION

Immigrant students are experiencing unprecedented trauma and toxic stress. This guide provides concrete, classroom-tested strategies recommended by Dr. Maryam Kia Keating.

THE CURRENT REALITY

Immigrant students are under severe stress. Enforcement actions lead to dramatic drops in school attendance. Students experience significant worries about family safety, which may affect their ability to focus and learn.

What this means for your teaching:

- Concentration problems may reflect external stress, not disinterest
- Before assuming emotional or behavioral issues stem from individual problems, examine the ways in which environmental factors are contributing
- Your classroom may be the only safe space some students experience all day

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Look for changes in a student's typical emotions and social behaviors:

- Increased absences or late arrivals
- Withdrawal from peers or group activities or isolating themselves
- Difficulty focusing during instruction or seeming spaced out
- Changes in academic performance
- Anxiety or anxious behaviors
- Sleep or eating disruptions (e.g., seen during lunch/breakfast programs, falling asleep in class)

Remember: Research shows that harmful policies and neighborhood factors predict short and long-term physical and mental health outcomes for children and adults. Students are impacted by what they are exposed to directly and on social media, as well as the well-being of their caregivers and family stressors.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE STRATEGIES

When you notice concerning changes:

Create brief one-on-one moments for gentle check-ins that let students know you care and see them as whole people, not just academic performers. Your tone should be warm and genuine, not probing or

clinical, making sure students understands the limits of confidentiality for you as a mandated reporter.

- "I want to check in on how you and your family are doing and if there is anything I can do to support you"
- "There have been some frightening things in the news. I hope your family is safe."

Briefly sharing your own reactions can help to normalize and validate experiences of worry:

- "Some of the things I have seen on the news have made me feel very frightened or upset."
- "I am worried about peoples' families in our community"

Don't:

- Force students to disclose details about their situation
- Make assumptions about what's causing negative behaviors or emotions
- Jump immediately to behavior corrections
- Request information that would require a family to disclose sensitive details about their immigration status

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BUILDING RESILIENCE

Lasting support comes through the daily routines and rituals that are already part of your teaching practice. It's within these everyday interactions—taking attendance, transitioning between activities, organizing group work—that we build the sense of belonging that helps young people develop resilience.

This shift from reactive to proactive and responsive approaches doesn't require adding hours to your day. Instead, it involves being more intentional about how you structure the time and interactions you already have with students.

STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS

Social support is the strongest predictor of wellbeing after trauma. Loneliness and isolation create additional stress, while feeling connected to others provides a buffer against difficult circumstances.

Center relationships and relational practices (restorative approaches, community-building, and consistent trust-building) at your school and in your classroom:

- Assign specific students to be "classroom partners" with newcomers
- Rotate partnerships so multiple students get to know each other
- Choose partners who genuinely enjoy helping others

Connect families to one other:

- Facilitate introductions at school events
- Share contact information (with permission) between families who speak the same language
- Use existing parent volunteers to welcome new families

Build social networks systematically.

These connection strategies work best when embedded in your regular classroom routines. The goal isn't to add new activities, but to be more intentional about using existing structures—group assignments, seating arrangements, classroom jobs—to ensure every student has multiple pathways to connection.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Once you've addressed immediate concerns and begun building connections, you can focus on transforming your classroom culture. Creating a supportive environment isn't about adding more tasks to your day—it's about structuring the space and time you already have to help students feel safe and focused.

Create transition time:

- Start class with a few minutes of breathing or quiet reflection
- Help students to mentally "put down" outside worries (see the Project Zero Thinking Routine below).
- Use consistent routines that help students feel grounded

Try this: Creating Space for Learning - A Routine from Harvard Project Zero:

A routine to foster a disposition toward self-understanding, self-direction and mindful and compassionate concentration
Breathe-Notice-Set Aside-Keep
Have students draw a circle on blank paper, then guide them through:

- **Breathe**: Find a comfortable posture and take three deep breaths.
- **Notice**: What is on your mind and in your heart right now? Write or draw your thoughts and feelings inside the circle.
- **Set Aside**: What feelings and thoughts might you need to set aside for now to learn today? Gently "move" these to the margin of the page.
- **Keep**: What feelings and thoughts do you want to keep as you prepare to learn today? Bring them to the center of the circle.
- Take a few final deep breaths and turn to your learning.

From "Social & Emotional Thinking Routines for Teaching in a Diverse, Complex, and Moving World: An Educator's Guide" (2019) by Veronica Boix Mansilla with Carola Suárez-Orozco & Devon Wilson. Jointly published by Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Re-Imagining Migration.

Make your room a greenhouse of possibility: Your classroom might be the one hour a day where students can forget outside pressures and experience joy and a sense of belonging. This isn't extra work—it's essential for learning, and educators benefit alongside students by elevating positive feelings, nurturing hope, and being intentional about their purpose.

Give students voice and choice, especially given that agency and empowerment may feel stripped away in other facets of their lives:

- Ask for input on classroom rules and procedures
- Create opportunities for students to share their expertise or interests
- Offer choices in how to demonstrate learning when possible

WHEN STUDENTS NEED MORE SUPPORT

In addition to formal referrals:

- Connect the student to caring peers in your classroom
- Link families to other families in your school community
- Use community resources and neighbors when possible

Professional referrals can be intimidating for families concerned about interactions with officials. Community connections often feel safer and can be just as helpful.

Do consider professional support when:

- Students explicitly ask for help beyond what you can provide
- Safety concerns arise
- Families request additional resources
- Persistent changes don't improve with increased classroom support

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SUPPORTING AND CONNECTING ALL STUDENTS

Remember that all students have family migration stories:

- Invite students to share family histories when appropriate. If a direct discussion doesn't feel safe, consider the Tenement Museum's Your Story, Our Story approach, focusing on objects that tell personal stories of American immigration and migration
- Help non-immigrant students understand their role as allies
- Recognize that hostile environments affect everyone negatively, not just targeted groups

Students are naturally inclusive when given permission and structure to be so.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Pay attention to your own stress signals: Early signs include fatigue, irritability, or feeling overwhelmed by student needs.

Limit news consumption: Get the information you need, but avoid repeatedly watching upsetting videos. Research shows excessive media exposure to collective trauma can predict depression years later.

Connect with colleagues: Find other teachers who understand the challenges you're facing. Share strategies and provide mutual support.

Maintain basic self-care: Sleep, nutrition, and brief breaks between classes become more important during stressful periods, not less important.

Seek support: If you're feeling hopeless or overwhelmed, it will affect your ability to create the hopeful spaces students (and you!) need.

REMEMBER YOUR ROLE

You have the power to help children experience joy and safety during their school day. While the outside world may create fear and uncertainty, your classroom can be a place where students feel they belong and can focus on learning.

The goal isn't to fix everything—it's to provide consistent safety, connection, and the message that every student belongs in your classroom.

Based on an interview with Dr. Maryam Kia Keating, licensed clinical psychologist specializing in trauma and resilience. Dr. Kia Keating eagerly looks forward to receiving questions from educators to better understand and support them in their essential work.

For additional resources: **www.reimaginingmigration.org**

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