



amazeworks

The Rock in My Throat

**Lesson for Educators and
Caregivers**

amazeworks.org

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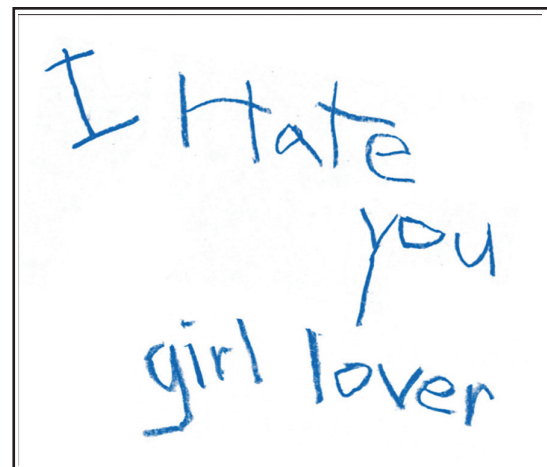
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History of AmazeWorks

AmazeWorks began in 1996 because of an incident of bias towards a 2nd grade student with two lesbian mothers. In response to this incident, the family worked with a committed group of educators, parents, school psychologists, and community members to create a program to talk about diversity in a way that helps children learn about themselves and the people around them. This group's belief that every child should see their family structures, identities, and lived experiences reflected in positive mirrors in the classroom led to the creation of AmazeWorks and our foundational Elementary Curriculum, rooted in Anti-Bias Education. AmazeWorks was incorporated in 1996 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



Our Process

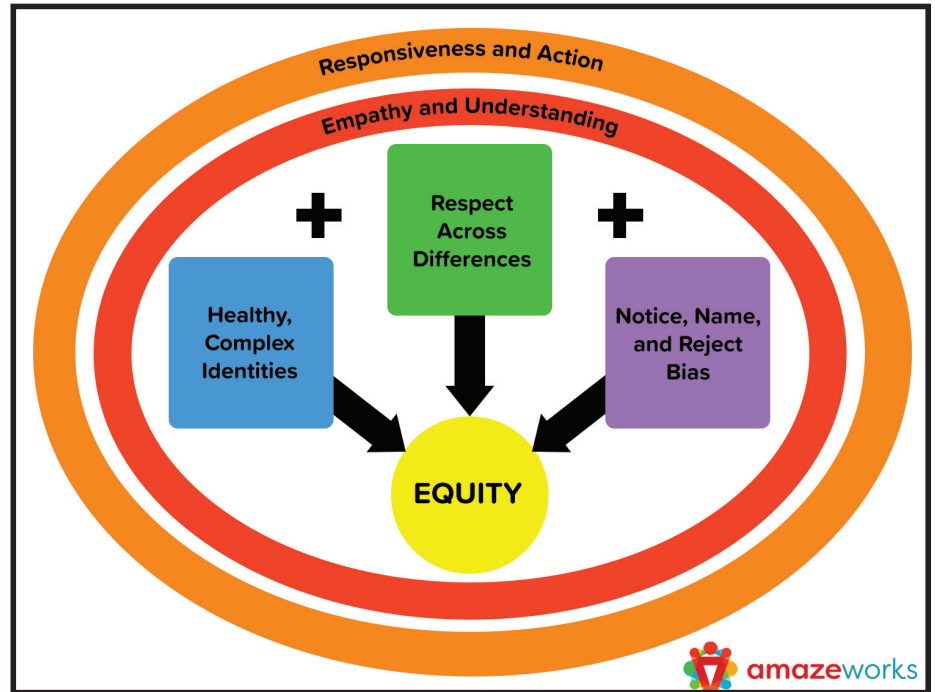
AmazeWorks carefully curates the books we use in our curriculum, identifying books that are written and illustrated from authentic voices as much as possible. We utilize task forces of educators, community members, parents, and specialists to vet and provide feedback on the books and lessons to ensure that the curriculum truly reflects the tenets of Anti-Bias Education and does not reinforce harmful stereotypes of different groups of people.

The curriculum was created using a backwards design process. Discussion questions and journal prompts are guided by the Six Facets of Understanding framework (Wiggins and McTighe).

AmazeWorks Anti-Bias Education Model and Conditions for Belonging Framework

The Elementary Curriculum is centered around the AmazeWorks Anti-Bias Education model, developed from the work of Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards in early childhood.

“Anti-bias education is a critical approach to teaching and learning that recognizes that change is needed. Anti-bias educators actively challenge prejudices and injustices. They engage in critical thinking and problem solving, supporting all children in developing a fuller understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Anti-bias teaching helps children strengthen their identities as capable and empowered human beings. Through anti-bias education, children identify issues and inequities in their lives, ask questions, consider multiple perspectives and thinking about their lives critically, growing to actively resist prejudice and discrimination. Anti-bias education acknowledges that while education is a human right, in today’s classrooms, schools, and society, biases are shaping the experiences and very futures of children.” (Derman-Sparks et al. Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change. Teachers College Press, 2015.)



Anti-Bias Education (ABE) promotes:

- Empathy and understanding for self and others
- Healthy and complex identity development
- Respect across and appreciation of differences
- The ability to notice, name, and reject bias
- Responsiveness and taking action against bias, prejudice, and discrimination

Infused within Anti-Bias Education is **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**. When children engage in discussions around identity, difference, and bias, they are developing and practicing the important SEL skills of:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making



The Rock in My Throat
Musical Composition by
Jocelyn Hagen

The Rock in My Throat

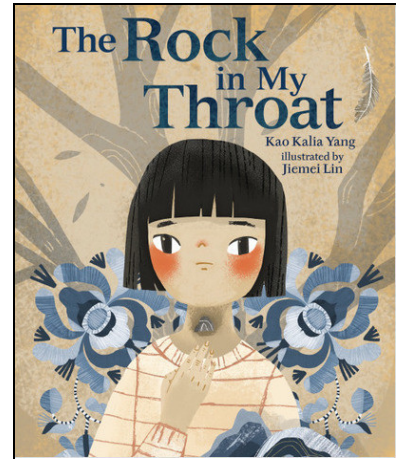
written by Kao Kalia Yang
illustrated by Jiemei Lin

Book Lesson for Educators and Caregivers

Book Title: *The Rock in My Throat* by Kao Kalia Yang, illustrated by Jiemei Lin

Recommended Ages: 7 and up

(**Note:** Some of the figurative language in this book may be difficult for young children to understand. When sharing this book with younger children, you may need to take more time in explaining the metaphors and guiding children in making inferences based on the text and illustrations.)



Book Summary to Share With Children

This is a true story about a young girl, Kao Kalia Yang. She tells about her experiences as a Hmong refugee. A refugee is someone who has been forced to leave their homeland because it was not safe to stay there. In this story, she describes watching English-speaking people treat her parents poorly, which led her to stop speaking at school. Kalia feels as though a rock has become lodged in her throat, and it grows heavier each day. While this story is about a difficult time in Kalia's life, listen and look for signs of love and hope throughout the story.

Reflection Questions for Educators and Caregivers

1. Think about a time when you were in a group and felt like an outsider. What made you feel like an outsider? Was there anything someone in the group could have said or done to help you feel welcomed? How does that experience affect you now?
2. In the book, there is a conversation between Kalia and her mother that is not translated into English. When you see this conversation without the English translation, what feelings arise for you? Why do you think the author decided not to include the English translation?



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Reader's Note

AmazeWorks suggests that all adults read the **Author's Note** in the back of the book before reading this book to children. It provides important context for the story and will help you in navigating the conversation. There are also some helpful pronunciations of the Hmong names and sentences that will be helpful for non-Hmong speakers when reading this book aloud.

Hmong people are an ethnic group without a country of their own who have traditionally lived in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and China. Following the Vietnam War, in which many Hmong in Laos fought alongside the U.S, Hmong people were forced to abandon their homes. Many sought refuge in Thailand. Many Hmong refugees began coming to the U.S. during the 1970s, and there are over 300,000 Hmong people currently living in the U.S.

Hmong people have not traditionally had a written language, so history and culture were passed down through generations by way of an oral tradition. Because of the displacement of many Hmong after the Vietnam War, first generation Hmong Americans have not all had the connection to Hmong history and culture previous generations had. The preservation of the Hmong language is key to preserving the history and culture of Hmong Americans.

[Watch this video](#) featuring author, Kao Kalia Yang, and her father, Bee Yang, who is a poet of Kwv Txhiaj, a type of Hmong song poetry. In this video, they talk about their family's story and how Bee Yang's song poetry inspired Kalia's love of language. If you are not familiar with the Hmong language, spend some time listening to the language as a way to more deeply understand Kalia's story.

For more information about Hmong history and culture, check out these resources:

- "Hmong in Minnesota." Minnesota Historical Society, <https://www.mnhs.org/node/3374>.
- Yang, Nancy. "10 Things: Hmong Culture, Food and Language." MPR News, MPR News, 1 Mar. 2015, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/03/01/10-things-hmong>.
- "About Us." Hmong Cultural Center, 2018, <https://www.hmongcc.org/about-us.html>.

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In the story, Kalia’s rock in her throat is due to selective mutism, an anxiety disorder that is usually found in children. Children with selective mutism are unable to speak around certain people or in certain settings. For example, they may speak freely at home among family members but not be able to speak when at school. Often, their silence can be misinterpreted as shyness. When this happens, it is often not addressed as a possible barrier to learning or belonging, and parents and caregivers are often discouraged from seeking treatment as it is thought that the shyness will pass. Children with selective mutism are not being oppositional or refusing to speak. In reality, they are extremely anxious and cannot talk, even when they want to. It used to be believed that selective mutism was a result of trauma or abuse, but there is no evidence of a causal relationship between the two. This means that a history of trauma may contribute to selective mutism, but not all children with selective mutism have experienced trauma or abuse.

For more information about selective mutism in children, check out these resources:

- “Complete Guide to Selective Mutism.” Child Mind Institute, <https://childmind.org/guide/parents-guide-how-to-help-a-child-with-selective-mutism/>.
- Selective Mutism Association, selectivemutism.org.

Anti-Bias Education Tenets

- Empathy & Understanding
- Healthy Complex Identities
- Respect Across Differences
- Notice, Name, & Reject Bias
- Responsiveness & Action

Social-Emotional Learning Competencies

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision Making
- Relationship Skills

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Discussion Questions (*essential questions in bold)

1. **Before reading the book:** Look closely at the cover of the book. What do you notice? What feelings come up for you when you look at the cover? Why do you think the illustrator chose the design and colors they did?
2. What is important about the feather that Kalia found on the ground at recess?
3. **Why does Kalia stop talking? What does the rock represent?**
4. **What happened with the woman at the store when Kalia's mother tried to buy light bulbs? How did that experience affect Kalia?**
5. **Why do you think that the author doesn't provide an English translation for the Hmong sentences in the story?**
6. **What do you think Kalia was feeling on the day there was a substitute teacher?**
 - What words or phrases did she use to describe her emotions?
 - **Have you ever felt like this? If so, what helped or could have helped you during that time?**
7. Why do you think being in a world that speaks English makes Kalia feel so exhausted?
8. **How does the story end? Why do you think the author ends the book this way?**
9. **Have you ever tried to include someone who was alone and they said 'no'? Why might they be saying 'no'? How can you let the person know that you care and would like to include them?**
10. Why do you think Kao Kalia Yang wrote this book? Who is it for?
11. What signs of love did you see or hear in the story? What signs of hope did you see or hear?

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Journal Questions

1. Explain: *Empathy happens when we understand how someone is feeling so well that we experience the feelings with that person. Often, we can connect to a time when we've felt the same way. This is different from sympathy, which is when we feel bad for someone else who is going through something difficult, but we can't connect to their feelings in the same way.*
 - a. Write or draw about a time when you had empathy for someone else or someone else had empathy for you.
 - b. How do you think the story would be different if more people showed empathy for Kalia and her family?
2. In the book, Kalia talks about the only place she is able to rest at home. Write or draw about a place where you can rest and be yourself. Think about the following question: What makes this place somewhere you feel like you belong?
 - a. Afterwards, ask: *How can we make our neighborhood, classroom, or community a place where everyone feels they can rest and be themselves? What can you do as an individual? What can we do together?*
3. Have there been times in your life when you couldn't talk, even though you wanted to, or others couldn't understand what you wanted to say? Write or draw about how that felt. How does it feel to think about that now?

Activities

1. Learn more about Hmong history and culture. Use resources available/recommended by the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. They have a museum and library you can visit if you're in the area, and their website hosts many great resources at <https://www.hmongcc.org/museum-and-library.html>
2. If you have access to an iPhone or iPad, check out the HmongPhrases app, created by Hmong American software developer Annie Vang as a way to preserve the Hmong language. Listen to some common phrases, and talk about why preserving the Hmong language is important.

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- a. Why is it important for young Hmong Americans to have an app like this one?
 - b. How does language help us stay connected to our cultures?
3. **Arts Connection** – After reading and discussing the book, listen to the [musical piece \(also see accompanying QR code\)](#) made to accompany the book reading with your child. After listening to the music in its entirety, ask your child(ren) what emotions they think the music evokes, and write them down. Then, play the music again, stopping every so often, to see if your child has any other emotions to add to the list. Offering an emotions chart with pictures and/or words may help with this process.
- a. Using the list of emotions, work with your child(ren) to create a visual art piece to represent the emotions the music evokes. This could be a collage, painting, sculpture, etc. Use whatever materials you have available, including any natural materials that may be around.
 - b. Using the list of different emotions throughout the musical piece, ask your child(ren) to describe how each emotion feels in their body. You can also ask them to show you how each of the emotions would look if they were a movement. Next, work with your child(ren) to create a dance to accompany the music that represents Kalia’s feelings throughout the book. Perform the dance for other family members and share the story with them.

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