

A Curriculum Guide to

The Distance Between Us: Young Readers Edition

By Reyna Grande

About the Book

Reyna Grande spent the first years of her childhood longing for her father to return home after he decided to make the dangerous trek across the Mexican border in pursuit of work in America. He was determined to earn enough money to build a dream home for his family. As the months turn into years, Reyna’s mother joins him in *El Otro Lado* (“the Other Side”). Forced to live with their stern grandmother, Reyna and her siblings look out for themselves—and for one another—as they wait for their parents to come back home.

Ultimately, Reyna finds herself preparing for her own challenging and dangerous journey to *El Otro Lado* to live with the man who has haunted her imagination for years: her long-absent father. In this middle-grade adaptation of her memoir, Reyna captures the struggle her family endured while trying to adapt to a different culture, language, and life in the United States. Living a childhood torn between two parents and two countries, Reyna also reveals how books and writing helped save her during the most difficult times. Both funny and heartbreaking, Reyna’s story is one of hope and love, and an exploration of complicated family bonds that won’t break, no matter the distance.

Discussion Questions: Part 1

1. List everything you learned about Reyna in Chapter 1, including a description of her sister, Mago. What is the most surprising thing you discovered?
2. Why did Reyna have to cut her hair short? How do we know Carlos is suffering too? What do you think would be most difficult about this experience?
3. How does Mago act out after learning of her mother’s pregnancy? How was she punished? Would you act out too?
4. How does Élide get a bit of sympathy? How was Tía María Félix particularly cruel during her visit? Why?
5. Describe Reyna’s school and her first day as a student. Why was it disappointing compared to her hopes?
6. How do the new outfits reveal the disconnection between the children and parents? Do you think it would be possible to still feel close to your parents in these circumstances? How?
7. What gave the children hope that their parents would come home soon? How did the children help? Why? Do you think the family’s sacrifice of being apart is worth the outcome?

8. Summarize the scorpion incident. What do you think would be the worst part—the scorpion, or being left behind?
9. Describe the reunion with Mami and her kids. Explain what Reyna means when she writes, “the woman standing there wasn’t the same woman who’d left.” Have you ever felt this way about someone you once knew?
10. Explain why they set up a stand where parties are held. What did Mami reveal about Papi’s work? What memory is revealed to Reyna?
11. What did Carlos witness from spying up a tree? Why did Mami leave again, and with whom did she leave?
12. Mago, a girl of only twelve, realizes it is too much for Abuelita Chinta to provide and care for four children. What does she do? What does this reveal about Mago’s character? What about Mami’s?
13. How does the story of the three pigs mimic Reyna’s worries? Describe what happened to Catalina. How did this effect Reyna? How would it affect you?
14. What had Carlos been made responsible for? Why? What was the result of this? Do you think this was too much responsibility for one boy?
15. Summarize the events at Christmas after Mami went to live in the city with Tía Güera.
16. Compare and contrast the children’s expectations of Papi’s visit with the reality of what happened.
17. What opportunity does Papi offer when Reyna tells him she, too, wants to go. At first, Papi will only take one child. How does Reyna appeal to his sympathy? How did this make you feel?
18. Why did the kids panic in the early morning on the last day of the bus ride? How would you react if you were in their position?
19. List the key moments of Reyna and her siblings’ crossing to America. Then choose which moment would have been most frightening to you. How about frustrating? Thrilling? Order the most important moment to the least important.

Discussion Questions: Part 2

20. Describe Reyna’s first day in America after arriving at her father’s home.
21. Why does Reyna feel like she was “tearing in half”? What does she miss from Mexico? What has Reyna lost and gained in moving to America? Are you surprised she feels this way?

22. Explain how the dentist's visit for Reyna reveals all the cracks and blemishes in the new family.
23. Summarize all the things that went wrong at Christmas. Do you think Papi is fair? Why or why not?
24. How did becoming a *señorita* become an awful experience (instead of a rite of passage) for Mago?
25. How is Papi full of contradictions? How is he both tender and cruel? Find examples of both.
26. Describe how both siblings are unlucky with their first crushes. What do you think it teaches Reyna?
27. What happens when Mrs. Anderson's class creates books one week? How is this a turning point for Reyna?
28. What do the siblings learn about Mami? How did they feel about her choices and actions as well as her explanations and excuses? How does Reyna's father feel about her mother? What did he want the children to do?
29. Describe the surprises band class held for Reyna. What does she learn about her dad?
30. Explain why Reyna's neighborhood can be a frightening place. Find at least two examples of how the siblings experienced violence.
31. Why did Papi lose hope after returning to Mexico? What had the home cost him, other than money?
32. When Reyna won a writing competition, how was it both exciting and disappointing?
33. Summarize Reyna's first interaction with romance. What do you think would be the worst part of her experience?
34. How does Carlos's accident underline their father's cruelty? What are the good qualities of Papi? How is Mago changing?
35. Describe how Reyna got a *quinceañera* and who she had to thank for it. What were some of the most memorable moments?
36. Compare and contrast the differences between Mago's and Reyna's reactions to their visit to Mexico. What has Reyna lost?
37. Why does Mago leave? What is Papi's reaction? Is Papi being unreasonable? Why or why not?

38. Describe Reyna's senior prom and how she got ready for it. What had happened to Mago's education?
39. When Mago comes to pick up Reyna from school, how does Papi react? Why doesn't Mago help?
40. How does Reyna stand up to her father? How does her first class go?
41. After her father was arrested, where does Reyna go? Who gave her a place of refuge?
42. How does the professor become her real life hero and expand her world?
43. How does Reyna welcome her father back into her life? When he reconciles with Mila, what is the condition she requires? How does this make Reyna feel? How would you feel?
44. What was your favorite part of the memoir? Why? Did it change your viewpoint on any key issues?

Extension Activities/Projects

1. Create a time line of Reyna's life as it is depicted in the memoir. Include the most important events from her childhood in both Mexico and America. This could be done traditionally on paper or poster board, or could be created in a virtual space (see: www.dipity.com).
2. Vocabulary: choose at least ten words from the book that are new to you. Then choose one of the following vocabulary projects to build your word-base:
 - **Flash cards:** create a set of flash cards that have the following information on them: the word defined in your own words, both synonyms and antonyms, and a complete sentence revealing your understanding of its meaning.
 - **Crossword:** create a crossword puzzle using all ten words. Clues should help the player learn the definitions. Provide an answer key.
 - **Etymologies:** find the original language that each word first appeared in and any interesting information about its change through time. Describe any changes in their meaning over time and through various languages.
 - **Art:** sketch a picture that will help you remember the meaning of the word. Then add color to help your memory. Explain each sketch in one sentence.

3. Using a graphic organizer similar to the one below, compare and contrast life for Reyna in both of her childhood homes. Then, use your graphic organizer as a springboard for discussion.

	Poverty	Education	Family	Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects
Iguala, Mexico					
Los Angeles, CA					

4. Character Key Quotes: Find key quotes that best represent each of these characters from the memoir. A key quote could be a selection of dialogue that a person said himself or herself, or it could be something from the narrator or a line spoken by another character.

Character:	Key Quote:	Why it represents him/her well:
Reyna		
Mago		
Carlo		
Papi		
Mami		

Abuela Evila		
Abuelita Chinta		
Mila		
Dr. Savas		

5. Research one of the following topics from the memoir and then create a poster, pamphlet, or website about what you learned. In a short paragraph, explain its connection to the memoir and Reyna’s experience with it.

- Immigration
- Tijuana
- Los Angeles/ gang violence
- Iguala, Mexico
- Coyotes & trade of crossing over to *El Otro Lado*
- The Dream Act
- Quinceañera
- Lice
- Poverty
- Undocumented immigrants
- Citizenship/Green cards

This guide is written by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, author and English teacher. Curriculum guide addresses the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.1, 2, 3, 5, 6) (SL.5.1, 1a) (L.5.4b, 4c).

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