

Coming of Age in a Multicultural Community

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INTRODUCTION

I teach reading in an inner-city high school. Most of my classes are composed of students in the ninth grade, but I do have one class composed of 10th, 11th, and a couple of 12th graders. My classes contain a mixture of regular kids, special education kids, and English as a second language (ESL) kids. Many of my students are considered at-risk of failure for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to retention, domestic situations, lack of parents, being parents themselves, being children of divorced parents, substance abuse, and exposure to the criminal justice system. In general, my students are just like any other young person coming of age in a competitive, sometimes complicated, yet exciting time. In this unit I would like to not only help my students to be better readers and develop their vocabulary, but also give them a deeper understanding of the people around them. This will give them greater opportunities to lead richer, more productive lives. I read an article in the newspaper yesterday about a cab driver who filed a complaint with the police department because a police officer had given him person a hard time about being from another country. The cab driver was actually a naturalized citizen, but because the police officer who stopped him lacked an understanding and appreciation of living in a multicultural community, his behavior was inappropriate. I do not want my students to be plagued by insensitivity and ignorance with regard to people of cultures different from their own. In this day of globalization, cultural tolerance and appreciation are paramount to social growth and development.

My students, like most people, respond best to pieces of literature they can relate to. This includes stories of people who are going through some of the same things they are going through. They also like to read about real people going through real-life events. This unit will include stories of young people who are not only trying to grow up but are faced with the added difficulty of leaving one community for another and then trying to find their place in that new community. All high school students are trying to find their place in life, but being a new immigrant can make that event even more daunting. The unit will also discuss why people leave their home countries to immigrate to the United States. I will focus on certain parts of the globe for various reasons. First, I will focus on the Middle East because of 9/11 and the war in Iraq. These types of events have led to situation like the one I observed in my classroom where, in response to an unrelated question about India and Pakistan, many students had caustic comments about Pakistan. They blamed the people of Pakistan for the airplanes flying into the World Trade Center. This made me sad for my students, because they were carrying around so much hatred for a whole country full of people who they did not even know. To accomplish the task of increasing cultural understanding, I will have students read and interact with *Funny in Farsi* by Firoozeh Dumas and *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi.

Second, I would like to focus on Vietnamese immigrants as well as Hmong immigrants to address the needs of the relatively large Vietnamese/Asian population in my building. At my school there is an Asian club, which attracts Asian students as well as other students. Each year they put on exhibits and demonstrations in order to educate other students about the Asian culture. I take my students to these presentations and there has always been an observable level of interest as non-Asian students attempt to learn more about the people they encounter both at school and in the community in general. There are also benefits for the Asian students in my classes in that by seeing themselves reflected in print, they will gain a sense of validation. Other students may look at them with a new sense of understanding and respect. For this part of the unit, students will read excerpts from *Once Upon a Dream: The Vietnamese-American Experience* edited by De Tran, Andrew Lam and Hai Dai Nguyen; excerpts from *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People* edited by Mary Terrell Cargill and Jade Quang Huynh; and *Hmong Milestones in America: Citizens in a New World* by Susan Omoto.

I will start my unit by providing students with an extensive list of inspirational thoughts, ideas, sayings as well as words of wisdom from many different cultures. The students will be put into groups of two or three and they will select their favorite message. They will then have to copy the message of their choice along with the author's name onto small or large banner paper or small poster paper. I would like to cover the room with these messages to inspire students every time they walk into the classroom and to remind students that each culture has worthwhile ideas to share. They will also see how everybody needs guidance and inspiration once in a while. From there we will move on to reading the texts I have chosen.

IRAN

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood

The first book my students will read is called *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi. It is an autobiography written in cartoon format about growing up in Iran during the Iranian revolution. It tells one person's story of leaving her home country because of turmoil. Marjane is an only child to educated, progressive, and socially active parents. Her story is enlightening and inspiring. It will teach my students many things. My students' lives are so restricted to their immediate area. They identify themselves by what part of town they live in. They like to write "southwest" on the blackboard because that is their part of town. Reading *Persepolis* will teach my students what it is like to grow up in a different time and place. The fact that every page is filled with pictures along with text will disarm my students who are usually so guarded about learning anything new through books. Some of Marjane's story is fairly sophisticated and requires prior knowledge to be fully appreciated (like most text) but again the illustrations will make her story easier to follow and comprehend. So much of what we know of the Middle East we learn from the news media and that perspective can be very

one dimensional. Marjane's story will give my students an up close and personal perspective, which is far removed from what is seen on TV or in the newspaper.

Marjane begins her story with a chapter entitled "The Veil." Before the revolution, women and girls had not been required to wear a veil, which is actually a head scarf, but afterward all females were required to wear one in public. Marjane shows the little girls in school using the scarves for other purposes such as combining them to make a jump rope and pretending they are something else. Her story is also filled with tragedy, suffering and sorrow. Between the revolution and then the war with Iraq many people suffer and die. My students will see how hard life was under the Shah and then just when the people have gotten rid of him for a better future, Islamic fundamentalists take over and make life worse for the people. The Shah had imprisoned people for going against the government so when he was removed, these people were set free. Some of these people were family members of Marjane. Unfortunately, these imprisoned people had not changed their politics so the fundamentalists imprisoned them again and finished them off. Marjane's neighbor is killed when an Iraqi missile blows up her apartment building. Marjane narrowly escapes being detained by the Woman's Branch of the Guardians of the Revolution. She is stopped while walking down the street because her hair is showing; she has on tennis shoes and a blue jeans jacket. Her parents finally send her to Vienna, Austria to keep her safe. My students need to see why some people have to leave their homes and go elsewhere to be safe and grow to their full potential.

As students read, we will discuss Marjane's experiences. I will ask my students to compare their lives to hers so they can see the differences and similarities they share with young people in other countries. I know from experience that there will be a few students who have an incarcerated relative. Marjane's uncle is incarcerated for his political beliefs. This may be the first time my students have had any experience with the concept of a political prisoner. The opportunities for vocabulary development are immense. There are so many words that I know my students will not be familiar with. We can take these words as they appear and determine which parts of speech they are, define them, and use them in a sentence.

Funny in Farsi

Funny in Farsi, by Firoozeh Dumas, will be a most appropriate book for my students to read for several reasons. The chapters are short and easy to read. This is a near essential quality for my students, because they seem to have an intense repulsion for any text they feel is too long. The short chapters will also help them to improve their comprehension by providing them with a specific framework from which they can understand the text. While my students are reading this book, I will most likely have them keep a log or journal where they can write notes, impressions, thoughts, summarizations, inferences, generalizations, and questions as they read. *Funny in Farsi* is an autobiographical account of an Iranian girl (Firoozeh Dumas) growing up in the U.S. before, during, and after the fall of the Shah in the late 1970s. My students know about 9/11, and I think it is

fairly safe to assume they know of some, or I should say, many American's ill feelings toward Middle Easterners right after that time; however, they do not know of the Americans held hostage in Iran in the 1970s and what effect that had on Iranians living here in the United States. Reading *Funny in Farsi* will give my students a sense of what it is like to live in a country where you have to lie about where you come from just so people will not harass you about it. *Funny in Farsi* is just like the title states – very funny. I read part of this book with my 10-year-old daughter, and we both just laughed and laughed. I think that if the humor in this book can span three decades, it can certainly touch the funny bones of my students, who have most likely never read a really funny book.

Firoozeh Dumas' story begins in Whittier, California where she began her life in America in the second grade. She knew very little English, and her mother knew even less. Together they were so lost that they literally were unable to find their way back home. They couldn't ask for directions, they couldn't read the street signs, and finally they had to rely on the kindness of strangers to help them get home. In a perfect world I would take my students to Botswana or Switzerland and enroll them in classes for one week just so they would know what that feels like. Since that is not possible, I will simply ask them, after they have read the chapter, to explain what they think it might be like to be sent off to live in Botswana without the benefit of language, much less friends to rely on. I will ask them what might potentially be embarrassing, funny, and scary.

Most teenagers find their parents to be trying at times, but to an immigrant child, there is the added dimension of having to translate for one's parents while one is still trying to master the language oneself. Through news media I have heard stories about how this can be a difficult situation for children with regards to legal and medical matters. Firoozeh shares some of the more comical moments associated with trying to master a new language. For example, when a plumber told them they needed to use elbow grease to get out a stain, they went to the store looking for elbow grease and were given an explanation of just exactly what it is (Firoozeh 12).

Firoozeh addresses the issue of continually having to answer questions regarding her place of origin and her language. Because of her skin color, she was occasionally mistaken for Mexican. People would assume that she could speak Spanish and would ask her to translate (Firoozeh 38). Reading this part of the story will precipitate class discussion regarding the stereotypes we make about people who look different from us. We all do it, but I think that if we are more aware of the people around us, then we are less likely to make blanket generalizations and more likely to keep an open mind regarding others. I think this might be a good time to pause the reading so students can look at three different pictures of people. These pictures might include people from Africa, people from the United States who are of Chinese decent, and people from Argentina. In turn, I will have students write a short paragraph telling about the person in the picture. After they have completed their paragraphs, I will add a voice to each picture and instruct them to write a new paragraph about the same picture. The voice will be

recorded authentic dialogue. From this activity we can have a brief discussion of some of the stereotypes that we have. I think it would be interesting to see how perspectives change once a voice is added to a face.

When the Iranian Revolution began and Americans were taken hostage, Firoozeh lived in Newport Beach, California. Americans went from being kind and generous toward Iranians to being downright hateful. Firoozeh writes, “for some reason, many Americans began to think that all Iranians, despite outward appearances to the contrary, could at any given moment get angry and take prisoners” (Firoozeh 39). I think that many Muslims and Middle Easterners in general were plagued with similar sentiments following 9/11. I guess they came to this conclusion from hearing their parents or perhaps it was something they had misconstrued from the news media.

Through *Funny in Farsi* I would like to dispel ignorance and provide knowledge and awareness. Firoozeh is a fairly average girl with an average family. My students will be able to meet and know an Iranian family without actually meeting them face-to-face. My students will be able to see how absurd some of their former fears and prejudices have been. In the chapter entitled “The ‘F Word,’” Firoozeh discusses the difficulties some immigrants have regarding names. Immigrants have been changing their names to fit the English language since before the days when great waves of immigrants entered Ellis Island. This was partially due to the fact that many immigrants did not know how to spell their own names, but another part of the reason was the limits of the English language. We have incorporated words from many other languages, but we do not use the rolled “r” as in Spanish or guttural sounds that come from the back of the throat as in French, Arabic, or Farsi. I do not think my students as a whole have any idea what it might be like to have to change your name because no one can pronounce it or because they always get it wrong. After my students read this chapter, I will have them think of another name for themselves and challenge them to use it for one week just so they will have some understanding of how one’s name is associated with one’s identity and how changing it can affect one’s sense of self.

In the chapter entitled “I Ran and I Ran and I Ran,” Firoozeh points out how some immigrants suffer persecution simply because they have decided to come to the United States. In 1977, the Shah of Iran decided to come to here to meet Jimmy Carter. Several Iranians residing in the U.S. were invited to go to Washington D.C. for a ceremony. Firoozeh and her family were some of those invited. Unfortunately, they were threatened both by way of a message as well as by having projectiles thrown at them. They literally had to run away to avoid physical harm. I do not know of a similar incident taking place with other immigrants, but I have met several immigrants who have been unable to return home for fear of imprisonment or death. I think that this chapter will further illustrate to students how people from the Middle East or people of the Muslim faith cannot all be lumped together as a single entity with malice in their hearts. When the Iranian revolution occurred, Americans were held hostage. All of this was depicted on the evening news, which led to a lot of anti-Iranian sentiment. Firoozeh and her family had

to endure this sentiment. Her father, who clearly loved being in America, tried to find work at this time. On remembering this time and her father, Firoozeh writes, “[H]e only said how sad it was that people so easily hate an entire population simply because of the actions of a few . . . what a waste it is to hate” (Firoozeh 121). From this chapter I will discuss with my students the concept of hate. We will discuss what is helpful and what is hurtful about hate. Specifically, we will make a list of all the things that they hate and then why they hate what they hate. From this we will discuss how hate can be harmful to individuals, communities, and societies.

VIETNAM

Voices of Vietnamese Boat People: Nineteen Narratives of Escape and Survival

“Live Free or Die” is a biographical narrative by Khon Luu that tells of his flight from Vietnam. Originally, his family was from China, but they emigrated to Vietnam to escape war. On November 23, 1987, Khon and his son left Vietnam to escape a corrupt and oppressive government. In “Live Free or Die,” Khon gives a brief history of the war in Vietnam before American involvement and up to 1975 when the Americans left. He goes on to tell about his failed escape attempts and his last successful attempt. On leaving Vietnam, Khon writes, “It burned my heart to leave, and the path to that life was a watery one – an ocean of tears” (164). Khon had been involved with the South Vietnamese Army and the American Army which made his life very hard when the communists took over South Vietnam. To avoid being sent to a re-education camp he took on a new identity but that was a short-term solution. After many failed escape attempts, Khon and his son finally escape by boat to Indonesia where they stay in a refugee camp for six months until they are sent to the Philippines where they stay an additional six months. Finally, one year after leaving Vietnam, they come to the United States where they make their home in Concord, New Hampshire. Khon’s wife and daughter did eventually join him in Concord. Of this reunion Khon writes, “Before they arrived, my life in America was just a refuge, not a home. Since my wife and daughter arrived, my house has become a home” (170).

“Drowning the Boat” by Hung Truong is another selection from *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People* that my students will read. In this narrative, Hung tells of his life in Vietnam without a mother or father and with three little brothers to look after. At the time, he was 14 years old. Hung’s father had worked for the South Vietnamese Navy, so when the war ended, he was barely able to find work. His mother left the family before the end of the war. Hung’s father attempted to leave Vietnam with Hung and his second brother, but then he went back to shore because he could not leave his other sons behind. He took Hung and his brothers to live with his sister for a while, but she was very poor, too, had nine children of her own, and was not capable of feeding everyone. Unable to provide a home for his family, Hung’s father and his sons were sent to live in a new economic zone (Truong 69). The family was practically starving when Hung’s father got into a conflict with a communist leader, which led to his detainment. Eventually, Hung’s

father escaped with his sons, but by that point, he really had problems because he was a wanted man. Hung's father decided to kill himself and his family, but before he could carry out his plan, his sister stopped him and talked him into escaping with four of her children. She promised him that she would escape later and bring his children to him. This left Hung and his brothers virtually alone. They went to live with his grandfather, but he was unable to work, so Hung did all of the work while his three younger brothers went to school. Eventually, Hung's uncle took them to live with him and his family, but he was an abusive man who took the money Hung earned from work and abused Hung's brothers. Hung writes, "[H]e tied them up by their hands to a tree and beat them" (72). Disgusted by everything, Hung wrote to his father for money so that he could take himself and his brothers out of Vietnam. His father was able to send him what he needed to do so, and he eventually did with his brothers. Hung, his brothers, and his sister, who had been taken away by his mother before her birth, stayed in a refugee camp for three years before joining their father in America.

Reading these narratives will benefit my students in many ways. They like to read about real people going through real situations. For that very reason, they will be interested in the stories before they ever begin reading. The situations are real, yet the reality is so different from what my students are used to reading about elsewhere. "Live Free or Die" will provide students with knowledge of the Vietnamese War from a Vietnamese perspective. Although Khon's historical summary is very brief, it addresses America's involvement in the war and why we were not successful. Khon writes, "[T]hey wanted us to follow the American Way. But we weren't American" (Truong 166). This will provide students with a contextual understanding of America's involvement with Vietnam. I know they either will learn or have already learned about the Vietnamese War in their history classes, but that information does not provide an in depth personal experience. When people tell their stories of personal experience, they are more likely to touch their reader's or listener's emotions, which in turn leave that person with a deeper and more sustainable knowledge and understanding. Students may also look at their Vietnamese/American classmates with more compassion and understanding. I have never seen Vietnamese-American students engaged in frequent conversations with non-Asian American students, so I feel fairly certain that most of these students have no idea how difficult and tumultuous life may have been for many Vietnamese-American families. Since many of these events happened in the 1980s, it is possible that some Vietnamese-American students may not even know the history of Vietnamese people coming to America. This may be eye opening for those students as well. "Drowning the Boat" tells of a 14-year-old boy who struggles to feed his younger siblings. Many of my students are 14 years old. Many of them have real, difficult issues of their own to deal with, but then again, perhaps when they see what Hung had to go through, they will see their own problems as more manageable. They may be able to better appreciate what they rather than being discontent about what they do not have. Most American children have more than they realize. Hung had to endure physical, emotional, and financial hardship over a long period of time, but he did not give up (even though his father almost

did). I want my students to be strengthened by the perseverance and courage Hung showed

“Drowning the Boat” and “Live Free or Die” are both short. This is very helpful in my classroom since most of my students would immediately dismiss anything that they considered to be too long. As students read they will be able to pull out and examine vocabulary words; raise questions that have definitive answers as well as those that have no specific answer given in the text; make inferences and draw conclusions about Hung and his life; and compare and contrast their lives with Hung and his brothers.

To teach these two narratives, I will first provide my students with some context to facilitate understanding. I will show a documentary on Vietnam. This will give my students a visual image of the setting and background of the two narratives. I will then have my students read two different newspaper articles on the war in Vietnam. One article will be from 1972, and the other article will be from 1975 when the United States withdrew their forces from Vietnam. I selected 1972 arbitrarily because I want them to read what was being reported about the war while the war was in full swing. We will read and discuss these articles together to glean as much understanding from them as possible. Again, this is to further their contextual understanding of the setting of the narratives. We will read, annotate, and discuss the selections together. As we read we will pause to write, define, and discuss unknown words and write possible answers to questions that begin with how and why. I write “possible” answers because if everyone writes a question and we answer them together, then we may not have time to answer all of the questions in a single class period. What I have done in the past is have students write their questions on the board and then have the class answer them collectively. Sometimes, everyone wants to ask the same question, but most of the time students can come up with some very interesting and different questions. I will also ask students to summarize as they read in order to practice this skill. For example, in “Drowning the Boat,” Hung Truong talks first about his dad and then about himself. Once students finish reading the part about his father, they can stop and summarize that part of the narrative. They can also make judgments about his father, especially the part where his father considered suicide/murder for himself and his children. We can discuss what kind of despair brings a person to that point and what we have in our society to help people who are feeling so hopeless.

Once Upon A Dream: The Vietnamese-American Experience

Once Upon a Dream: The Vietnamese-American Experience is a collection of essays, short stories, pictures, and poems by Vietnamese-Americans. These selections reflect life during the exodus from Vietnam, everyday life conflicts in America and what it is to return to Vietnam. I am using excerpts because some selections are not appropriate for my students. “Warmth in A Cold Land” by Nguyen Van Ba is a short story about a son who, with the help of his family, reunites with his father after a long estrangement. Quan and his father, Mr. Lan had both been soldiers in the South Vietnamese army. When

South Vietnam fell to the North Quan found out that his father had gone to the United States with a young woman leaving his wife and Quan's mother behind. After the war, Quan had been forced to attend a re-education camp and finally escaped by boat with his wife and children to Canada. Quan's mother died alone in Vietnam of tuberculosis. Quan had never forgiven his father for abandoning him and his mother. Mr. Lan comes to visit Quan and his grandchildren at Christmas time. At first Quan refuses to bring his dad home but makes him stay at the YMCA. Quan's wife encourages him to bring his dad home, which he eventually does. Once in Quan's home, Mr. Lan falls in love with his grandchildren and they return his love. Mr. Lan acts like most grandfathers in that he dotes on his grandsons and takes them places. In the meantime, Quan is very cold toward his father. On Christmas day Quan's dad gives him a train that is a replica of a real train back in Vietnam. The combination of this gift along with the love he witnesses between grandparent and grandchildren releases Quan's long held anger so that Mr. Lan is finally invited to live with Quan and his family indefinitely.

This story will enable by students to see how immigration can disrupt family ties. My American students will be able to see a different side of their fellow Vietnamese students. Last year I had two Vietnamese students and academically they did very well. Other students may think their lives are pretty comfortable because of their academic success; however, as "Warmth in a Cold Land" points out, immigration can leave an immigrant with a sense of lost or broken ties with family roots. They will also recognize the power of family and how love and forgiveness is better than holding on to anger and resentment. Quan's story will show my students that in spite of our cultural differences we are fundamentally the same.

Before reading this story I will have my students consider their own families. I will have students answer questions like: what does family mean to you; who is the family glue; who in the family gets into more trouble than the rest; what could a family member do to cause themselves to be shunned or ostracized by the rest of the family; what impact has the older people, like grandparents, aunts or uncles, had on your life? I will then have students construct a public service announcement that expresses the benefits of having a grandparent or other significant older person involved with their lives. This will remind students who have withdrawn from their grandparents of the importance of those relationships. It will also serve those students who are being raised by grandparents by giving them an opportunity to express what they know very well. These creations will be placed around the room while we are reading "Warmth in a Cold Land."

We will read "Warmth in a Cold Land" together to insure understanding. We will again use this story as an opportunity to practice good reading skills like summarization, questioning, inferring, and comparing and contrasting. I will break the story up into three parts for summarization. The first part will be where Quan is at work and chooses to delay picking up his father at the bus station. The second part will be where Quan first brings his father home and ignores him; and the third part will be where Quan is finally able to forgive his father and rediscovers his love for his father. The biggest question in

the story will be why did Quan's father abandoned his family in the first place. As a class we will refer back to the point in "Drowning The Boat" when Hung's mother abandoned the family. We will discuss why a parent might abandon his/her children. This might lead to a pretty interesting conversation, because I know several of my students in the past did not have a mother or a father because they had just left. We can also discuss how huge an undertaking it is to forgive a parent for doing such a hurtful and potentially destructive thing. From there, students can infer what kind of relationship they think Quan will have with his father in the future. We will look back through the text by re-reading certain parts – such as the part about the train – to find support for our inferences. Students will also be able to see the benefits of mending old family grievances. I can only hope that this activity will put at least one student on the road to considering doing the same in their own family.

Concluding the Vietnamese immigrant section of the unit, students will read "Where Do I Belong?", which was written by an anonymous author and is also from *Once Upon a Dream: The Vietnamese-American Experience*. This selection is very short – only one half-page long – but in my opinion, it is very powerful. The writer analogizes Vietnam and America to mother and father where, according to the writer, "America is my home. Vietnam is my homeland" (Anonymous 184). Through this piece the writer illustrates the struggle many immigrants undergo in making their new home in America. This will help my students to see the importance and value for immigrants in keeping their customs, religious beliefs, cultural celebrations, and language. In my community and that of my students, people celebrate the Chinese New Year as well as Cinco De Mayo. These are important celebrations for people from China and Mexico, and they are becoming more important for the rest of us as each year the rest of the community at least acknowledges these events. "Where Do I Belong?" will help students to see why it is important for these people to have these celebrations and why it is important for the rest of us to understand.

When we conclude this selection, I will have my students consider their own connections to their forebears and why it is important to remember what they have given us. For some students this may be easy, but for others who do not know their origins, it may be more challenging. An example of this might be the value different families place on family reunions or why we wear white at weddings, while in China white was the color of death and red was the color of weddings. Why is it that some people celebrate birthdays while others do not? We will also examine how all of the various cultural differences we discover add to our community and make it interesting and inviting.

The last group of immigrants my students will explore in this unit will be the Hmong people of Laos. Students will read *Hmong Milestones in America: Citizens in a New World*. This is a wonderfully written book that gives a brief history of the Hmong people and their culture; an account of their involvement in the Vietnam War; an explanation of why they had to leave their homes in Laos; a description of what life was like in the

refugee camps in Thailand; and five short biographies of Hmong people living in the United States.

The origins of Hmong people are unsure but persecution and immigration are part of their history (Omoto 11). They lived in the mountains of Laos to avoid friction with the Laotians, who had a different religion. During the Vietnam War, the American government enlisted the help of Hmong men to fight the Laotian communists. As a result, Hmong communities were bombed, exfoliates were used, and many Hmong were killed. At the end of the war, Hmongs continued to be a target for Laotian and Vietnamese communists, because they had helped the Americans. The American government airlifted many Hmong people out of Laos, but they either could not or would not get everyone. The rest of the people spent two years either escaping to Thailand or dying in attempts to do so (Omoto 26). Those who made it to refugee camps sometimes remained there for 10 years before they were allowed to come to the United States.

Dr. Xoua Thao is the first Hmong depicted in Omoto's book as well as the first Hmong physician. According to Omoto, "Thao's amazing story illustrates the tremendous capacity of the human heart to forgive, to let go of the past and to begin again" (Omoto 34). When Thao and his family first came to the United States, they were given a place to stay in Providence, Rhode Island. Thao had never experienced such cold weather before and found it difficult to adjust to the climate. The American kids at school harassed him, but he held on to his discipline, worked hard, finished high school, and went on to Brown University. Thao was culturally challenged along the road to becoming a doctor and while practicing as a physician. Hmongs believe in reincarnation, a process during which the whole body is deemed necessary, so when he had to dissect cadavers in medical school, he had to overcome that part of his cultural beliefs. Another conflict is when he treated older patients they wanted to be given opium, which was a standard practice in Laos, but was illegal here.

Ying Vang was the first Hmong Catholic priest in the U.S. According to Omoto, "Shamanistic animism was the spiritual backbone of the Hmong culture" (Omoto 43). This presents problems for Hmongs who immigrate to the United States because of the influence of Christianity. Some Hmong convert, while others do not, and this creates conflicts within the family. Vang was 13 when he arrived in a Thailand refugee camp only to find out most of his family had been killed by the communists. He lived in the refugee camp for five years and made connections with the Catholic missionaries stationed there. There, he converted to Catholicism and decided he wanted to help others as he had been helped.

Choua Lee became the first Hmong elected official when she was elected to the St. Paul School Board in Minnesota. This in particular conflicts with the Hmong culture in that women traditionally have had a lower status than men. Women definitely did not assist in the governing of the community. Lee and her family were able to leave Laos pretty quickly with the whole family in tact. For Lee, the most troubling aspect of

coming to America was finding her way around. In her narrative Lee writes, “It got so confusing. At first, I couldn’t tell the difference between the inside of a plane and the inside of a building . . . all the buildings looked the same” (Omoto 46-47).

It is important for my students to read about the Hmong people so they will know that all the people from that part of Asia are not the same. Hmong and Vietnamese lived side by side in neighboring countries, yet they are very different people. They have different religious beliefs, lifestyles, histories, and cultures. *Hmong Milestones in America: Citizens in a New World* gives even more examples of immigrants’ stories where each person must give up some of their old ways and adopt new ones. We all find meaning in context, and when you change the context, the meaning also changes. A common question that language arts teachers ask their students is, “How would the story be different if it were set in a different place?” Each one of us has a story to tell; our contexts change as we grow, yet as the story of the Hmong exemplifies, sudden and dramatic change can make life scary and difficult, yet challenging and exciting. American students need to be aware of some of the challenges ESL students face as they try to adapt to their new environment. American students would benefit greatly from a more open and understanding perspective. They just might get to learn new things about the world around them and broaden their horizons.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: Inspiration

Objective

The student will develop an appreciation for words and their impact through multicultural sources.

Materials Needed

Multicultural text that contains words of wisdom and inspiration

Poster board

Banner paper

Markers

Paint

Pencils

Tapes

Paper clips

Activity

In groups of two or three, students will be given a list of inspirational words and phrases from which they will select one phrase. They will transfer that phrase to either poster board or banner paper along with the author and country of origin. Students will then hang their choices around the room.

Lesson Plan Two: Pre-reading for *Persepolis*

Objective

The student will become familiar with one of the reasons why some people must leave their own country to insure their safety. The student will also develop a reason for reading.

Materials Needed

Newspaper article on the Iranian revolution from 1980
Paper
Pen/pencil

Activity

In preparation for reading *Persepolis*, students will read an article from the Houston Chronicle (or a similar article of the teacher's choice) on the Iranian Revolution. Once we read and discuss the article as a class, students will partner up to write a story in which they are the main characters. However, instead of living in Houston in 2004, they will place themselves in Iran in 1980. Students will be asked to write what they imagine an average day might be like for a typical 14-year-old. Before they do this, we will compile a list of exactly what makes up an average day in their lives and how this list might be different in a different country, different time, and different situation. Once students complete their stories they will share them with the class. The stories will be used to generate a discussion of what we imagine life to be like.

Lesson Plan Three: Post Reading Activity

Objective

The student will utilize critical thinking skills to synthesize and draw conclusions from reading multicultural text.

Materials Needed

Previously compiled annotations from material read
Paper
Pen/pencil

Activity

Students will use their notes to write a story of their own family's experience of coming to America. Some students will know how this came about and may therefore have an easy time on the assignment, but for others, it may be more difficult. It may be especially difficult for African American students whose forefathers probably came here on slave ships. An alternative activity might be to have these students write a letter to the forefathers who brought their family to this country through which they can express their feelings about being here and state whether or not they would rather be somewhere else.

Lesson Plan Four: Post Reading for *Hmong Milestones in America*

Objective

Students will use critical thinking skills to analyze selection and how it relates to their own lives.

Materials Needed

Hmong Milestones in America: Citizens in a New World

Annotations of selection

Paper

Pen/pencil

Activity

Students will use their annotations to create a new context for themselves. They will be able to either work alone or with a partner to place themselves in a new environment. They will use their notes to consider the how the Hmong's religion, lifestyle, and culture had to change when they came to live in the United States. Students will be given the choice of placing themselves in another country or even some made-up place. This place will have different laws, customs, and beliefs. To do this students will first have to decide on a place and then determine the laws of this real or imagined place. They will also have to decide what kind of food and clothing is common in this place. The religion will have to be different, so they will have to come up with a place where their religion is not the predominant one. Students will also have to look at customs surrounding everyday life like rights of passage, marriage, birth and death. Once students have determined the parameters of their new environments, they will write what their lives would be like if they lived there. They will be able to decide whether to take their family members or go alone or with friends. They will have to write at least three pages, the first page being their parameters. Once they have completed this assignment, they can compare their story with one of the stories presented in the book. They will be able to determine how their experiences are similar or different from the people presented in the book.

Lesson Plan Five: Pre-Reading for “Warmth in a Cold Land”

Objective

Students will get ready to read the selection.

Materials Needed

Paper

Pen/pencil

Poster board

Markers

Activity

Students will be asked questions about their own families. These questions will include:

- What does family mean to you?
- Who is the family glue?
- Who gets into the most trouble and what does the family do about it?
- What could a family member do to be shunned by the rest of the family?
- Who are the significant older people in your family?
- How has this person or people affected you throughout your lifetime?

From here, students will use their lists to create something that honors the older family members in their lives. They will have a choice of writing a poem, creating a poster, writing a song or writing a story. Once students complete their work, they will be able to share their work with the class.

Lesson Plan Six: Pre-Reading for *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People*

Objective

Students will develop a reason for reading and expand vocabulary.

Materials Needed

Newspaper articles on the Vietnam War from 1966, 1968, and 1970

Paper

Pen/pencil

Activity

Students will be placed into groups of two or three to read various articles on the Vietnam War. They will be asked to look for things like: What were American's attitudes about the war? What was the government's attitude about the war? How were Americans affected by the war? How were Vietnamese affected by the war? Does the article talk about the war in a favorable or a negative light? How do you think families were affected by the war? Does the article appear to state fact or opinion? Students will have to summarize the article, find and write down some facts and some opinions, infer what the attitude of the writer is by his or her word choice, infer who the writer's audience is, and infer the audiences' attitude based on what they have read. Once students have determined all of this information, they will present it to the class. Each presentation will be followed by two questions about the presentation asked of the presenters. Students will have to show that they were listening to the presentation by answering the questions correctly.

Lesson Seven: Post-Reading on *Persepolis: the Story of a Childhood*

Objective

The students will show understanding of multicultural text.

Materials Needed

Annotations from the selection

Paper

Pen or pencil

Activity

Students will work in groups of two to come up with a continuation of the selection. They will be given the choice of (a) writing three pages on what her life would be like living in her chosen destination, (b) writing three pages on what her life would be like if she had moved to the United States or (c) writing what her life would be like if she had not moved at all but stayed in Iran. Each piece must be illustrated at least partially. That is to say that at least one picture must accompany each written work. Students will be required to consider Marjane's hopes, dreams, and goals as a young person getting ready to go out into the world. They must consider her relationship with her family, her religion, and her values. They also must consider what other people would say about her, what they might think about her, and how they would treat her. They would want to write about whom her friends are and whether she has communication difficulties because of changing environments. Once they have completed their thoughtful work, they can share it with the class.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

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This is a wonderfully funny story about a young girl and her family. Firoozeh explains what it is like when no one can get your name right; how it feels to be suspected of gross wrongdoing just because of where you are from; and how language barriers can create some funny situations. This book seems to be accessible to people of all ages.

Luu, Khon. "Live Free or Die." In *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People: Nineteen Narratives of Escape and Survival*. Ed. Mary Terrell Cargill and Jade Quang Huynh. North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2000.

This book gives real insight into what Vietnamese boat people had to go through to get out of Vietnam.

Omoto, Susan. *Hmong Milestones in America: Citizens in a New World*. United States: John Gordon Burke Publisher, 2002.

This book tells of a people who helped the American government but were all but forgotten. Their stories are remarkable.

Once Upon A Dream: The Vietnamese-American Experience. Eds. De Tran, et al. Kansas City, MO: Andrews and McMeel, 1995.

This book has poem, illustrations and stories that tell the reader what it was like to leave Vietnam, what it is like to live in two cultures, and what it is like to return home. Great reading for anyone who wants to broaden his horizons.

Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of A Childhood*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003.

This story is accessible to a wide range of age groups because it is written in a cartoon format. This is the story of a young girl growing up in Iran during the Iranian Revolution in 1979/1980. Her parents make her leave Iran for her own protection. This book is a clear illustration of why some people must leave their country in order to reach their full potential.

Truon, Hung. "Drowning the Boat." In *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People: Nineteen Narratives of Escape and Survival*. Ed. Mary Terrell Cargill and Jade Quang Huynh. North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2000.

This book gives real insight into what Vietnamese boat people had to go through to get out of Vietnam.

Van Ba, Nguyen. "Warmth in A Cold Land." In *Once Upon A Dream: The Vietnamese-American Experience*. Ed. De Tran, et al. Kansas City, MO: Andrews and McMeel, 1995.

The book from which this essay was selected contains poems, illustrations, and stories that tell the reader what it was like to leave Vietnam, what it is like to live in two cultures, and what it is like to return home. It is great reading for anyone who wants to broaden his horizons.

"Where Do I Belong?" In *Once Upon A Dream: The Vietnamese-American Experience*. Ed. De Tran, et al. Kansas City, MO: Andrews and McMeel, 1995.
Written by an unknown author, this brief but poignant essay provides an interesting analogy of Vietnam and American to mother and father.

Supplemental Resources

Cerar, Melissa K. *In Their Own Voices: Teenage Refugees From Nicaragua Speak Out*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 1995.

This book for young adult readers tells several stories of young immigrants from Nicaragua.

Do, Hien Duc. *The New Americans: The Vietnamese Americans*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.

This book describes Vietnamese Americans from every aspect.

Lee, Gus. *Chasing Hepburn*. New York, NY: Harmony Books, 2002.

This amazing book tells of two families in China and how one family comes to the United States.

Orfalea, Gregory. *Before the Flames*. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1988.

This book gives the history of Arab Americans from 1878 it also gives the reader real insight into Arab Americans in general.

Schnapper, LaDena. *In Their Own Voices: Teenage Refugees From Ethiopia Speak Out*. New York, NY: Rosen Publishing Group Inc., 1997.

This book will teach its reader what it is like to be an Ethiopian refugee.

Sinnott, Susan. *Extraordinary Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders*. New York, NY: Children's Press of Scholastic, 2003.

This book tells of famous Asian Americans.

Ugwu-Oju, Dympna. *What Will My Mother Say: A Tribal African Girl Comes of Age in America*. Chicago, IL: Bonus Books Inc., 1995.

"A real eye-opener" is the best phrase I can think of to describe this book.

Reading this book would benefit anyone.