

How to Survive Being an Immigrant

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INTRODUCTION

I have been an immigrant since the last five years. As millions of people I decided to come here to the United States of America looking for either a better life, a better opportunity or, even a new opportunity for business or study. In my particular case I came here for two things: looking for a chance to get into a Master's degree program and also looking for a position as bilingual teacher in Houston, Texas. In looking for these two things, the master's degree program and the position as bilingual teacher, I have felt the strong and uneasy feeling of being an immigrant.

Even though I have traveled out of my country before, the fact of being an immigrant, which is strange to many people, is not an easy experience. I have to say that coming as an adult made my first step as an immigrant a little less complicated. I was very excited at the beginning. Starting a whole new life is always exciting. Also, traveling into another country is a great opportunity to know many things, many people, and many cultures. But, later on, I started to feel alone, and sensed the difficulty of starting a new life as an immigrant. Feelings of loneliness, homesickness, nostalgia, melancholy, solitude, isolation, separation, or sadness went around my head every night and day.

Although for many immigrants these feelings are different, in my case they affected me really hard at the beginning. For others, the condition of being an immigrant it is easier. Slightly less complicated. Can you imagine how hard it is being an immigrant as a child? How would you face a new life as an immigrant at a new school? What kind of fears, worries, or doubts do immigrants feel studying as immigrants?

I raise all these questions because children do not know how to handle a new situation like adults do. In other words, children can suffer a deeper impact living as immigrants. Their beliefs, their language, their social skills, and their cultural preferences are going to face multiple changes and challenges.

Forced Migration

Many of the immigrant children that come to the United States come by a forced migration. That means an aggressive and involuntary way to start a new life. It is not always easy to distinguish forced migration from voluntary migration. "Refugees" are defined as involuntary immigrants "pushed" by perceived threats to life and liberty and by political conditions. "Immigrants," on the other hand, are defined as voluntary resettlers "pulled" by expectations of a better future and attractive economic opportunities.

In the case of my students, they do not have the opportunity to choose. They come with their families and they start a new life right away. They are immigrants, no refugees. In fact, the status of "refugee" is not determined necessarily by the migrants but rather than the host government for a variety of ideological or political reasons (Ben-Sira 12).

In my case, I decided to come by my self. Although, my experience to live in a country that has been living in war since the last 50 years would have given me the opportunity to come as “refugee,” I came as an immigrant. Colombia, unfortunately, lives in a war. Many Colombians have to immigrate.

But the impact of forced migration goes beyond stress and homesickness. One case study made by Kinzie and Sack suggested that Cambodian refugee children from childhood to young adulthood suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Ben-Sira 16).

The effects of sudden separation for immigrants vary from a prolonged disturbance of an individual to stress. It is clear that whatever the motivation, whether voluntary or forced, immigration produces a major change in the lives of immigrants. In Rumbaut’s words, “migration can produce profound psychological distress even among the most motivated and well prepared individuals, and even among the potential for psychological stress and disorder” (qtd. in Tinajero and Ada 85).

However, there is a growing understanding that the stress in an individual’s life situation can not be attributed to change alone. One dimensional approach emphasizing only a stress-producing force inherent in any change is increasingly being challenged. Mirosky and Ross, for instance, specifically reject the importance of the psychological and social meaning of “life events” per se, that is, apart from their meaning and valence for the individual (Tinajero and Ada 87).

Cristina Igoa in the book *The Power Of Two Languages* states that “if we are going to understand the inner world of immigrant children, then we need to go to them, listen carefully to their deeper feelings, love them, and take what they have to say seriously so that in collaboration with them, we can design programs that will empower them fully” (qtd. in Tinajero and Ada 84).

Sometimes students can present obstacles or unexpected difficulties. Once they are in the classroom, teachers should know what kinds of issues are not related to immigration problems. As a teacher, you are going to have many phrases like “my students won’t talk,” or “the same few students do all the talking.” Many times teachers can suffer the confusion of, “Should I call students who do not raise their hands?” or “My students will talk, but they won’t listen.” Another question teachers ask is, “Brilliant, but did anyone understand?” That question occurs when a student will make a mathematically brilliant contribution or one that at least has the potential to open up some important issues for the class.

Those are questions teachers make in the classroom that do not have to deal with immigration. They have to deal with daily classroom discussions (Chapin 148).

The real problem occurs when immigrant students face the classroom once they are established in their new home. They have to deal in this way: the individual versus social learning. The emphasis of American education traditionally has been on individual learning. We can see this individual emphasis in the way classrooms are set up with straight rows facing the teacher. Under the influence of behavioral psychology, materials were developed that further isolated students, such as immigrant students: programmed texts, mastery learning kits, and dittoed worksheets.

Second language learners such as immigrant students face many views on social interaction. Educators have debated the role social interaction plays in language development and social adaptation. Krashen, in 1982, presented a model similar to Piaget’s, which emphasizes the active understanding of the individual in order for language development to take place. Krashen argues that language is acquired when students receive comprehensible input (messages they understand) that contains language structures that are slightly in advance of their present ability level (Freeman 104).

When students study a new language, as immigrants, they expect to be able to communicate in that language. A variety of teaching methods have been developed to help students reach that goal. Although the methods seem to be on the surface to be quite different, most of them are based on the assumption that students develop the ability to communicate by first learning language forms of functions.

ADAPTATION AND READJUSTMENT OF IMMIGRANTS

Immigrant students become part of the society. The word integration is a crucial word in this process. In sociologist terms, interaction among the members of a society is the building block unit of social systems. To function effectively in a society, the individual must be able to express his or her needs in socially acceptable terms.

Extensive theoretical and empirical work has been devoted to the study of the adaptation of immigrants, mostly focusing on specific aspects of this adaptation. There have been studies of occupational adaptation (Shin and Chang 1988); of inter-generational conflicts (Gold 1989); and of the process of identity assumption (Lobodzinska 1986). Of the many studies that have been devoted to the problems of emotional disturbance among the immigrants, most are limited to a few variables.

In studying adaptation Zeev Ben-Sira uses the more global concept of “readjustment” (44), which refers to the restoration of emotional homeostasis as a result of successful coping stress, as defined before. In the case of immigration, readjustment will be viewed as the outcome of meeting the demands imposed by the change inherent in immigration – that is, the successful completion of the process of immigration.

My primary intention for creating this unit is to provide a handbook for teachers, parents, and even students in order to help immigrant students to succeed. I also wish to give clues to teachers about issues that immigrant students could face. My students’ origins are mostly from Mexico and other Central American countries. Although they are bilingual second graders among the age of seven and eight years, they struggle with the problem of adaptation. They need to understand that they are living a new life.

Although the process of being immigrant takes more than time and tears, this process as an immigrant student could be softened if you as teacher or parent take the right way to act. Integration and readjustment could take years. But, to ease the uncomfortable feeling of stress, immigrant students can adapt by taking many easy steps at school.

It is true that they need time to understand the magnitude of this huge challenge, but that is what we are here for. Bilingual teachers like me have to be aware that the students we are working with need a special support and motivation in order to succeed.

Once immigrant children arrive with their families, everything is going to be an extreme change. Little towns, large and close families, food, culture, music, even the way to live, are going to change. Religions, principles, ethnic, racial, ideological, and personal influences are going to be different.

A language difference is another major reason why immigrants face a new challenge as well. Our job as educators is definitely different from any other job. Bilingual teachers have to make a slow transition between their current lives and their new life as immigrants.

UNIT BACKGROUND

The goal of this unit is to integrate not only students but also families and educators. It is easy when second grade bilingual students work along with their closest relatives. Once they feel comfortable, they are going to understand easily the change. This month-long unit will be a study of what is the difference between the former life immigrant children used to have and their new

life as citizens here in the United States of America. The unit will also have parent and community involvement through social studies activities. Students are going to construct maps by comparing and contrasting their communities, discussing differences between them in Mexico and the United States of America, visiting their neighborhood to identify and recognize authorities such as police officers, fire fighters, postal workers, hospital workers, librarians, and teachers.

Finally, students are going to see their parents in action: Parents are going to talk about their experiences as immigrants in order to let know their children the advantages of living in the United States of America as immigrants. Also, parents are going to help students differentiate life in Mexico and life in their new communities.

This four-week long unit will be a study of differences of culture and food and a study of challenges of being immigrant: how to learn to live as an urban resident, how to live and share life in a multicultural city, how to compare the places the immigrants used to live and the towns in which they presently live, as well as the differences according to music, religion, and race. This study will also focus on contributions made by immigrants to the community.

During the course of the unit, we will become social researchers. After exploring how immigrants live in certain areas within our city, we will try to understand their life styles.

OVERVIEW OF IMMIGRATION IN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Immigration is the entrance of a person into a new country for the purpose of establishing permanent residence. Motives for immigration, like those for migration generally, are often economic, although religious or political factors may be very important in the decision to migrate. High rates of immigration are frequently accompanied by militant and sometimes violent calls for immigration restriction or deportation by nationalist groups.

Why Do People Immigrate?

People immigrate for many reasons: To escape poverty; to find employment; to escape a dictatorship or other unfair government; to avoid persecution and oppression including genocide, ethnic cleansing, and bullying; to look for a better weather or a lower cost of living; to reunite with family, or to practice their religion without persecution.

The great majority of immigration occurs for economic reasons of one sort or another. Wage rates and living expenses vary greatly among different countries. Poor individuals of third world countries can have far higher levels of living in developed countries than in their home countries. On the other hand, individuals who are not very well off but are financially independent people from highly developed countries can live better in a less developed country where living costs are lower.

Good examples of immigrants are the ones from Mexico and Central American countries who live in the United States of America. In general, people are considered to be immigrant if they keep staying in the new country for more than one year.

Many of the children in my classroom come from other countries: they are from Mexico and Central America. All of them along with their families are looking for a better life with a better opportunity, and all of them are waiting to establish themselves into a new culture easily and quickly.

I am going to try to construct a handbook with many entries in order to help my children and their parents make the tough step of immigration painless. They deserve a smooth transition between their native culture and their new culture in the United States.

The psychological trauma that immigrants experience when uprooted from their own land is less visible and less easily measured than their language proficiency. Having left behind a whole system of communication, cultural beliefs, and the sense of identity that once gave meaning to their lives, many immigrants experience a deep sense of anxiety.

The philosopher Heidegger says that without the language that maintains a connection with the past, without the ability to name, the past ceases to exist or to have any reality for a person. Yet, belief in the concept of progress has led to the incredibly naïve idea that people can free themselves from their past, that it is possible for people to exchange one culture for another in the same way people can exchange commodities.

Many of the transitions an immigrant child must make in order to become oriented to a new life are formidable. Traditionally, we have relied upon schooling as the dominant means of bringing immigrant children into the mainstream U.S. culture. However, there are four potential and typical shortcomings of systems designed to help immigrant children:

1. The program may treat immigrant children as anomalies or as guests.
2. The program may emphasize assimilation rather than integration within the educational system and society at large.
3. The program may be guided by the belief that the immigrants should ignore or reject their native culture in favor of the new culture.
4. The program may not take into account that there may be little or no emotional support at home since adult members of the family may themselves be experiencing culture shock.

Immigrant children suffer different issues within their new culture and new accommodation. From a silent stage to fear or ridicule, or as I mentioned before, isolation, exhaustion, and cultural shock from struggling in school.

If there is one characteristic of the uprooting experience that appears to be shared by all children, irrespective of nationally, economic status, family stability, or any other factors, it is what some have characterized as the “silent stage” (Tinajero and Ada 87). In the silent stage immigrant children may appear to be alienated, moody, fearful, even terrified, but not because they do not wish to socialize or cooperate. Immigrant children long to blend in and to be like others and to join in the activities of other children. But the fear of ridicule, deep loneliness, loss of cultural identity, and the pressures of the new school system and the new culture can combine to render feelings of helplessness, alienation, exhaustion, and inadequacy. To get themselves through the period of adjustment in which these feelings dominate, the immigrant child adopts the mechanism of self-imposed isolation.

The silent stage need not to be a negative experience and even has its innate advantages. In that silence, children have developed strong listening skills. Moreover, they can now articulate beautifully what had been pent up inside at the time, for they keenly value language as a way of self-expression.

There is little the teacher can do to prevent an immigrant child from entering the silent stage, but there is much the teacher can do to see that the silence does not evolve into guided introversion or morbid introspection that shuts the child away from the world of human activity and human relationships. If the teacher can look into the child’s inner world and identify the cause behind the silence, she may be able to increase the chances of identifying, as well, what type of support the child needs to emerge from that silence.

The fear of ridicule discredits a person and evokes feelings of shame; it attacks a person’s feeling of equality in relationships and robs him or her of personal dignity and competence. The fear of ridicule is linked to forces in the collective unconscious that can make a person feel as if he or she were in the clutches of some unknown terror.

Another aspect of self-imposed silence may be a feeling of isolation, described by one immigrant child as follows: “When I first came to school in America, nobody played with me. I was alone. Nobody liked me because I was from another country” (Tinajero and Ada 87). Whether or not such a statement is true, that feeling is the child’s reality. It is difficult to socialize when you feel that your language and your culture are useless, and the feeling is compounded when you are unable to articulate the feeling to others outside one’s silent world.

Another recurring theme in the inner world of the immigrant child is a feeling of exhaustion from exposure to the continual parade of strange sights and events. The term culture shock has frequently been used to describe what people experience when they attempt to cope with an entirely different culture. Immigrant children keenly feel the environmental differences between their new reality and their homeland, not only in terms of language barriers, but also in terms of events and how people look and behave.

On the other hand, one major educational implication to succeed immigrant students is that the school program must aim to promote a fair form of bilingualism. It is necessary involve a home-school language switch at some stage in the educational process, but when and how must be determined in relation to the linguistic and socio-economic characteristics of the learner and of the learning environment. Specifically when the home language is different from the school language and the home language tends to be denigrated by others and when the children come from socio-economically deprived homes, it would appear appropriate to begin initial instruction in the child’s first language, switching at a later stage to instruction in the school language (Cummins and Swain 19).

In this specific case, immigrant students like my second grade students, should receive support from their families at home. Houston Independent School District offers a wide variety of approaches in bilingual education. But, in order to succeed, students need to reinforce their native language as they acquire a new language. That is the case of the traditional bilingual program.

As a conclusion, children need a safe and nurturing environment in which they can cope with the language barrier until they are ready to express themselves within the new culture. The mechanisms immigrant children adapt when the integrity of their cultural identity is challenged include self-imposed silence and academic failure, the creation of escape hatches, and the embracing of American culture to the exclusion of native culture.

To lessen the impact of culture shock, immigrant students need a transitional place, a nest in which they can incubate and grow emotionally as well as intellectually. Without a caring teacher and other forms of intervention, patterns of loneliness, anxiety, and helplessness continue to persist.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

This unit is intended for use as part of the social studies curriculum in my classroom. Students, teachers, and parents will have the opportunity to survive as immigrants by using these lesson plans. The lessons will focus on the city and the neighborhood in which they live and the people they talk to.

The lessons will focus on the Social Studies TEKS. Students will have the opportunity to compare and contrast their communities in Mexico to that of their new communities in the United States. We will then mark everyone’s community on a map of Mexico. Also, we are going to discuss the differences between people’s lives in both cultures.

Students are going to draw pictures comparing living here in the United States and in Mexico. I will incorporate parents in this unit by asking them to visit the classroom to tell stories to their children about how they got here. As the major actors in this topic, parents have a lot to share.

Parents are going to come to the class and share with students experiences as immigrants. They are going to talk to them about their beginning as immigrants. Also, the parents are going to tell the students how difficult it was for them, and how easy the life can be when students take advantages of this country.

Because I teach all the subjects in Spanish, I plan to teach this topic in Social Studies. The unit will begin with an overview of Mexican immigration in the twentieth century. Through lectures, discussions, and guests, the students will learn about being an immigrant and how to live in this country as an immigrant. They will learn about immigration in different ways, for example, by comparing and contrasting their lives and communities in Mexico and in the United States.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One

Objective

My students will be given the opportunity to compare and contrast their communities in Mexico with their new communities in the United States of America.

Materials

Mexican atlas, pencils, highlight, tape, and Texas atlas

Activity One

We will mark everyone's communities on a map of Mexico. For instance, students are going to identify their Mexican towns and cities in a map of Mexico. Many of my students can identify and can point out the border between United States of America and Mexico because we already have learned it in Second Grade Social Studies.

The objective will be identifying their cities and towns in Mexico and their new communities in a map of the United States of America. By using an atlas, children will point out Mexican cities such as San Luis Potosi, Puebla, Matamoros, Juarez, Chihuahua, and Mexico City.

Activity Two

Students are going to work together to identify and name their cities and towns. Children will locate their former towns by using highlighting tape. Students have to mention the name of the city or town and locate the Texan city of Houston. Children's comparisons should include details about how the two places are alike and different.

Evaluation

Once finished with the activities, students are going to use a copy of an atlas and locate and name the Mexican city or the Mexican town where they were born. Also, in a map of Texas, students are going to locate the city where they live: Houston.

Lesson Two

Objective

Discuss differences between lives in the cultures of Mexico and United States. Students are going to discuss differences between food, music, way of living, and religion.

Materials

Students are going to bring typical Mexican food such as taquitos and menudo. Also, students are going to bring American food such as hamburgers and hot dogs. Students are going to bring compact discs with traditional Mexican music and also, American music. The class it is going to

use a Compact disc player, a DVD, chart tablet paper, pencils, crayons, markers, construction paper and a television.

Activity One

By partners, students are going to bring Mexican food, such as tamales and menudo. Others will bring American traditional food, such as hamburgers and hot dogs. Students are going to find the differences; for instance, Mexican traditional food is homemade. American traditional food is made in a different way. Students are going to draw more Mexican food, such as taquitos, enchiladas, and guacamole. Also, they are going to draw more American food, such as sodas, French fries, etc.

Activity Two

Students are going to bring to class music from their small towns or cities in México Rancheras, Norteno music, Cumbias and Banda music. Also, students are going to bring music from United States, such as country music, hip hop, rock, and pop music. Students are going to hear the music by turns; one song from México and one song from United States. They are going to talk about differences, such as instruments, rhythm, and lyrics. American music is going to be translated to make it easier to understand taking into account that they are English language learners.

Students are going to watch a video of Mexican music and a video of American music. At the end of the activity they are going to draw what they saw from each video. For instance, clothing, instruments, singers, and the way the video was presented.

Evaluation

By doing a drawing presentation, students are going to restate differences between food and music. Students are going to describe why Mexican music and American music are different. Also, by tasting the food, students are going to say how different both kinds of food are. Students are going to taste the food not to say what the best is or which one tastes better. They are going to find differences between cultures by tasting two different typical foods.

Lesson Three

Objective

Recognize diversity in our community. A community is a place made up of many neighborhoods. Houston is made up of many communities and some examples are the Mexican, Chinese, and Indian communities among others. The main idea of this lesson is to become aware that our city is made up of many different ethnic areas.

Materials

An approved permission letter from parents to visit Houston's Chinatown will be required, as well as a permit from Houston Independent School District bus to go to the University of Houston Downtown. A permission slip for the police station, the fire station, and post office will be required. Digital cameras will also be required.

Activity One

By walking through our city and visiting several places, students are going to understand that Houston has a very diverse cultural population. For the first day, students, parents, and a teacher are going to walk through Chinatown into Downtown Houston.

They are going to take pictures, walk over the streets, and talk to the people to know that in our city, there are people from different places. They are going to watch some of the construction there.

For the second day students are going to walk through the University of Houston Downtown. Due to the diversity of the students, children are going to identify students from many places of the world, such as Indian, Japanese, Arabic, Pakistani, African, and Latin American. Students are going to identify their clothes and languages. Students are going to try to talk with them and ask them how different their lives are here when compared with their lives in their home countries.

For the third day, students are going to visit their neighborhoods. We are going to visit the different kinds of authorities the neighborhood have, including police officers, postal employees, firefighters, and school staff. Every student is going to compare his or her neighborhoods in Mexico with their neighborhoods in Houston.

For the fourth day in the classroom, students and the teacher are going to make a demonstration with chart tablet paper, pointing out what differences there are in a neighborhood like this and what differences they can find living in a multicultural city such as Houston. They are going to discuss what kind of people live in Houston and where are they come from. Students are going to discuss if they had this kind of city in Mexico. The objective is that students understand that Houston is a city made up of immigrants. Houston has many races, and students as immigrants have to learn to live in a city where people from many parts of the world live as well.

Evaluation

By the fifth day of the week students are going to share the pictures of the visits they made in Chinatown and the University of Houston Downtown campus, and they are going to write a detailed description of what they saw on both places. Also, they are going to talk about the differences between their neighborhoods in Mexico and their neighborhood in Houston.

Lesson Four

Objective

Students will study and learn from their parents' stories as immigrants. The main objective will be to see that parents are a powerful tool in learning process. As guests, parents will share stories about their life as immigrants and how difficult is to have a new life in a new country is. Parents are the life-long teachers of their children. In that way, parents are going to share the experiences with their children talking about any difficulty they had starting a new life in another country living as immigrants.

Materials

A parent is going to be the guest. Talking as an immigrant, the parent is going to share with students experiences as an immigrant in the United States. Students are going to use their social studies writing tablets. Students are going to use pencils and construction paper.

Activity One

Students are going to hear a parent talk about immigration. Parents are going to be the models and the facilitators in this activity. Parents are going to ask them who are immigrants. Students are going to discuss with the teacher who could be an immigrant. They are going to share with the parent the visits they did before in order to know immigrants like them.

Parents are going to share the experiences they have had in this country living as an immigrant. For this particular activity I do have a whole family that came to the United States of America crossing the Mexican border five years ago. Today, although they have assimilated into the American culture, they do not have the same opportunities the students have. They have to work to live. They did not have the opportunity to go the school. It is important for my students to hear this because they can make a difference for them.

Evaluation

Students are going to write down how an immigrant should live in Houston. According to their field experiences they will explain to their classmates how they should live in a multicultural city like Houston.

CONCLUSION

As a second grade bilingual teacher, and as an immigrant like many of my students, I understand the importance of the term immigrant. Often, teachers forget that we need to challenge our students and have high expectations of them in order to motivate them. This is a challenging topic that my students in the second grade can develop with the help of parents and the community. A topic like this may seem very difficult to understand, but if we adapt and modify the content with appropriate activities it can be a great success for students.

The United States is a country made of immigrants. We do not have to feel different because of it. We are part of this country and we live here, but we do not have to forget our values and culture. As John F. Kennedy once said, "Everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life."

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