

Elementary School Lesson

“What is it Like to be an Outsider?”: Building Empathy for the Experiences of Immigrants

Rationale

This lesson helps students to build empathy and understanding for the experiences of immigrants in the U.S. Through stories, reflective writing and research on the influence that immigrants have had on U.S. culture, students heighten their awareness about the negative effects of anti-immigrant bias and the integral role that immigrants have always played in U.S. life.

Objectives

- Students will increase empathy for immigrants and others who are treated as “outsiders” in their community.
- Students will learn about the history of immigration to the U.S.
- Students will explore the negative impact of anti-immigrant stereotypes and bias
- Students will research the contributions of immigrants to the U.S.

Age Range

Grades 3–5

Time

2–3 hours or 3 class periods plus time for research

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [You Have to Live in Somebody Else’s Country to Understand](#) (one per student or one large copy to post)
- [Native Americans](#) (one per small group)
- [A Nation of Immigrants](#) (one per small group)
- [One Nation, Many Languages](#) (one per small group)
- [Gifts from Many Lands](#) (one per small group)
- [Contributions of Native Americans and Immigrants](#) (one per small group)

Other Material:

- Chart paper, markers, large world map, small *Post-it*® Notes pad or pushpins

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- (Optional) Instead of photocopying, chart the poem, “[You Have to Live in Somebody Else’s Country to Understand](#).”
- Make enough copies of the [Native Americans](#), [A Nation of Immigrants](#), [One Nation, Many Languages](#), [Gifts from Many Lands](#) and [Contributions of Native Americans and Immigrants](#) handouts so that each student in an assigned group receives a copy (see Part III #2).
- Obtain a copy of the English and Spanish versions of [Who Belongs Here?/¿Quien Es de Aqui?](#) by Margy Burns Knight (Tilbury House Publishers, 2003, 30 pages, grades 2–5).

Key Words

Bias
Cambodia
“Chink”
Descendent
Discrimination
Ellis Island
Empathy
Famine
“Gook”
Immigrant
Immigration
Native American
Outsider
Prejudice
Refugee
Stereotype

Techniques and Skills

brainstorming, connecting past to present, cooperative group work, critical thinking, forming opinions, historical understanding, large and small group discussion, reading skills, research skills, social action, using the Internet, writing skills

Procedures

Part I: Building Empathy for “Outsiders” (45–60 minutes plus time to write story/poem)

1. Prior to the lesson, obtain a copy of both the English and Spanish versions of the book, [Who Belongs Here?/¿Quien Es de Aqui?](#) by Margy Burns Knight

Summary: Nary, a young boy fleeing war-torn Cambodia for the safety of the U.S., is viewed by some of his new classmates as a “chink” who should go back where he belongs. But what if everyone whose family came from another place was forced to return to his or her homeland? Who would be left? This story teaches compassion for recent immigrants while sharing the history of immigration in the U.S. and some of the important contributions made by past immigrants.

2. Tell students that you are going to read a story aloud, and that for homework you would like them to write a summary of the story in their own words and a letter to the main character, Nary, describing how they felt as they heard about Nary’s experiences. Begin reading [¿Quien Es de Aqui?](#) (the Spanish version only) aloud to the class. Read several pages and pause to ask students if they have any questions about the story so far and if they feel prepared to complete the homework assignment.

NOTE: Read just enough to make students feel a little uncomfortable; the goal is for students to experience what it might feel like to be a newcomer to a country where they don’t understand the language. If [¿Quien Es de Aqui?](#) is not available or if many of your students speak Spanish, this exercise can be done with any book written in a language that is unfamiliar to the majority of your students.

3. Presumably many students will express frustration at having to listen and respond to a book that they can’t understand. After students have had a chance to voice their apprehensions, tell them that they don’t actually have to complete the assignment and discuss some of the following questions:
 - How did it feel to sit through a story that you could not understand?
 - What was your reaction when you thought you’d be expected to complete an assignment that you are not capable of doing?
 - What group of people experience situations and feelings like this every day? (If students do not use the term immigrants, introduce and define it.)
 - How do you think it would feel to move to a place where you do not understand the language or the customs?
 - Have you ever observed immigrants being teased or treated differently because of where they come from? Describe what you have observed.
4. Tell students that you’d like to read a poem together written by a ninth grade student, an immigrant from Cambodia who expresses what it feels like to be an outsider. Post or distribute copies of the poem, [You Have to Live in Somebody Else’s Country to Understand](#) by Noy Chou. Ask for volunteers to read each stanza aloud. Discuss the following questions:
 - What is it like for Chou to be an outsider from another country, and to look and sound different from the other kids in her new school?
 - What groups or individuals have you noticed are treated like outsiders in our community? How does it affect a person when they are made to feel like an outsider?
 - How do Chou’s new classmates in the U.S. react to her differences? How do they treat her?
 - Is it fair for Chou’s teachers and peers to expect her to keep up with everyone else? What do they think about Chou when she can’t keep up?
 - Why do you think that some of Chou’s classmates bother or make fun of her when she hasn’t done anything to them? Why do some people choose to hurt rather than help immigrants like Chou?
 - Have you learned anything from this poem that will cause you to behave differently in the future?
 - What can we all do to make immigrants like Chou feel welcome and supported in our school or community?

NOTE: The Cambodian name is spoken and written in the order of last name then first name, so Noy Chou should be referred to as Chou when discussing the poem with students.

5. Tell students that most of us have had the experience of feeling like an outsider—or as Chou says, “an opposite” or “a loser”—for one reason or another. Ask students to reflect on a time when they have felt this way, and to write a short story or a poem describing the experience and their feelings. Have students title their poems/stories, “You have to _____ to Understand” (e.g., “You Have to be Adopted to Understand” or “You Have to Have a Disability to Understand”).
 6. When students have completed their writing, ask for several volunteers to share their pieces with the class. Conclude by reinforcing the importance of demonstrating empathy for others and making “outsiders” feel like “insiders” through kindness and friendship.
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OPTIONAL: If there is not sufficient time in class for this writing task, assign it for homework and do just the sharing/processing part in class.

7. For homework, ask students to find out whether or not their family is originally from the United States and, if not, approximately when they arrived in the U.S. and from what part(s) of the world. For the purposes of this assignment, ask students to trace their family’s history back as many generations as possible.
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NOTE: Be aware that some children will not know where their family/ancestors are from for a variety of reasons including: their parents have not discussed it with them, the situation may have been difficult, they may be undocumented or they are African American and they may not know what country in Africa their ancestors lived before being forcibly brought to the United States.

Part II: Exploring Who “Belongs” in the U.S. (30–40 minutes)

1. Read aloud the English version of [Who Belongs Here?](#) by Margy Burns Knight and discuss the following questions:
 - Why did Nary and his family leave Cambodia and immigrate to the U.S.?
 - Nary’s grandmother once told him that the U.S. would be “better than heaven.” Did this turn out to be true for Nary? Explain your answer.
 - Why did some of Nary’s classmates call him names and tell him to “get back on the boat and go home where you belong”? Why do they believe Nary does not belong in the U.S.?
 - How did Nary and his teacher help the other students to better understand Nary’s experiences and feelings?
 - In what ways did Nary’s story help you to better understand the experiences of immigrants that you know?
 2. Post a copy of a world map. Tell students that the book they just read asks the question, “Who belongs here?” Ask, “what if everyone whose family came from another place was forced to return to his or her homeland? Who would be left?” Remind students that for homework you asked them to find out where in the world their families originally came from, if not the U.S. Invite students up to the world map to indicate where their families lived before coming to the U.S. using a small sheet of *Post-it*® paper or a push pin.
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NOTE: Students should indicate the place(s) that represent the earliest ancestors about whom they are aware. Encourage students who do not know precise locations to approximate. For example, African-American students who do not know exactly which country their forebears came from can select any spot on the continent of Africa; a Jewish student who only knows that his/her relatives lived somewhere in Eastern Europe before the war can select any spot in that region.

3. Ask students to stand if they did not come up to the world map that is if their family has always lived in the U.S. (Presumably few if any students will stand.) Ask students if all those families who come from someplace else “don’t belong” in the U.S. Ask why some people say that immigrants—like Nary in the story—don’t belong here and should go back where they come from.
4. Emphasize that while every country has to set limits on the number of immigrants who can arrive at any given time, it is never true to say that any particular group—such as Cambodians or Mexicans—don’t belong. Ask students if they know what it is called when someone holds a belief about a whole group of people that assumes that everyone in the group is

the same (e.g., Mexicans are criminals so they should not be allowed in the U.S. or Haitians are lazy so we don't want them in this country).

- If students do not identify the term stereotype, introduce and define it (the false idea that all members of a group are the same and think and behave in the same way). Ask students why it is important to avoid stereotypes about immigrants and all groups of people (e.g., they are untrue, hurt people's feelings, limit opportunities, lead to prejudice and discrimination, etc.).

Part III: Researching the Influence of Immigrants on U.S. Culture (time will vary)

- Emphasize that immigrants have always been and still are a central and important part of U.S. life, and that they have shaped the way we live in many ways. Tell students that they will conduct some brief research to further explore the ways in which Native and immigrant groups have influenced U.S. life and culture.
- Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one of the following topics:
 - Native Americans
 - A Nation of Immigrants
 - One Nation, Many Languages
 - Gifts from Many Lands
 - Contributions of Native Americans and Immigrants

Have each group select a recorder and a reporter. Provide each group with a copy of the appropriate handout and review the directions with them. Allow groups time to research their topics using the classroom/school library and the Internet.

- When groups have completed their research, reconvene the class and ask the group reporters to share highlights from their group's findings. Conclude by underscoring that the U.S. is a "nation of immigrants," that this is an important part of our history and that prejudice and discrimination against immigrant groups is unacceptable.

Extension Activities

- In *Who Belongs Here?* the author writes:

"Every year millions of people from all over the world try to come to the U.S. Not all of them are allowed to live here. Since the mid-1800s the government has made laws to keep certain people out of this country. Many people choose to come illegally...Who should be allowed to come to the U.S.? Should anyone be made to leave? If there aren't enough jobs, homes, and food for everyone, how do we decide who gets to live here?"

Have students research some of the past and current U.S. laws regulating immigration. Discuss with students the question of how the government decides who gets to live in the U.S. Have students write their own immigration law that addresses this question and incorporates their ideas about the fairest way to regulate immigration.

- Assign students to conduct research on activists who have worked to safeguard the rights of immigrants and migrant workers, such as Dolores Huerta and César Chávez. Have students write brief biographies and create dioramas depicting scenes that represent key episodes in the struggle for rights.

You Have to Live in Somebody Else's Country to Understand

By Noy Chou



What is it like to be an outsider?

What is it like to sit in the class where everyone has blond hair and you have black hair?

What is it like when the teacher says, "Whoever wasn't born here raise your hand."

And you are the only one.

Then, when you raise your hand, everybody looks at you and makes fun of you.

You have to live in somebody else's country to understand.

What is it like when the teacher treats you like you've been here all your life?

What is it like when the teacher speaks too fast and you are the only one who can't understand what he or she is saying, and you try to tell him or her to slow down.

Then when you do, everybody says, "If you don't understand, go to a lower class or get lost."

You have to live in somebody else's country to understand.

What is it like when you are an opposite?

When you wear the clothes of your country and they think you are crazy to wear these clothes and you think they are pretty.

You have to live in somebody else's country to understand.

What is it like when you are always a loser?

What is it like when somebody bothers you when you do nothing to them?

You tell them to stop but they tell you that they didn't do anything to you.

Then, when they keep doing it until you can't stand it any longer, you go up to the teacher and tell him or her to tell them to stop bothering you.

They say that they didn't do anything to bother you.



Then the teacher asks the person sitting next to you.

He says, "Yes, she didn't do anything to her" and you have no witness to turn to.

So the teacher thinks you are a liar.

You have to live in somebody else's country to understand.

What is it like when you try to talk and you don't pronounce the words right?

They don't understand you.

They laugh at you but you don't know that they are laughing at you, and you start to laugh with them.

They say, "Are you crazy, laughing at yourself? Go get lost, girl."

You have to live in somebody else's country without a language to understand.

What is it like when you walk in the street and everybody turns around to look at you and you don't know that they are looking at you?

Then, when you find out, you want to hide your face but you don't know where to hide because they are everywhere.

You have to live in somebody else's country to feel it.

Native Americans

In *Who Belongs Here?* by Margy Burns Knight, the author writes: *For at least 10,000 years before [immigrants made the U.S. their home], the U.S. was inhabited by thousands of tribes of native people. Descendents of these tribes live in the U.S. today.*

What Native American Nations still exist in the U.S. today? Where do they live? What can you learn about their culture? **Chart the answers to these questions in the table below.**

Name of Nation	Location	Cultural Facts
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

A Nation of Immigrants

In *Who Belongs Here?* by Margy Burns Knight, the author writes: *In the last five hundred years millions of people have made the U.S. their home. Some came by choice, while others were forced from their homelands by war, slavery, or famine...From 1892 to 1954 more than 12 million immigrants from at least 50 countries arrived on boats at Ellis Island, an immigration station in New York City.*

What are some of the immigrant groups that make up our nation today? How many people from each of these countries live in the U.S.? Why did they leave their homelands? **Chart the answers to these questions in the table below.**

Immigration Group/Country	Number of People in U.S.	Reasons for Immigrating
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

One Nation, Many Languages

In *Who Belongs Here?* by Margy Burns Knight, the author writes: *At least 350 languages are spoken in the U.S. today, and many English-language words come from other languages. Kindergarten is a German word that means children's garden, and Mississippi is a Chippewa word for large river. Jeans became the English word for Gênes, which is the French spelling of Genoa, a city in Italy. The original material for jeans was imported from Genoa.*

What are the main languages spoken in the U.S. today in addition to English? How many people in the U.S. speak those languages? What are some words or expressions from each language that have become a part of our everyday speech? **Chart the answers to these questions in the table below.**

Language	Number of Speakers of Language in U.S.	Common Words/Phrases
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

Gifts from Many Lands

In *Who Belongs Here?* by Margy Burns Knight, the author writes: *Peanuts, peppers, corn, squash, and avocados are among America's native foods. Bagels, tortillas, olive oil, curry, potatoes, pretzels, and rice are some of the many foods brought to the U.S. from other countries.*

What other foods or products originate from foreign countries? When and how did they arrive in the U.S.? How are they prepared or used? **Chart the answers to these questions in the table below.**

Products from Other Places	When/How They Arrived	How They are Used
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

Contributions of Native Americans and Immigrants

In *Who Belongs Here?* by Margy Burns Knight, the author writes: *Parts of the U.S. Constitution were modeled after the Great Law of Peace, a political system that six nations of Iroquois people developed in the 1500s and used for several hundred years. Representatives of each nation spent long hours talking about ways to build peace and cooperation among their people.*

What are some other contributions from Native Americans or immigrant groups? What person or nation is responsible for the contribution? How has each contribution helped to shape the way we live in the U.S.? **Chart the answers to these questions in the table below.**

Contribution	Who Introduced It?	How It Affects Our Lives
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		