

Published: **May 17, 2006**

**COMMENTARY**

**What We Owe Immigrant Children**

By **Eileen Gale Kugler**

**Instead of seeing immigrant students as a drain on our resources, we need to recognize the resources they bring into our classrooms.**

As the role of immigrants in American society is under examination, it's time to take an accurate look at the place of immigrant students in our classrooms. Most reports focus on the services they require; whether learning English or just the "American way," immigrant students are viewed as little more than resource drains. Many American-born parents with the economic luxury of choosing where they live steer clear of schools with large immigrant populations, fearing there will be few resources left for their own children, not to mention a peer group with low aspirations and poor study habits.

Those views are some of the pervasive "myth perceptions" that poison public attitudes toward immigrant students and the schools they attend. To dispel them, talk to parents whose American-born students sit side by side with immigrant students and find out the realities. There are valuable lessons taught in diverse classrooms that could only be imagined in homogeneous classes.

I have marveled at the deeper thinking of students who are confronted with perspectives different from their own, based on life experiences poles apart. Recent immigrants bring firsthand knowledge of life in distant lands, illuminating classroom dialogues.

Students at multicultural schools quickly learn that people view the world through a variety of prisms, a lesson that will serve them well in the small global community that will await them. Skilled teachers in diverse classrooms know how to create vibrant discussions using the resource of students with varying frames of reference. One student at Annandale High School, an immigrant-rich school in Northern Virginia that my children attended, was amazed at his teacher's ability to expose these wide-ranging views and experiences, thus encouraging all students to think critically about their own ideas. "The teacher used the students like paints to draw the different sides of an argument," he said. "I might not have agreed with everyone, but it raised a lot of ideas I hadn't contemplated before."

Students at schools like Annandale High aren't limited to knowledge about mainstream American culture. They know that Jan. 1 isn't the only New Year's Day. They learn from their classmates that Asian cultures celebrate the lunar new year in January or February; that the Jewish new year of Rosh Hashana in the fall is a religious, not a secular holiday; and that Nowruz is the Persian new-year holiday welcoming spring. When students' eyes are opened to new worlds, they open their minds to new approaches, new ways of thinking.

The range of views and backgrounds inspires students to think deeper in nearly every subject. A chemistry teacher watched a fascinating discourse evolve when he raised with his students the issue of chemistry's role in society. This led to a discussion of the rights of animals used in the testing of foods and drugs. One student, who had recently fled the starvation of an African country, looked mystified by the conversation. "Animal rights?" he asked with genuine puzzlement. "What are 'animal rights'? Animals are food." The other students, most of whom had never known an empty dinner plate or seen a farm animal, suddenly saw the issue as more complex than they'd considered.

In their years at Annandale High, my children gained a deeper appreciation for what they have here in the United States. I learned this lesson early in life, from the stories of my immigrant grandmother who fled the pogroms of Russia as a child in the early 20th century. But my children only heard her stories secondhand. Their eyes were opened by classmates' stories of leaving behind beloved grandparents and all that was familiar to travel to this country with their parents, who sought to break out of the cycle of poverty—and, yes, who now do those jobs that "Americans won't do." Other students told of earlier lives unfathomable in this comfortable suburb—dodging bullets during civil wars, or watching a father shot in his own home because he was part of the wrong side of a political debate.

Immigrant students don't take American freedoms lightly. That's why so many of them took to the streets to raise their voices during the recent rallies, another precious right in the United States.

Middle-class, American-born students learn other important lessons from their immigrant classmates. They watch immigrant friends work after school, not to buy the latest pair of athletic shoes for themselves, but to buy shoes for their baby brothers or sisters. Playing with the high school band at Friday-night football games, my son would go on to school dances afterward, knowing that his Korean-American friend had instead left to help out in his father's dry-cleaning business. The star of the football team, who emigrated from Ethiopia to live here with an adult sibling, could be seen walking several miles home after practice because no one in his family could pick him up, let alone give him his own car.

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I've watched extraordinary recent immigrants to this country master the complex language of English in addition to the one, or two, or more languages they already speak. Our society gives them little credit for this accomplishment, even as we extol the American-born student who manages to become bilingual.

I've watched these immigrant students take on thoughtful leadership roles in class and in the school, and serve as worthy role models for my children. How could a textbook or lecture duplicate the lessons learned just by watching a teenager from El Salvador who had been in the United States for only six months poignantly sing "Climb Every Mountain" in the spring choral show?

And I've watched as many bright, articulate students realize that they may not be able to continue their educations—a loss for all of us—because of myopic political leaders who deprive these young people, well prepared by our American schools, of a chance to qualify for affordable tuition.

Our schools are stronger because of the immigrant students who enrich the academic environment for all of our children. The resources invested in their academic development pay dividends that strengthen our society. Let's not forget them as new immigration policy is crafted. Instead of seeing them as a drain on our resources, we need to recognize the resources they bring into our classrooms. We must show them our appreciation by assuring that they are given the quality education they deserve—and providing them with opportunities to further develop their minds by reducing barriers to their higher education, not by putting up even higher walls.

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