A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

COMPLICATIONS OF CULTURE
Family and Responsibilities

How do family expectations and responsibilities affect people’s decisions to immigrate and the relations between family members?

This lesson is appropriate for units on immigration and contemporary issues.

Students will be able to:
• identify how family expectations and responsibilities can affect the decision or ability to immigrate
• identify how immigration can affect one’s responsibilities to family, or family expectations

ACTIVITIES
I. Opening activity
   Make a list of what parents might expect of their teenage children.

II. Discuss the opening activity.
   Ask for volunteers to share what they have written. Brainstorm about ways in which students in immigrant families may face additional expectations or responsibilities.

III. Group activity: Read first-person accounts
   A. Divide the class into small groups. Each group should have a reporter, recorder and materials handler.

   B. Each group reads the account given to it and answers all of the following questions:
      1. How did immigration affect the responsibilities and family expectations of the author (or subject) of the article you were given or her family members?
      2. How did the author’s (or subject’s) expectations and responsibilities of herself or those of her family members affect the decision to immigrate?
      3. What different responsibilities and expectations did each of the children in the family have? What accounted for these differences?
      4. What caused the author’s (or subject’s) extra feeling of obligation?

IV. Share learning
   Each group’s reporter briefly describes the group’s material and reads their answers to the questions.

V. Discussion
   Discuss similarities and differences in the experiences of the authors and their families.

   What were some expectations and responsibilities related to gender? How great or small are the gender differences in expectations and responsibilities for immigrants today?
VI. Assessment options
A. Create a poem that addresses the relationship between responsibilities, expectations and immigration. Here are two suggestions to get started.

1. To create a “found” poem, review the text of one of the accounts. Select words or phrases that strike you as important. Arrange them into a poem with other words of your own.
2. To generate ideas, you may wish to complete these prompts for one particular person in a reading.

As a child of my parents, I must ________________________________.

My family expects ________________________________.

Immigration has been ________________________________ for me.

I was / was not able to immigrate to the U.S. because ____________________.

I thought / hoped that ________________________________.

Because I immigrated, I must now ________________________________.

B. Write a diary entry from the point of view of a young person who recently immigrated to the U.S. What family expectations does she or he feel? What responsibilities must she or he fulfill? The prompts for the poem can be used to assist with this activity.

C. Write a letter from the point of view of …….to a friend/family member.

DOCUMENTS
A: Interview with Kate Zou
B: Journal entry by Kate Zou
C: Accounts by high school students Jennifer and Joanna
D: Letters from Dora Levine to her brother
Hickman: What was the day like when you said, “I’m moving to the United States?” How were your parents’ reactions?

Zou: They supported me from very beginning. They wished me to come to U.S. to continue my higher education. During the Cultural Revolution chaos, Chinese young people had no chance to receive the education they wanted to. Therefore, when China opened its doors to Western countries, many Chinese hunted every possibility to get into colleges in the developed countries. So did my brother and me. In addition, at that time, Chinese could not choose what they wanted to do for their future. Everything was controlled, arranged by the government or by one’s parents. However, I wanted some kind of control of my own life. I also wanted to see what it was like outside of China.

Hickman: In your journal entry, you have this Chinese saying, “children go everywhere with a mother’s blessing and worry” and you agreed with that. Can you expand on that a little bit?

Zou: Can you read that again?

Hickman: “Children go everywhere with a mother’s blessing and worry.”

Zou: Yeah, it’s the meaning of a famous Chinese ancient poetry. It says parents are always thinking and worrying about their children, no matter how old they are or how far they go. I understood it better only after I left home. In Chinese culture, parents take care of their children; when children grow up they live with parents and take care of them. You never say, “when I grow up, I’ll live by myself,” it was considered strange and not moral at that time.

Hickman: Right.

Zou: You were expected to live with your parents and you should always take care of them.

Hickman: And what happens when you get married? Do you still live with…?

Zou: Yes, Yes.

Hickman: The woman’s parents?

Zou: Traditionally, most parents live with their sons.

Hickman: Okay.

Zou: In most cases, they live with the oldest son. My brother is the oldest and only son, but he already came to New York, and he wished me to stay at home. I felt guilty to think about leaving home, since the responsibility of taking care of my parents had fallen on my shoulder. Coming to the U.S. is one of the hardest decisions I have made in my life. Meanwhile it was a big sacrifice that my parents did for me.
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Before Kate Zou could take classes at Queens College/CUNY, she had to take classes to learn to read and write in English. In her English language class, she was required to keep a journal, which was then corrected by her teacher. The journal shows many of the challenges Kate faced, including her relations with her parents in China.

Journal Entry of Kate Zou, November 25, 1986, page 1

11/25/86:
I have just received a letter
letter and Christmas card from China.

The writing on the card said, “To our dearest daughter. It included all parents’ love
to theirchild. Although I have been
adult and live far away from my
parents, they still worry about me. They told
me many things about how to take
care of myself, as if I am a baby.

The Chinese said, “Children go everywhere
with mother’s bless and worry.” That
is right. When I was reading the
letter, my eyes were full of tears.

I wrote a letter to my parents
at once. I told them I was very
well without any troubles, and I would do
what they told me. Even

thought that would not be true.
Now, I can understand why many Chinese students in overseas only reported good news to their family. They do not want families to worry about them too much. They endured much unhappiness, tears, even pain, but they sent every picture and word with a sweet smile and happy. Can anyone understand them and know how hard it is to earn a livelihood and study? What I have had to do others have to do, because I love my parents very much and they love me too.

Kate, you never know how parents feel unless you become a parent yourself.
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Joanna, a student at the Bronx High School of Science, wrote a paper describing what it is like to be the child of immigrants.

Joanna 01/12/2008

I am an immigrant of the year 1999. My family and I emigrated from Korea that year. Our new destination was the land of the free, the America. My family was ready to start new, and make a better life for all of us. Yet the only problem we did not anticipate was that we were mutes as soon as we stepped on American soil.

I was the only child in my family. I was only seven years old, which meant I was more likely to learn the language faster than anyone else in my family. And here is why I became the barrier for my family, for them to hide behind me whenever they had trouble communicating. Days, weeks, and months went by as we struggled to communicate with the cashier at the grocery store, the landlord of our home, and even the transit bus drivers. Yes, the bus rides were the worst.

Quite often my mother and my grandmother would take the transit bus. Many times I followed. But every time I followed, I ended up in a humiliating situation translating for my family. It always began while we were waiting for the bus as we prepare our bus change. My grandmother was sixty seven years old, old enough to pass as senior and pay reduced fare. My mother paid the full price of $1.50. I was young enough to pass free or $0.50. But every time we get on the bus, there will be a problem. The bus driver argued that my grandmother and I had to pay $1.50 each. Once this happens, my grandmother would push me forward to explain the situation. The bus drivers always got loud with us. I swear, the bus suddenly got quiet and every pair of eyes was fixed on me with my broken English. I would translate. The bus driver only got louder. In between my grandmother would interrupt to ask me what he was saying. Often she shouted Korean words at the bus driver. I never went into details translating. I would tell her to pay full and sit down. By then, the seven year old child was as red as a balloon and was about to burst in tears. Everyone saw me, everyone heard my broken English, and everyone probably laughed inside.

I hate the bus ride.
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Jennifer, a student at the Bronx High School of Science, wrote a paper describing what it is like to be the child of immigrants.

Jennifer 1/12/07

Life with Immigrant Parents: Caught Between Two Worlds

When asked how it feels like to live with immigrant parents, there are many ways to answer that question. First, there’s the sense of cultural difference that separates my parents from myself. Traditional values they might have can clash with opinions I hold dear. Another would be the language barrier between us. I often talk to my parents in English and them to me in Korean. It’s a habit we just unknowingly acquired but I think it really represents how it feels like to be living in America with Korean parents. It’s a privilege most children take for granted to talk to their parents freely. Most importantly, there is the overwhelming sense of responsibility one has as a first generation American. Since my parents sacrificed everything they had to bring me to America for a better life, I have to provide for them. I am the one that has to make it because it is my burden. A lot of people wonder why kids of different ethnicities work so hard in school, but it’s because it is really the only thing we have. My parents own a grocery deli they work fifteen hours everyday. I remember when I was younger, maybe nine years old my brother and I would help out my parents. We would set up the newspapers and work at cash registers. It is amazing to me how my parents do this everyday. They live in such an unfamiliar world, which is no doubt quite scary. Often times customers would get frustrated at my parents because they did not understand what they wanted which would make me ashamed. Even now when my father speaks to someone in English with his thick accent, I fell slightly ashamed but guiltier for being embarrassed by my own parents. Ultimately my parents are true heroes to me. They work incredibly hard and I know that I am truly lucky to have two people that care about me so much. Living with immigrant parents is very difficult but I think it has brought my parents and me closer as we learn to understand each other more everyday.
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Dora Levine was a young Jewish woman living in the city of Dvinsk, Latvia (then a part of the Russian Empire). In this letter, she is writing to her brother Morris (circa 1910) who was living in New York City. Dora sees few opportunities for herself in Dvinsk. An unmarried daughter without enough money for a dowry, she feels trapped by her circumstances. She is the only daughter left behind to take care of the family store and her ailing father. Her needs and desires are secondary to those of her parents and the family.

Letter from Dora Levine to her brother Morris (a.k.a. Masky) Levine, circa 1910.
(Morris was his English name; Masky/Masenke was his Yiddish name.)
No city or country is on the letter, but Morris’s family came from Dvinsk (now known as Daugavpils) in Latvia and he lived in New York City, his home after he came to America.

Good wishes to my brother Masky. Be well, our health is good. Hope to hear from you soon with good news. Received your letter and happy to hear you are well and you visit Leibke, why don’t you live together? You are both alone from one family, there is no one else. We have frequent letters from Leibke. We received their photos. They all look well. He has two children; we should live long enough to see them. We have a store. Itzke works and support himself. He eats with us & doesn’t give us any money. Ruuke & Mulke attend classes and I stay.

In the store father doesn’t do anything. He is weak. He coughs a lot.

[continuation of the same letter]

Dear brother Masenke. I want to ask your advice. I am a 20 year old girl. My father has no money for me so no match can be made for me. We don’t need much but even with 500 Rubles, one can’t make a great match.

I am thinking of going to America but father doesn’t let me go. I don’t know how this will end. Let me know whether it pays for me to come to America. Can you & Leibke send me some money? If not all at once, a little at a time. Dear brother, advise me. Answer soon.

Thank you for your frequent letters. Write often and mother wants to hear from you often. She would write you but her eyes are weak. She sends best regards & wishes that your business goes well.

Write us whether you were engaged

If we will receive your photos, we will send you our photos.
No more news.

From me your sister
Dora Levine

1 Yiddish is the language of Eastern European Jews. It is a Germanic language which uses Hebrew characters and includes elements of Hebrew and Slavic languages.
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Photograph of Morris (Masky) Levine, circa 1910
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DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY’S NEW YORK TIMES

1. Find an article in The New York Times about a student who has attended or is currently attending an American school, either on a student visa or special permit. You might need to review several issues of the Times to locate such an article. Consider his or her family responsibilities. You may also locate information on the responsibilities of immigrant students on the Web. One example:

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/19/us/19raquel.html

An article entitled “Three Sisters,” December 19, 2006, is an example of an article on the problems and successes of immigrants and the decisions they made. Do the articles reflect your own aspirations and responsibilities?

2. Opinion pieces in a newspaper can be broken down into pieces: editorials, Op-Ed and letters to the editor. News reporting, unlike opinion pieces, must be based on facts, answering the “Who, What, Where, When, Why and How” and presenting details verified by evidence, observation or research. Select an article from The New York Times that discusses events in an immigrant’s life in America and underline the facts presented in the article. Then determine where it would be beneficial or interesting to learn more about these facts by seeking the opinions of the reporter who wrote the story. What comparisons can be made between an opinion piece and a news story?

3. Identify several of your responsibilities at home, and project where you will be living and what you will be doing five years from now. Compare your responsibilities at home and future aspirations and share with your classmates. Finally, ask classmates how your answers might differ from those of recent immigrant students. Review the New York Times article “Inheriting the City” and other information on immigrant students. Discuss the applicability of the information you and your classmates shared at:

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/nyregion/18immigrants.html