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American Dreams, Global Visions: Dialogic Teacher Research with Refugee and
Immigrant Families

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Torn in the USA

“Assimilation assumes that there is one right culture. We [immigrants] want to maintain a separate identity and culture, so we can educate our young to not join a gang, to get a good education, to get jobs. When the [American] government promotes cultural diversity, they are not serious about learning about other people’s cultures. Their suggestion usually is ‘just read the book and you’ll know everything about it.’”

Sonia Shah, Asian American, 1994

Approximately ten percent of all Americans were born outside of the United States. The growing number of refugees and immigrants in our country poses a significant challenge to educators across the nation. How can we teach immigrant children the basic skills necessary to survive in our society while still respecting each individual’s respective culture? Jen Van Horne of the English Learning Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota says that it takes an average of nine years for non-English speakers to catch up with their peers academically. During these years a sense of alienation and distance can develop between these individuals and their teachers, the vast

majority of whom remain European-American and middle class (Cochran-Smith 199).

The barriers of language and culture can cause misunderstandings between teachers and students in almost every classroom interaction.

Donald F. Hones of the University of Wisconsin addresses this chasm with his book, *American Dreams, Global Visions*. In this work he outlines a system of inquiry he calls *dialogic teacher research*. Through this method, teachers interview students and family members to find out about their experiences in their home countries, about their cultures' respective differences from America, and about the struggles they are currently facing in their new lives here. This conversation allows teachers to better assist students and families in taking advantage of resources available to them, and to more adequately prepare them for the problems of finding employment, achieving higher education, and dealing with other challenges life will present them.

Hones is one of the founders of a bilingual education program at the University of Wisconsin that prepares teachers to address the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. One course in particular called "Principles of Bilingual/Bicultural Education" emphasized research with immigrant and refugee families. Each participant was asked to build a relationship with an immigrant family and to interview them about their experiences as a semester project that culminated in a written family narrative. Students then presented excerpts as performance events. One essential part of this project was that each interviewer was required to compose an autobiographical narrative of his own life, which forced him to realize his perspective had been influenced by culture and encouraged the interviews to be more of a dialogue than a question-and-answer session. *American Dreams, Global Visions* is comprised of a number of these projects, which are excellent examples of success stories in the struggle to build intercultural relationships.

Hones wishes to promote the use of dialogic teacher research in schools, which can not only bridge the divide between pupils and educators, but also can promote greater understanding of different cultural backgrounds among Americans. He emphasizes that the full meaning of a culture cannot be absorbed solely through books and lectures—it is imperative to see the more human side of it by interacting with people of different nationalities. Hones states that the teacher plays three essential roles when interviewing families: that of the *cultural storyteller*, the *cultural healer*, and the *cultural worker*. By these terms he means that teachers must be able to portray the stories of their students in a way that Americans can understand, to assist them in dealing with the stress of such a sudden transition to a new environment, and to help them to remember students' own cultures and histories while “preparing them with the critical tools to address the unequal distribution of power in society” (16). Hones believes that immigrants and refugees are usually situated in low social classes with little upward mobility, and that teachers have the responsibility of teaching them to correct this injustice in the social order.

The book is composed of seven chapters arranged into three parts. Part I sets the foundation for the family narratives. The first chapter argues for the advantages of using narrative methods of inquiry, for the need to understand other cultures, and for the necessity of reflecting upon how our findings can benefit society. The second chapter explains the University's bilingual education program and the context from which the project came. It also highlights some of the difficulties experienced by researchers while interacting with families. One Mexican student was offended that he was asked to be the subject of a “study,” and many of the ideas of those who did contribute were lost in translation.

Part II, arguably the book's most poignant section, provides ethnographic portraits of four immigrant families: one Hmong, one Mexican, one Assyrian, and one Kosovar. Each chapter is devoted to one family and begins with an overview of the history of each ethnic group and the political stressors that forced them to move to the United States. Then comes the written family narrative, which puts a more personal face on the conflicts described. Each chapter concludes with each interviewer's personal reaction to the project. These often reflect upon a particularly surprising experience or aspect of culture.

Part III suggests implications of these findings for the rest of the world. Chapter Six draws direct connections from the experiences of the immigrants to the past actions of the US government. Chapter Seven shows how dialogic teacher research can inspire changes in teaching, curriculum, and school—community relations.

The book's two appendices consist of examples of classroom activities that are designed to help children relate to the struggles that refugee and immigrant families face in the U.S. Both are role-playing exercises, one referring to an Iraqi family and the other to a Mexican family.

Overall, *American Dreams, Global Visions* presents a convincing argument for the use of dialogic teacher research. Perhaps the work's strongest asset was its ability to encourage compassion for refugee and immigrant families. Hones raises the reader's awareness of the turmoil that causes families to leave their homes for the unwelcoming and unfamiliar territory that is America. The family narratives are honest and at times heart-wrenching accounts of the struggles they faced in their home countries.

Hmong immigrant Chan Lor's family was forced to flee home when the US pulled out of Laos and left its supporters at the mercy of the communists. The Lors joined countless others who walked hundreds of miles over mountainous terrain to avoid the

hostile military, many dying of starvation and disease along way. They hid in a jungle for more than six months before finding protection in a refugee camp set up at the Laotian border. After three years of living in primitive conditions, the United States finally granted them refugee status and paid their way to America—leaving family, friends, and everything dear to them far behind.

The stories of the other families are equally harrowing: the book tells of extreme poverty in Mexico, ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, and civil war in Iraq. Americans note the presence of immigrants and refugees, but often overlook their troubled pasts.

Americans are notoriously ignorant of other cultures. At a conference at the University of California in 1997, many educators and social workers came to the conclusion that the use of whites as the norm for educational standards is a significant problem in the US system that downplays the benefits of Hispanic/Latino and African American upbringing. (Barr). *American Dreams, Global Visions* addresses this disconnect by requiring the program's American participants to write autobiographies and to demonstrate how American culture has influenced their own personal development. These often help the teacher-student dialogues feel more like a conversation than an academic study. One participant compares their similar experiences in learning to drive a car:

Dunya got into two accidents within 3 months after getting her license, jus like I did after I got mine. Our first accidents were both minor fender benders. I pulled out and hit a car, and she backed into another car. But, it was just bad timing, because if those other cars wouldn't have been there, our records would both be clean (115)!

The book also succeeds in highlighting students' educational backgrounds in other countries, and how they can hinder students' progress in the American classroom.

Mahira, an Assyrian girl who was forced to flee Iraq with her family, is an excellent student but is trapped in lower-level classes. After learning Assyrian at home and being schooled in Arabic and Kurdish while fleeing to different parts of the country in Iraq, she must now learn English as a fourth language while digesting difficult academic content.

She writes:

I know what school is like now. I understand a lot but people still look at me different. I think some people don't talk to me because I'm in ESL and they think that they are better or something. I get As and Bs but it doesn't matter because ESL means I don't speak English good. I tell them [teachers] I just want to try regular classes. They say that I will get lost and not understand. Maybe, but to go to college and be smart you can't b in ESL. This is my third year. I can't stay in ESL my whole life. Once I leave school, it's not ESL. I want it to be like this now, like real life (159).

Hones emphasizes the close relationship between the family and the school, and the effects that the culture of the family can have on school performance. When Sarjon, an Assyrian man, finds that his young son, Lark, needs a babysitter but his whole family is either working or in school, and thus is faced with the dilemma of taking one person away from his studies:

Samir [Sarjon's brother] came again and says he quit school. I say, no, you have to go, you have to go. He says no. So I tell him "Fine you can quit and watch Lark." He say "No, I go to school." Hushniya [Sarjon's sister] hears us and said she'd watch Lark and go to school at night with Dunya [Sarjon's wife]. She said she could just go back next year, when Lark is in school all day. But, I don't want her to have to quit. I know she likes to learn, everyone does. Maybe even Samir. Day care would cost us a lot of money but I don't want her to quit (121).

The book's final chapter draws connections from the stories of these families to their political origins and raises some excellent questions about how US foreign policy affects the lives of immigrants everywhere. Hones attributes the lack of food in stores reported by the Assyrian family to the US-led economic sanctions against Iraq ,and shows that the desperate unemployment in Mexico experienced by the Gonzalez family may be the result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

These connections to politics are all well and good, but they are so briefly mentioned that one wonders what type of message the author is trying to get across. He attributes the lack of food in stores to the economic sanctions, but does not go so far as to suggest what America should have done instead. He fails to offer advice as to how NAFTA should be corrected. Perhaps if he had made some sort of conjecture about what can be done to prevent each of these situations the reader would be more inclined to get involved.

While the book makes a good case for the benefits of instigating a dialogue with immigrant families, I could not clearly see how this research relates to the role of the teacher. Hones does not describe how these methods of cultural storytelling, healing, and working relate to the management of a classroom and how teachers can modify their behavior to better suit the needs of immigrant students. Overall, the idea seems a bit impractical for the typical bilingual classroom. The process is lengthy, and overloaded teachers don't have much time to spare. It seems as though these cultural dialogue activities could be performed just as well or perhaps even better as an extracurricular activity. Stories of immigrants could be published in journals or performed for the community.

The suggestions for role-playing exercises in the back are promising in that they place the stories of immigrant families in a format that is simple enough for children to understand. However, I worry that these activities oversimplify these histories to the point that they reinforce stereotypes of immigrant groups. It would be necessary to assure that the children realize that immigrants' stories are not all the same.

Throughout the work, Hones's vague writing style sometimes convolutes concepts that are otherwise very intriguing. The stories of the immigrants told in the book serve as excellent examples of his ideas in practice, but his overly academic language makes the explanation of dialogic teacher research very difficult to decipher.

Despite these shortcomings, *American Dreams, Global Visions* can be used in a number of ways. This method of dialogic teacher research is a provocative new way of addressing immigrant and refugee issues, and has the potential to change teachers' interactions with these people. As the individuals recounted their extraordinary personal histories it became apparent that the process is a much-needed therapy for those newcomers who are running from a troubled past. This close interaction with an American can help them realize their own accomplishments, and can raise self-esteem. Their histories can be seen as successes in an environment in which it may seem that they are failing in comparison to the Americans around them.

Because of the prejudice that many Americans feel towards immigrants, it is important to spread awareness of their histories, both within the classroom and without. The public scholarship and community performance pieces that the interviewers produced could be used as models for further education of the general public.

The emphasis on family-school relations has profound implications for strengthening community bonds. Because the narratives were largely recounted by

parents or grandparents, this method draws older members of the community to become involved in the educational system. Hones writes that “the school itself should mobilize neighborhood people to bring about social justice” and that “part of the educational work of schools and teachers is to help channel decision-making powers and responsibilities to members of the community”(13). My instincts tell me that it is unrealistic to expect stressed school systems to be responsible for social change in the community, but he offers up interesting cases of how the school can affect the neighborhood in smaller ways. The repertoire of school-community events featured throughout the book, such as the Hmong New Year festival, Spanish-language PTA meetings, night school literacy trainings for those unfamiliar with the Roman alphabet, and many others serve as excellent examples of the value of these relationships. If dialogic teacher research gains popularity, perhaps these strong bonds will become more common.

As the noted Native American author G. Sarris writes, “In understanding another person and culture you must simultaneously understand yourself. The process is ongoing, an endeavor aimed not at a final and transparent understanding of the Other or of the Self, but at continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both.”

Through this book, Donald Hones powerfully portrays the emotions and experiences of immigrant community members while encouraging Americans to take a critical view of themselves. It shows how researchers’ work can change our priorities in educating immigrant and refugee youth from assimilating them into a system in which they will always be the minority to helping them to remember and take pride in the in their pasts. *American Dreams, Global Visions* promises to teach us both the compassion and the self-awareness necessary to establish a more understanding society. Dialogic teacher research promises to help us along the way to a more harmonious future.

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