

Vietnamese Americans

LESSONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

LESSON 1

The Boat People: Separation and Loss

SUBJECTS

World History, American Experience, World Literature, American Literature and Multicultural Education

OBJECTIVE

Develop students' understanding of separation and loss in the context of the Vietnamese "Boat People" experience.

STANDARDS SUPPORTED

This lesson supports national social studies standards, Strand IV: Individual Identity and Development; Strand VI: Power, Authority and Governance, and Strand IX: Global Connections

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

1 class period

Background on the Boat People:

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, thousands of Vietnamese began fleeing their country fearing persecution by the Communists. The phrase "boat people" came into common use as a result of the flood of refugees casting off from Vietnam in over-crowded, leaky boats at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Between 1978 and 1981, over one million Vietnamese ventured across the South China Sea for freedom and safety, and it is estimated that half of those who attempted the trip died due to hunger, thirst, disease, and at the hands of pirates. These boat people gave up their homes, friends, and essentially their lives for a better life abroad.

HOW TO DO IT

Students will participate in an activity that will enhance their understanding of the word "separation" in the context of the refugee experience. Remind them that America has a long history as a destination point for refugees. Give students the example of the Mayflower pilgrims as the most famous "boat people." [It is important to note that the arrival of such earlier European groups to America resulted in the displacement of Native Americans, who also experienced "loss" and "separation" as a result of war, persecution and forced removal from indigenous lands.]

Ask the students to name other refugee groups, or countries of origin where refugees have emigrated and permanently resettled in the United States. For example, the twelve largest source countries for refugees (comprising 98 percent of 1999 arrivals) who permanently settle in the United States are: Yugoslavia (former), Cuba, Soviet Union (former), Vietnam, Somalia, Liberia, Sudan, Iraq, Ethiopia, Iran, Haiti and Sierra Leone.

- Write the word “separation” on the board and ask students to brainstorm what the word means to them. Write all their ideas on the board and briefly discuss. Words should reflect wide interpretations of separation.
- Ask students to take out a piece of paper and write down the ten most important things in their lives in no particular order. The list could include people, pets, objects – anything.
- Now tell them to eliminate two items on their list. Tell them to choose carefully because they will never see or touch these things again. Give them a few seconds to do this.
- Now have them eliminate two more items. Again, tell them that they will never be able to see the items again. Some students might protest but encourage them to continue.
- Eliminate two more items and continue until there are only two items left. Now have them cross those out also. This activity will be difficult because students will have to choose among siblings, parents, and other important aspects in their lives. Some may refuse to go on.

ASSESSMENT/CLOSURE

Ask students how they felt during the process. Remind them that this, of course, was not real. Tell them that these are decisions that the Vietnamese Boat People and nearly all refugees have made in order to survive.

Remind them that separation for refugees is often among the harshest kind — parents separated from their children, siblings separated from each other, and people separated from their homes and country.

Conclude by having students write about their feelings regarding this activity and whether or not they have developed new insight into the plight of the Boat People.

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM A LESSON BY THE ORANGE COUNTY HUMAN RELATIONS COUNCIL