Lesson Plan Incorporating Somali Culture, Language and History

Final Project for EDU T&L 727028 Somali History, Language & Culture
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Grade Level: ESL Intermediate or Advanced Class, Grades 3-5
Purpose/Overview: To begin a study of Somali culture with English-language learners
Objectives:
To increase an awareness of the culture of Somali students
To develop listening skills by listening to a picture book
To develop oral language skills through participating in class discussions and engaging in an interview assignment
To develop writing skills through class writing activities and an interview assignment
To develop reading comprehension skills by having students place story events in sequential order

Length of Time: 2 days, approximately 40-45 minutes per day.

Materials/Resources Needed:
Picture book: The Color of Home by Mary Hoffman
Pencils
Paper
Crayons or markers
Family interview handout
Map of Africa

Day 1:
1. Read aloud The Color of Home.
2. Discuss story events. Relate that this story is based on actual events.
3. Point out Somali and Mombasa (story settings) on a map of Africa.
4. Have students orally retell the story in sequential order.
5. Have students choose an event to illustrate.
6. Have students write a sentence or a caption for their pictures.
7. Distribute and explain the interview assignment.

Day 2.
1. Have students orally share their interview assignments.
2. Discuss what students found out about their backgrounds that they did not already know. Discuss any similar/dissimilar experiences found among the students.
3. Have students write a brief one-page reflection of the assignment.
Assessment:
1. Evaluate the students on completion of the assignment. Were all parts of the assignment completed?
2. Evaluate the written reflection paper on Day 2 using the following rubric:
   My name and the date are on my paper.
   I followed the topic.
   I began each sentence with a capital letter.
   I ended each sentence with correction punctuation.
   I wrote complete sentences using correct word order.
3. Observe the oral discussion. Make notes of verbal skills.

Modifications:
Lower-level ESL students can participate in this activity by completing a simple family tree labeling family members, or have them draw a picture of their family.

Extensions:
Extend the study of Somali history and culture in the following ways:
1. Have Somali students teach others a few greetings and words in Somali.
2. Label classroom objects in Somali and other languages.
3. Use additional literature. Suggested titles:
   Welcome to Somalia and Somalia by Elma Schemenauer
   Somalia by Mary Virginia Fox
   Somalia by Susan M. Hassig
   Somalia in Pictures by Janice Hamilton
4. Compare and contrast Somali folktales with those of other cultures. Suggested folktales:
   Dhegdheer: A Scary Somali Folktale by Marian A. Hassan
   Wiki Waal: A Somali Folktale by Kathleen Moriarity
   The Lion's Share: A Somali Folktale by Said Salah Ahmed
   Somali Folktales by Abdullahi Hassan Roble
   Tales of Punt: Somali Folktales by Abdi Sheik-Abdi
5. Read Somali poems. See Anthology of Somali Poetry by B. W. and Sheila Andrzejewski for a collection of Somali poems.
6. Play Somali music as students write. See Collection of Somali Songs by Swedish International Library and selections available at the Columbus Metropolitan Library.
7. Display Somali artwork in the classroom.
8. Have students make dioramas or other types of displays about Somalia.
9. Display student work in the school hallway.
Interview Assignment

Name _________________________________________ Date ____________________

Choose a parent or older family member to interview. Ask the person the questions below and write their responses.

I interviewed __________________________________________

1. Where were you born?

2. What country did your family come from?

3. What do you know about that country?

4. What special celebrations or customs do you have?

5. What do you remember about school?

6. What is your favorite childhood memory?
Lesson Plan Reflection

To my regret I did not know a lot about Somali history and the Diaspora prior to taking this course. It has been a revelation to me to discover more of Somalia's unique history. My Somali students have not shared a lot of information about their backgrounds. It made me wonder what they know of the history of country where they or their ancestors were born. Keep in mind that, at the elementary level, many of my students were not born in Somalia but in other African countries, primarily Kenya, or in the United States. I feel pride in my Irish heritage because of the stories my mother told me. I think children feel a sense of pride when families share the history and customs of their ethnic backgrounds. This was corroborated by the speakers during this week's course. A sharing of cultural backgrounds is one of my objectives in the lesson plan and extensions I have developed.

In addition, the students at my school, and in my ESL groups, who are not Somali have questions about their Somali classmates. They don't understand why the girls wear the long skirts and hijabs. They don't understand why they fast and why they celebrate Eid. They don't know the history of Somali. Some have no idea where Somalia is. Just as some students think all Asian students are from China, some may lump all my students from African countries as Somalian. The concept of a continent made of a vast assortment of individual countries is a difficult one for some students to grasp. When I ask my students where they are from, sometimes the response is "Africa," rather than Guinea, Senegal, Liberia, Nigeria, Kenya, Somalia, or the other African countries of their birth. To develop a greater understanding of where my ESL students come from, and to promote a greater understanding of the background of our Somalia students in particular are two other objectives of my lesson plan.

I was privileged this past year to see first hand how enlightening it can be when students study another country. In May we had an International Day celebration. Each classroom chose a country to study. All the countries of the ESL students were represented, and more, for a total of fifteen countries. On International Day, the whole school went around the building with passports stopping at displays made by the students. Student ambassadors shared information they learned about the country their class studied. Even our preschoolers and special education students were involved. Another highlight of the day was having a storyteller tell four stories from four different cultures. That kind of learning goes a long way toward enhancing the educational experience of all students.

When trying to decide how to introduce Somali culture to my young students, I chose a simple picture book, The Color of Home by Mary Hoffman. The story is of a Somali boy, Hassan, newly arrived in America and missing his homeland very much while trying to adapt to a new country and learn a new language. The family had fled the civil strife in Somalia and stayed in a refugee camp in Mombasa, Kenya. The events of Hassan's life are written in a sensitive and easy to understand fashion and are captured by Karin Littlewood's wonderful watercolors. I felt this fact-based fiction book would make an
excellent starting point for an introduction to Somalia, and might spark an opening for my Somali students to discuss their experiences.

After reading the book, the plan calls for the students to interview a family member, completing an interview sheet with specific questions. This assignment is modified for lower-level ESL students by giving them an option of completing a family tree or a drawing a family picture to bring to class for discussion. My objective here is to give the students an opportunity to learn more about their backgrounds and to develop English oral language skills through a follow-up class discussion. After opening the door to a study of Somali culture and history, I would extend the study using other media. Nonfiction books would be shared as well as Somali poetry and folktales. Somali music would be played. It is my objective that these basic strategies will give young learners an introduction to the culture of their Somali classmates and make the Somali students feel more connected and valued at school.

Because I feel so strongly that the culture of the students we serve needs to be shared, I would like to see more representation of the Somali culture at my school. To this end, I would recommend that Somali literature be added to the school library. When I was doing the International Day project mentioned above, I found no books on Somali in my school's library. I also would recommend the teachers in my school district receive professional development on Somali culture such as we are receiving in this course. We receive professional development on reading, math and technology. Why not offer professional development on this unique culture? As was mentioned in class, I agree that ESL teachers do not receive enough training in teaching reading to our students, particularly at the middle and high school levels. Such training would not only benefit ESL teachers, but also the mainstream classroom teachers who serve second-language learners. The Somali population in Columbus, as Abdi Roble pointed out, is here to stay. It behooves us to better understand their culture and find ways to serve Somali children better in our schools. As many of us talked about in class, providing educators with information about the Diaspora and Somali culture may be a beginning to greater understanding of our Somali students and may help break down some barriers and prejudices.