Inquiring into a Second Language and the Culture of School

This is the story of Han, a Vietnamese kindergartner, during her first year at East Elementary School. According to Van Nguyen, Vietnamese translator, Han’s father, mother, and paternal grandmother moved to California from central Vietnam eight years earlier through the Catholic Social Services’ Amerasian Program. Two years later, they moved to the Midwest where Han’s parents found jobs at a meatpacking company. Her father worked night shifts and her mother worked days, seven days a week. They did not learn to speak English because of the nature of their jobs and the prevalence of Vietnamese speakers in their home and work communities. The classroom, then, was a new language and cultural experience for Han.

In this new environment, Han had to learn the social codes of behavior, interact with others in English, and complete assignments and routines. While the presence of two Vietnamese-speaking children helped bridge her home and school cultures, Han’s access into the school culture depended largely on her inquiries into language and meaning. In Han’s ethnically diverse class, the children spoke English or an English dialect, either because their parents did or because their older siblings understood English as a second language.

However, because Han had neither of these scaffolds, she faced a greater challenge. Remarkably, Han was one of several children who demonstrated the most literacy growth by the end of the school year.

I worked as a participant-researcher alongside Han’s teacher, Brooke Kitt-Hinrichs, to observe Han. We noted that her literacy learning was greatly enhanced by inquiries that Han herself generated. Brooke encouraged the children to move freely in the first one-and-a-half hours of the day to centers—kitchen, blocks, sandbox, free-writing, library, art, writing activity, and computer. Han used these experiences to immerse herself in the oral, print, and written languages that surrounded and challenged her daily as she searched for ways to pursue her personal and social inquiries, making the strange familiar.

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PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The walls of Brooke’s kindergarten classroom were filled with literacy—magazine photographs of people from many cultures, each child’s name written on the fronts and backs of laminated poster board, construction paper cutouts of 12 birthday cakes corresponding with each month of the year, 26 large alphabet cards from the district-mandated phonics program, and a wall of words generated by the children as part of their yearlong inquiry into written language.

Throughout the day, Brooke encouraged children to work harmoniously with one another. She helped children resolve differences during play; pointed out the strengths of individuals so other children might respond more positively to these children during various social and instructional activities; and modeled appropriate ways of interacting at a center. Thus, Brooke significantly facilitated students’ socialization into appropriate learning behaviors and the mores of the cultural community (Smith & Qi, 2003).

LEARNER-GENERATED INQUIRIES WITHIN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER CONTEXT

This study’s theoretical frame is comprised of research on inquiry-based curricula and research on second-language acquisition in school settings. Reggio Emilia’s early childhood program in Italy has documented how children explore the world through “a hundred languages,
a hundred thoughts, a hundred ways of thinking, playing, of speaking” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. 3). Through this project approach, young children engage in extended in-depth investigations and use “graphic languages” to “record and represent their memories, ideas, predictions, hypotheses, observations, feelings, and so forth in their projects” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. 28).

Similarly, Harste (1994) sees inquiry as an assumed “openness” to learning, in which learners are not constrained by predetermined objectives that restrict their “personal construction of meaning” (p. 1223). Nor are inquiries imposed by others—teachers, peers, or parents—but instead emerge from the learner. When children explore those areas that most intrigue them, they become vested in learning. These inquiries, whether separate from the curriculum or discovered within broad whole-class themes, are driven by the individual’s personal interests, which become the driving force for learning as “learner-generated inquiries” (Pataray-Ching & Kavanaugh, 1999).

This study of learner-generated inquiry intersects with research on English language learners. Wong Fillmore and Snow (2002) argue that teachers must be agents of socialization to effectively assist students in acquiring a second language. When teachers assume these roles by contributing to and becoming part of the classroom’s physical and social contexts, they enhance the language-learning environment and the practices, values, and beliefs of the cultural community. Further, the English language learner’s fluid and continual interchange between school and home cultures influences the individual’s literacy development. As individuals build on what is “acquired at home from family members, children become socialized into the ways of thinking and behaving that characterize educated individuals” (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2002, p. 17). Hence, within a learner-generated inquiry-based curriculum, teachers play a significant role by providing the learning structures in which the learners’ literacy development may flourish.

Han observed and analyzed others’ language engagements before taking risks with her own.

Additionally, teachers create learning environments that approximate literacy learning across diverse environments—academic and nonacademic, school and home, informal and formal—so that students may build on existing schema as they expand their literacy repertoires. Once children learn the cultural schema of a particular community, they participate more fully because they understand the community’s underlying meanings (Carrell, 1987; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Drucker, 2003; Eskey, 2002). This research on inquiry-based curricula and second-language acquisition informs our interpretation of Han’s literacy development.

**HAN’S INQUIRY INTO A SECOND LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

Han inquired through assigned and unassigned oral and written language engagements. As part of her inquiry into learning language, learning through language, and learning about language (Halliday, 1980), Han observed and analyzed others’ language engagements before taking risks with her own. These engagements made the curriculum personally and socially meaningful because Han’s interactions and inquiries were all tied within a sociocultural context, allowing Han to construct ongoing semiotic interpretations of knowing through art, song, and print. In addition to the instructional requirements, which Han completed, she pursued learner-generated inquiries that were not imposed on or initiated by her peers, her teacher, or adult assistants. Through these processes of inquiry, Han constructed her own interpretations of meaning and knowing.

By the third week of school, Han actively observed and participated in literacy. Han watched and copied Thi, a Vietnamese classmate, who played a food server at a restaurant. Thi took Brooke’s food order, moved to the stove, and pretended to mix and stir the ingredients. Together, they took out little plates and served the food that Brooke ordered, placing the plastic food items on Brooke’s plate. Han brought the foods out to Brooke, and with Han standing at Brooke’s side, Brooke held up each of the plastic foods and confirmed what Han brought to the table. “You brought me a pineapple, a banana, some pizza, and milk,” Brooke said to Han. “Mmmm. This is all very good.” She pretended to eat the fruits while Han smiled. During her meal, Brooke dialed one of the toy phones and made a phone call to Han. “Ring, ring, ring.” Thi and Cindy picked up the other phone and handed it to Han. “Hello, is this Han?” Brooke asked. Han smiled. Then Thi told Han in Vietnamese to say “hello.” Han smiled shyly, so Brooke pretended to talk to Thi on the phone, “I’m just calling up some of my friends while I eat my delicious lunch.” They talked for a few minutes then hung up. When Brooke completed her meal, Han took her dishes and helped clean up.
On another day, Han shared her journal entry with the class. "Heart," Han said, describing the picture she had drawn. Knowing how limited Han was in her English, Brooke filled in the other words to help Han express her thoughts, “You liked the heart?” Han nodded. “That’s a very nice comment,” Brooke said, encouraging Han to continue sharing during future journal discussions.

Cummins (2001) describes language proficiency as conversational fluency, discrete language skills, and academic language proficiency. In the above scenarios, we see Han inquiring into conversational fluency as she learns the critical contexts that assist her in developing her other literate practices. Han’s language and literacy development required her persistence and desire to learn a new language as a means of being able to function and succeed in this classroom. Her inquiry into language and literacy continued throughout the school year. To examine the kinds of inquiry that can enhance a child’s literacy, Han’s yearlong inquiry is subdivided into four categories: 1) inquiry into literacy at home; 2) active analyses of others’ literacies; 3) negotiation between Han’s interpretation of classroom events and her existing personal knowledge; and 4) connections within and across pragmatic contexts. Although the different kinds of inquiry are separated for analysis, these inquiries are actually fluid, overlapping, nonlinear, and dynamic. Through this web of experiences, Han constructed a semiotic understanding, or personal interpretation, of language and literacy, enabling her to establish her identity and set the groundwork for future learning and cultural negotiations.

Inquiry into Literacy at Home

In school, Han often drew, wrote, read, and counted. Although she had numerous choices for inquiry, she engaged in those centers that allowed her to practice her literacy, art, and math skills. In the middle of the year, Han’s father told us through Van Nguyen, Vietnamese translator, why Han appeared to be so driven to work hard in school. He explained that early in the school year, the ESL teacher called to say that Han was not doing well academically. Brooke later shared that the ESL teacher called to address Han’s behavior; Han needed additional encouragement to stay with the class and participate in class activities. However, her family interpreted the call as a report on Han’s academic progress. Regarding education highly, Han’s mother told Han that if she did not improve, her books would be thrown away. This response also revealed that books were already an important part of Han’s home literacy environment and therefore one of the critical components of her early literacy development (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Hudelson, 1999). Han translated her parents’ threat to throw out all her books as a stronger motivation to “do better” in school. She worked to make connections between the teacher’s instruction and her own discoveries during morning centers, to make connections between what she perceived on her own and what her Vietnamese-speaking friends could clarify, to take greater risks with language, and to master new concepts.

At home, Mrs. Huynh worked hard to support her daughter’s inquiries. Mrs. Huynh brought out the letters of the alphabet, mixed them up, and asked Han to put them back in order. Han went to sleep early and stated that she woke up at 4 a.m. to work on the alphabet. She showed her parents her finished work in the morning. The family also had a Vietnamese/English dictionary, alphabet books, books with drawings and shapes, and Vietnamese joke books that they brought from Vietnam. Soon Han became so driven to draw and write that she preferred to do that for hours instead of doing anything else. “Once, I invited Han to go with me to the store,” Mr. Huynh said, “but instead, she wanted to stay in her room for 4–5 hours drawing and writing.” On the weekends, a neighbor in the building visited Han to help her with English. He showed her objects and taught her how to say their names. His teaching became evident in school. Han played a computer game in class in which she needed to match the letter with the picture of an item that began with that letter. When the letter “k” appeared on the screen and the pictures of a boat, heart, kite, and lamp appeared as choices, Han chose the picture of the kite without hesitation. When we asked Han how she knew which picture corresponded to the letter “k,” she responded, “Mr. Lomison.” Through Han’s inquiries into language, she made connections between the vocabulary words she learned at home with those she saw on the school computer.

Han’s father also shared that Han enjoyed memorizing songs. For example, she memorized songs from a Vietnamese opera, which she heard on her grandmother’s videotaped
recordings and then sang back to her grandmother. We observed this same enjoyment in school. One favorite at home and school was the “Alphabet Song.” When a classmate read the letters of the alphabet in a book, Han would automatically sing the “Alphabet Song” enthusiastically, preventing her classmate from singing it on his own (see Figure 1). All of these events formed her cultural schema that gave her the foundational structure she needed to make connections with school literacy (Carrell & Esterhold, 1983; Drucker, 2003; Heath, 1983; Weaver, 1994).

**Active Analyses of Others’ Literacies**

Han learned that she could gain access into this classroom community by observing others participating in it. As she engaged in her own activities of writing letters and numbers, drawing pictures, and playing computer games, she also observed her classmates, learning from them, participating with them, and making adjustments in her own personal knowledge about language and literacy. Krashen (1982) describes this period as the “silent period” in which second language learners go through a period of listening to, watching, and learning from others around them until they develop enough self-confidence to take risks with language on their own.

Such observations may also be interpreted as inquiry. In the third week of September, Brooke helped Han and another student make a booklet of shapes. Han closely watched her classmate complete his book and read it to Brooke. Quietly, Han worked on her own booklet, choosing the correct color for each page. When she was through, Brooke asked Han to read her book. Han did not appear to understand, so Brooke pointed to each shape, said the word, and looked at Han. Brooke demonstrated the process until Han repeated after her. Han spoke very quietly, unsure of herself.

On another day Han watched a classmate, Anita, trace a stencil of letters and pictures onto the magic slate. After she traced all of them, Brooke asked Anita what each letter stood for in relation to the picture. Han listened carefully as Anita identified each letter and the corresponding pictures that began with those letters’ sounds (see Figure 2). These engagements show that Han’s observations were not passive, but active processes within each “literacy event” (Heath, 1983). She regularly analyzed the processes through which others were able to accomplish their tasks with accuracy. Han appeared to be asking herself: How are they accomplishing that? How can I do that? What colors go with what page? What instruments do I need to draw those pictures and letters? And she drew tentative conclusions: “That says orange. That says apple. I can use the stencil to help me draw the pictures.” Each day for Han was filled with inquiries involving intense observation, question-posing, and theorizing about her world. Han took in information, connected it with existing hypotheses, and made adjustments to fit her new schema.

**Negotiation between Han’s Interpretation of Classroom Events and Her Existing Schema**

Bruner (1990) contends that meaning is a “culturally mediated phenomenon that depends upon the prior existence of a shared symbol system” (p. 69). Through her continual inquiries into language, Han learned that she had to engage in activities, even if she was unsure about their meaning or significance. She saw others place value in the letters and words that lined the classroom walls. Her teacher asked her to write in her daily journal by copying letters and words from books or by writing the letter that began the word for the picture that they drew. In addition, Brooke’s daily read-aloud time affirmed the value of words in stories. These experiences taught Han the significance of letters and words. She saw these symbols in school and at home in stories that her parents read to her in Vietnamese. Han’s experiences with literacy sparked her interest in writing. In one of her early attempts with print, Han wrote random letters on the page while playing in the kitchen area with her friend (see Figure 3).

Pelletier and Lasenby (2003) assert that children’s early forms of writing are generated through imitation, instruction, and construction. That is, children imitate writing from their print environment, conventionalize writing through direct instruction, and construct writing in real-world tasks. Han continued to notice words posted on the walls. One day Han
overheard Brooke and another student discussing the student’s June birthday. Brooke pointed to the wall at the 12 monthly birthday cakes. As a way to recognize and celebrate each child’s birthday, Brooke had written each student’s name individually on construction paper candles and placed them on the appropriate cakes. On a strip of construction paper, Han started copying what she saw—“March,” “April,” and “June” (see Figure 4).

We asked her what those words were, but she was unable to tell us. She appeared intrigued by the words on the birthday cakes, but could not yet understand why they were significant. The letters and words on the classroom walls continued to catch Han’s attention. In one of her daily journals, she copied the letters off the alphabet chart. That day, she shared with the class her journal entry, in which she had written some of the letters of the alphabet, “ABCDEeFHij.”

Britton (1993) describes each engagement as a “predictive apparatus” in which each encounter builds upon the next with the hopes that the collective body of interactions will eventually mean something later (p. 193). In this sense, Han hypothesized that meaning was mediated through letters, words, and pictures, and if she wanted to enter into this meaning-making environment, she had to mimic their forms, practice their usage, and learn the shared interpretations these symbol systems represented. And while Han might not have understood the significance of each literacy engagement, she continued to persist, building a “cumulative representation of [her] interactions with [her] environment” (Britton, 1993, p. 193).

Connections within and across Pragmatic Contexts

Han began to recognize the utility of print across pragmatic contexts and the different purposes of literacy across genres. Literacy was no longer an individual exploration, but a social inquiry in which she used and observed others using print for communicative purposes. These connections within and across pragmatic contexts became part of her overall inquiry process into language. For example, Han enjoyed using the Magna Doodle stencil to trace the letter “a” and the picture of an apple. While this appeared to be a passive activity, it was part of her larger inquiry into understanding the written English language. The following week when Han watched a classmate draw and write, she observed the string of capital letters her friend wrote across the page—“FIOLALOAMGGOO”—and focused on the “A.” “Apple,” she said. This association demonstrated a tremendous connection. Han both identified the letter “A” within the context of the Magna Doodle stencil, and in other fonts, such as another child’s string of letters. Further, while the Magna Doodle activity was an individual exploration, the literacy event that followed became a social activity in which Han attempted to converse about her writing.

By late March, Han’s literacy development began to exceed many of her classmates’. This became apparent one day when she listened in as Hope wrote a letter to her mother. Han overheard us asking Hope if she wanted to tell her mother that she loves her. Hope wanted to, but said she did not know how to write “I love you.” Han immediately spelled “I-L-O-V-E-Y-O-U” clearly and accurately. When Hope asked how to write these letters, Han pointed to each letter and Hope copied them on her paper (see Figure 5). Han’s abilities to assist other students demonstrated her developing cultural schema (Drucker, 2003) and connections she had forged across various pragmatic contexts.

Han’s reading development increased throughout the rest of the
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In the second half of the school year, Han's observations of Brooke reading to the class, her friends reading books, and her own experiences listening to books on tape, Han knew how to hold a book upright and how to turn the pages in the right direction. She interacted with the text by identifying letters and shapes. One book included one descriptive word on each page—wet, rough, soft, smooth, fuzzy, prickly, squishy, and sticky. She asked me to read the book to her. On the first page, I pointed to the word and asked, “What’s that?”

Han said “W.”

“Uh-huh, ‘W’ is for wet.” I pointed to all of the wet objects on the page. This process continued for each page, and Han successfully identified the first letter of each word, “R” for rough, “S” for soft, “S” for smooth, “F” for furry, “P” for prickly, and so on.

In another book about seasons, spring, summer, fall, and winter were each printed on a separate page. However, even when the season was read aloud to Han, she chose to identify pictures. On the page about summer, Han pointed to the apple tree. “Apple tree,” she said. Then she brushed her finger across the sign above the doghouse. I asked her what the sign said, and Han yelled, “D for doggy!” Han also identified other pictures: “red apple,” “pumpkin,” “baby bird,” “snowman,” and “house.” Han’s attention to letters and illustrations helped her make sense of text and demonstrated her developmental use of and attention to her semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic language cues (Goodman, 1973).

These interactions with text enabled Han to make connections across pragmatic contexts in her writing by labeling her drawings. In one journal entry in the second half of the school year, she drew a picture of a Barney book. After drawing a tall rectangular shape to represent a book and curvy lines at the top to indicate the book’s pages, she signified book by writing “Bk” in the middle of the drawing. On another day, she drew a picture of a duck. Then on the top right-hand corner of her page, she wrote “A DK” for “a duck.”

While most of Han’s classmates were writing individual letters of the alphabet or associating initial sounds of words with their appropriate letters, Han’s writing exceeded those skills. Her invented spelling included both the first and last sounds of words, indicating her developing ability to discriminate sounds in words. In addition, she used a complete phrase to identify her drawings. That is, instead of writing “dk” to describe her drawing, she wrote “a dk,” a syntactically and semantically appropriate phrase.

This combined use of language cues demonstrated her growing command over the English language, most evident when Han wrote a letter to her friend (see Figure 6). We asked Han what she wrote, and she said, “Mary. I love MaryRose.” In this simple letter, Han had written all the parts of a complete sentence—a subject, verb, and direct object. She no longer needed to copy commercially printed material or the works of classmates. She was able to generate and communicate her own meaning in socially appropriate ways, demonstrating an emerging understanding of the deep structure of this second language and this second cultural community (Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Eskey, 2002; Weaver, 1994).

The message showed no idiomatic or translational miscues from her first language to English. Still, Han pointed to the “E,” which was floating above the letter “M” and then pointed to the letter “s” at the edge of the paper, indicating that the “E” was supposed to follow the “s.” We asked her what happened. She shyly smiled and shrugged. She pulled out an envelope, and starting at its left edge, she wrote “MaryRose,” fitting
all the letters in their proper places. She carefully folded up her letter, slid it in the envelope, and delivered it to her friend’s cubby. In one sense, Han told us that she knew the “E” was supposed to follow the “s,” but she had just run out of room. In another sense, Han showed us that her inquiries into language, while now functional, were ongoing, developing, and discovering.

When Han entered school, she, like most other classmates, could not identify letters or write her name. She associated with only two Vietnamese friends, who spoke both Vietnamese and English. She relied on them to learn many classroom routines. While many of her classmates struggled with identifying the first sounds of words at the end of the school year, Han successfully wrote the first sounds of many words. She knew the “Alphabet Song,” and she wrote and identified most of the letters in the alphabet. She could identify a triangle, square, rectangle, heart, and circle. She knew colors such as blue, red, yellow, and purple. When she wanted to spell someone’s name or a word, she resourcefully looked for the name or word written somewhere around the room.

Han was speaking in complete sentences and with correct pronunciation. For example, at the art table, Brooke overheard Han saying, “Will you pass me the green?” “Could I have the pink?” “Just a minute when I’m done,” and “You could have the blue.” Her spoken and written literacies had increased so dramatically that Han was able to play games with her peers and participate in their conversations.

**Constructing Semiotic Interpretations of Knowing**

Cummins’s (2001) domains of literacy—conversational fluency (informal oral proficiency), discrete language skills (skills learned under direct instruction), and academic proficiency (specialized vocabulary and complex written and oral sentence structures)—can function as a dynamic whole within an inquiry-based curriculum rather than as a linear process. An assessment within a linear model might suggest that Han is flourishing within the conversational and discrete levels and has not yet entered significant academic contexts. However, assessment of Han’s literacy development within an inquiry-based model suggests that Han has already begun to acquire the foundations of academic literacy. The foundations of academic literacy—attention to context, curiosity about the functions and structures of language, recognition of literacies and literate behaviors that carry power or cultural capital within the classroom context, experimentation with new syntactical forms, recognition of the communicative power of language, an intuitive sense of how language works, and the successful cross-application of literate practices across cultural contexts such as home and school—are already part of Han’s literate experiences and practices.

Placing the three domains of literacy within a semiotic framework illuminates our understanding of Han’s literate practice and Brooke’s facilitation of Han’s literacy growth. A semiotic framework explains how the three domains work together as a dynamic whole within diverse inquiry contexts. The examples of Han’s learner-generated inquiries in her home, her analyses of others’ literacies, her interpretations of classroom events and existing personal knowledge, and her connections within and across pragmatic contexts, are only a few of the multiple inquiries Han engaged in throughout the school year. Each of these experiences built upon the previous ones, forming new theories of knowing and meaning.

In every semiotic event, there is an object, a sign, and an interpretant (Peirce, 1985). Each inquiry event for Han became a semiotic interpretation of language and literacy. But the combined semiotic experiences, or what Eco (1985) describes as a global semantic web, are the interpretation and understanding that are constructed as the individual links together a series of metaphors to form new semantic meanings (see Figure 7).

In this case, all of Han’s inquiries—home literacies, others’ literacies, classroom events—within and across pragmatic contexts form a global semantic system of Han’s language and literacy knowing. Her interpretation of each inquiry event becomes part of her web of experiences, and she constructs an understanding about how she can use both written and oral language to participate fully in her classroom culture. Every inquiry that she explored from her own interests added to the storehouse of theorizing she made throughout the year. This combined understanding has shaped her cultural identity as a language user.

**Negotiating Language and Cultural Identity: Theorizing Points of Contestation for Han**

According to the Vietnamese culture, it is the man’s responsibility to take care of the family. If he is the eldest son, he must be sure his parents, children, and siblings are all taken care of. This is why it is not uncommon for Vietnamese families to have extended families and several generations living in one household (Rutledge, 1992). Mr. Huynh, the only son, moved to the United States with
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his mother, wife, and sister in hopes of having a better life in the United States. When we asked Mr. Huynh if he and his wife intend to become U.S. citizens, Mr. Huynh said that his wife wanted to become a citizen eventually, but he did not have those same aspirations at this time. However, he planned to live in the United States permanently.

The following year, he intended to send Han to a Vietnamese school on weekends so that she would learn how to write and read in Vietnamese. When we asked what goals he had for Han, he remarked that he wanted Han to speak and write in both English and Vietnamese. However, he hoped that she would speak and write Vietnamese a little better and that she would not become too proficient in spoken and written English. According to the Vietnamese translator, Van Nguyen, and documented by Rutledge (1992), his comments reflect the belief within the Vietnamese culture that if women are too smart, they may begin to question the man’s decisions and even the traditional roles of husband and wife, disrupting generations of tradition in the Vietnamese culture.

Mr. Huynh spoke proudly about his daughter. He described Han as responsible, determined, self-disciplined, and easygoing. He rarely needed to discipline her. He only recalled three incidents when she had misbehaved—once for showing disrespect for her grandmother by requesting that her grandmother leave her bedroom, another for slapping her father’s hand away when he caused her to make a stray mark on her drawing, and a third time when she wrote alphabet letters all over the walls of their rented apartment that Mr. Huynh subsequently had to repaint. In these rare cases, Han’s punishment involved kneeling until her mother or father permitted her to stand. According to Vietnamese custom and the family’s religious beliefs, kneeling would make Han think about what she had done and pray to God for forgiveness.

Mr. Huynh taught Han the traditions and customs of the Vietnamese culture. According to tradition, his newborn son will eventually be expected to take care of the family—grandmother, mother, Han, any younger siblings, his wife, and children. In this scenario, Han and the other siblings would be expected to respect the family decisions that her younger brother would assign. In this way, Han would support the family unit.

However, as with many families who emigrate to the United States, there is a big difference between a first-generation Vietnamese in America, such as Han’s parents, and a second-generation Vietnamese American, such as Han and her younger brother. In the future, as Han continues to live and participate in the American culture through school and work, she will also acquire the values and traditions of a western lifestyle that will oftentimes conflict with her Vietnamese culture. She will undoubtedly observe her peers talking back to teachers and parents. She will see other girls pursuing their education. She will learn what it means to be independent and to thrive and succeed as an individual rather than only as a contributing family member. And unless her Vietnamese community is able to support her Vietnamese education, Han will have more opportunity to attain higher educational levels in English than in Vietnamese.

Han’s experiences as a Vietnamese American, then, will be vastly different from those of her parents. Hers will be a search for her own ethnic identity as a Vietnamese American (Fischer, 1986). She will notice a difference between several groups of people. First, those Vietnamese children, such as herself, who migrated to the United States at a young age and adapted to the western culture; second, the broad...
Further, the classroom environment was a complementary extension to Han’s home environment. Even if Han’s parents were not proficient in the English language, they knew that by emphasizing the importance of Han’s education through books, alphabet games, singing, and eventually Vietnamese language school, they were supporting Han’s inquiries into developing this second culture while maintaining her primary culture. With all these structures in place, Han could flourish in both cultures, claiming her own identity as a Vietnamese American and as a user of English.

As Han continues in formal American schooling, her learner-generated inquiries will become more sophisticated and complex. Han’s challenge, and our challenge as educators, will be to create curricula that will help Han thrive intellectually and explore new ideas and academic disciplines while still remaining connected to a sense of culture and community.

Such curricula will encourage her to invest authority in her culture and to derive questions based on this authority, as well as to place her experiences in dialogue with those of others. Clifford (1997) argues that museums are more than cultural storehouses; they are points of contestation populated with cultural and political values. Comparisons may be drawn to our classrooms in which cultural intersections or “contact zones” (Clifford, 1997) occur for people from different geographical and historical roots. These intersections may create tension between home and school cultures. A rich curricula, one that will be a bridge rather than a barrier between home and school, will encourage children like Han, if she desires, to inquire more profoundly into her cultural identity and to “(re)invent and discover” (Fischer, 1986) new ways of defining who she is and who she will become, perhaps one who is both firmly rooted in the past and grounded in the future.
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References


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