

## **4.7 - Know History, Know Yourself**

### **The Asian American Education Project**

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<b>Grade Levels</b>	5-12
<b>Lesson Overview</b>	Generation Rising (1960s to 1970s). In this lesson, students will consider the importance of learning ethnic studies in the classroom and engaging with the lived experiences of their own families and communities, particularly as people of color. They will also learn and discuss concepts of intergenerational trauma in the context of mass incarceration and its effects on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders by examining the ROOTS (Restoring Our Original True Selves) program at San Quentin State Prison. Lastly, students will learn about the current impact of incarceration on youth of color and relate it to the experiences of ROOTS program participants.
<b>Lesson Objectives</b>	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Discuss and identify the importance of learning history that includes the experiences of people of color, and reflect on their own family histories.</li><li>● Identify the causes and effects of intergenerational trauma upon communities of color, and reflect upon that concept in their own lives.</li><li>● Discuss the healing and empowering effects the ROOTS program has upon its graduates.</li><li>● Discuss the criminalization and incarceration of Asian American and Pacific Islander refugees.</li></ul>

### **Know History, Know Yourself Essay:**

Decades after 1968 and the struggles by the Third World Liberation Front to establish ethnic studies at colleges on the West Coast succeeded, scholars and activists today are finding new venues to spur radical changes and self-empowerment. One unlikely and successful location this has happened is San Quentin Prison in California, where volunteers have been teaching an ethnic studies program to mostly **Southeast Asian refugees**.

According to a 2015 study by the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) inmates comprise nine percent of the U.S. prison population. From 1990 to 2000, the number of AAPI prisoners increased by 250 percent. In 1990, Laotians and Vietnamese were among the four most arrested groups in the San Francisco Bay Area. Compared to whites, Asian youth were twice as likely to be tried as adults for the same crime.

Since 2013, the Restoring Our Original True Selves (ROOTS) program, by the Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC), offers participants at San Quentin the opportunity to learn about immigration and refugee history, **intergenerational trauma**, leadership development, and reentry planning. The program's co-founder, Eddy Zheng, is himself a former inmate.

An immigrant from China, Zheng was sentenced at age 16 to life imprisonment at San Quentin for robbery and kidnapping. In 2002, he and fellow inmates Viet Mike Ngo and Rico Riemedio were sent to solitary confinement by prison officials while advocating for Asian American and ethnic studies courses for

prisoners. In 2005, he was released on parole by then Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, with support from the Asian American community, including APSC, for his case.

Under the motto, “If you know history, you know yourself,” ROOTS teaches the stories of AAPIs by analyzing and addressing the historical harm of **xenophobia**, **criminalization**, and the intergenerational trauma caused by racism and exclusion in order to help participants heal and feel a sense of belonging. Curriculum topics include the wars in Southeast Asia, forced migration, and the violence and trauma experienced by refugee communities.

Students in the ROOTS program examine factors that led to their incarceration in the context of the punitive structures that lead people from school to prison and to a path of deportation. Moreover, participants learn how policing and incarceration is used to address social, political, and economic problems in the U.S. With efforts like these that raise the awareness of the rising number of AAPIs imprisoned, detained, and deported from the country, ROOTS participants in San Quentin have been able to learn about and be proud of their Asian American roots and identity.

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## **Vocabulary:**

- **Criminalization:** the action of turning an activity into a criminal offense by making it illegal<sup>1</sup>
- **Intergenerational Trauma:** unhealed trauma unknowingly passed on from one generation to another<sup>2</sup>
- **Refugee:** a person who flees to a foreign country due or power to escape danger or persecution<sup>3</sup>
- **Southeast Asian:** those from or with family origins from Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines<sup>4</sup>
- **Xenophobia:** fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that foreign<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Definition adopted from Lexico Dictionary

<sup>2</sup> Definition adopted from

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/southeast-asian-americans>

<sup>3</sup> Definition adopted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

<sup>4</sup> Definition adopted from Encyclopedia Britannica

<sup>5</sup> Definition adopted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

## **Discussion Questions:**

1. What does the ROOTS program teach?
2. From Thanh's speech in the video clip, how did the ROOTS program help him?
3. How did the program restore his "roots"? What does it mean to restore one's roots?
4. How might being cut off from one's roots affect one's identity and sense of self?
5. Why is it important that we know who we are and where we came from?
6. What does "know history, know self" mean to you personally?
7. What racial disparities in incarceration rates and sentencing exist?
8. Who is most impacted and criminalized, and why? How does this compare to other racial groups?

## **Activity 1: Healing through Education**

### **A: Activating prior knowledge**

1. Ask students to do a quick 10-minute write-up using the following guiding prompts:
  - How would you define trauma? What causes trauma?
  - How does trauma affect someone? Who does trauma affect?
  - What are ways that trauma can pass from one person to another? From one generation to another? (For example, think about the long-term impact on families affected by the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, the Holocaust, slavery of African Americans, the forced removal and genocide of Native Americans, and the forced removal and displacement of Mexican Americans. Also consider different types of impact, such as economic status, health, and cultural/ethnic identity, etc.)
2. Call on a few students to share their responses and thoughts with the rest of the class, and highlight any common themes that come out of what is shared.
3. Show the video clip, and then ask them to read the background essay.
4. Instruct students to do a Think-Pair-Share: In groups of two, students will go through the following steps using the prompts below: 1) Think on their own, 2) Discuss with their partner, and 3) Share with the class
  - What types of traumatic experiences did inmates like Thanh Tran experience? Does this change your response to any of the quick-write prompts? If yes, explain.
  - How did the ROOTS program help participants process this trauma?

- How did learning about Asian American and Pacific Islander history help the participants?

## **B: Drawing your family tree**

1. The motto of the ROOTS program is “If you know history, you know yourself.” Ask each student to create a family tree, focusing on the experiences of their family rather than an individual family member (as is the focus of traditional family trees).
  - Create a family tree using the following parts and prompts. Please see provided Know History, Know Self worksheet.
    - Roots: events and things that have affected your family and your family’s heritage (i.e., slavery, Spanish missions, colonialism, Transcontinental Railroad, World War II, the wars in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, freedom fighters, women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, familial culture, traditions, hard workers, dreamers, entrepreneurship etc.)
    - Trunk: the impact of those events or things (your roots) on your family and their response to what they faced (i.e., immigrating from afar to earn money for back home, being the first in their family to attend college, starting a successful business, serving in the military, making impacts in the fields of education, science, health, and technology, etc.)
    - Leaves and Fruits: the future that you imagine for your family or community that addresses the past issues they and you have faced (i.e., racial equality and equity, free higher education, affordable housing, universal healthcare, true living wages, and citizenship for undocumented people, etc.)
  - Optional: Because students are sharing personal details and experiences, the sharing (i.e., gallery walk activity) of family trees is an opt-in process. Only include the work of students who explicitly agree and want to share their work.
2. Ask students to do a quick 10-minute reflection write-up based on the following questions:
  - What parts of your own heritage and family history did you think most deeply about during this activity?
  - What feelings and words do you associate with your heritage?
  - What are you most proud of, and how do you carry/show that pride in your life?

## **Activity 2: Incarceration of Youth**

- A. Students will conduct research on the current conditions of incarcerated youth and answer the below questions. Students may utilize the following resource for their research: *Youth Confinement: The Whole Pie 2019* (<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/youth2019.html>)
  1. What racial disparities in incarceration rates and sentencing exist? Who is most impacted and criminalized, and why? How does this compare to other racial groups?
  2. What are deeper, systemic causes of the incarceration of youth? How are these similar and/or different across racial groups?
  3. Connect these points to the video and background essay to analyze how youth incarceration relates to larger societal issues and trauma.
  4. Does incarcerating youth solve the problems that led to their incarceration? If not, what type of solutions do you think would solve the problems that youth face?
- B. After students have conducted their research, have a whole class discussion on the following questions:
  1. What was the most surprising thing you learned when researching youth incarceration?
  2. How are youth of color, in particular, impacted by criminalization? What larger systems cause this criminalization, and how?

3. What are some of the solutions you read about or came up with to solve the problems that affect young people and land them into incarceration centers?
4. We started this lesson talking about trauma. Do you think that incarcerated youth face trauma from their experiences? What kinds of services or programs could address and heal that trauma?

### ***Further Information***

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