

## *Immigrant Youths Dig For Roots;*

### *Culture Classes in Vogue*

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## **Body**

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Victoria Vo has never seen the country her parents left behind. For her, Vietnam and its ways were mostly something to imagine while she learned to get by in other countries.

First it was Brazil, where she was born 13 years ago and grew up speaking Portuguese. Then it was the United States, where she learned English after her family moved to Fairfax County in 1989.

This summer, Victoria is trying to reclaim a part of her own *culture*, learning to speak Vietnamese in a six-week *class* that is one of dozens being sponsored by *immigrant* groups in the Washington area. The courses are designed to teach *immigrant* children, many of whom have been taught more about U.S. history and *culture* than about their own, the heritage of their families' native countries.

"My parents say that I should be able to speak and read and write in Vietnamese," said Victoria, a seventh-grader at Luther Jackson Intermediate School who hopes to visit Vietnam some day. As an adult, she said, "I would be really embarrassed if I wouldn't know how to read a [Vietnamese] newspaper."

Though some similar programs are held during the school year, many *immigrant* groups are using the summer break to offer children more intensive instruction in what it means to be Vietnamese, Chinese, Bolivian, Mexican or Ethiopian. Victoria spends three evenings a week with a dozen other students in her *class*, which is held at Swanson Middle School in Arlington and is sponsored by the Vietnamese *Youth* Educational Association.

Since the number of *immigrants* and refugees coming to the Washington area began to soar 15 years ago, educators and other analysts have noticed that American-reared children of *immigrants* sometimes do not identify with or understand the *cultures* of their families' native countries.

Analysts say *immigrant* children who do not have an appreciation of their parents' *culture* can have more difficulty adjusting to life here than those who do.

An *immigrant* child "needs to have a sense of his own *culture* to deal with all the complex issues" of life in this country, said Elena Pell, an education specialist with Aspira Association, a Hispanic advocacy group. "They need to define who they are and to draw on their family and their *culture* as a support system."

In some cases, analysts say, *immigrant* parents are so eager for their children to do well in the United States that they de-emphasize their *culture* and stop speaking to their children in their native language.

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"They're afraid that the children will grow up not well-adapted to American culture," said Peter Huynh, 20, a volunteer teacher in the program at Swanson. "What happens is, they start incorporating American culture in the household. That's when the problems come in."

Kim Oanh Cook, a social worker in Fairfax County's Vietnamese community, said children she has worked with "know the culture as other people think of it. They might think of kung fu as Asian, for example, without thinking about a real, living culture."

A summer day camp at Reston's Terraset Elementary School sponsored by the Chinese Experimental School teaches about 35 children such skills as Chinese painting and paper cutting, martial arts and Chinese language.

"Most of our campers are ABC -- American-born Chinese," said Bang-Jen Chao, principal of the school, run by a nonprofit group that also sponsors children's classes in Chinese culture during the school year.

Often, Chao said, children at the camp are torn between Chinese culture, which emphasizes obeisance to elders and authority figures, and American culture, in which there is a greater emphasis on individuality and independent thinking. A major part of the camp's curriculum, Chao said, deals with traditional Chinese mores and ethics.

"They sometimes are confused between the Chinese and the American way, so we teach them about this," she said.

This summer, for the first time, the Mexican Embassy will sponsor a children's course on the country's history, geography and current events, said Lucilla Ruvalcava, of the embassy's consular section. And for the last month, Debre Selam St. Mary's Church in Adams-Morgan, attended by hundreds of Ethiopians in the area, has been holding Saturday afternoon children's classes in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia.

"It's basically teaching them to read and write," said Altaye Berhale, 35, whose 5-year-old son is in the program.

Berhale said many of the younger children can speak and understand Amharic, which is spoken in most Ethiopian homes. But after attending school here, they refuse to speak the language, even at home with their parents. "When you speak to them in Amharic, they answer in English," Berhale said.

In the Hispanic community, much of the ethnic education focuses on traditional dances and music of various Latin American countries. This summer, dance and music groups are performing for children in religious and cultural festivals throughout the area.

Dora Castellon, president of Comite Pro Bolivia, a Bolivian cultural group, said the organization has helped teach immigrant youths traditional Bolivian dances and is increasingly reaching out to youths who are unfamiliar with many other Bolivian traditions.

"We need for them to keep the culture," she said.

## Graphic

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PHOTO, SHARON CHU AND JAMES Y. SHOU, BOTH 6, LAUGH AT CHU'S CHALK-COVERED HANDS DURING BREAK IN THEIR CHINESE CLASS. HEATHER STONE

## Classification

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