



LESSON PLAN

# The Power to Persevere



RELATED FILM

**Making it in America**

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## The Power to Persevere

### Key Idea

Since 1990, the number of immigrants from Central America to the United States has almost tripled. Immigrants to the U.S. often sacrifice family, community, and individual success, but gains may include safer living conditions, access to education, and increased opportunities for future generations.

### Background

From 1980 to 1992, El Salvador, one of the smallest and most densely populated countries in Central America, was ravaged by civil war. Approximately 500,000 refugees fled the chaos of the war and violence to live in other countries. According to the Migration Policy Institute, the Salvadoran immigrant population in the United States increased from approximately 94,000 to 465,000 during this time period.

Known as “the land of opportunity,” the U.S. is one of the top destinations in the world for immigrants. An estimated 400,000 Central American migrants enter Mexico each year with the intention to make it to the United States for potential economic opportunities, to escape poverty and violence, and to reunify with family. Salvadorans are the third largest Hispanic community in the U.S., after Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.

The short film *Making it in America* documents the life and worldview of a Salvadoran immigrant and her experience transitioning to life in the United States. Alma Velasco fled to the U.S. as a teenager during the Salvadoran Civil War. She gained legal status through political asylum and works at a clothing factory, American Apparel, in Los Angeles. *Making it in America* documents Velasco’s hopes and struggles as she strives to secure a future for herself and her three children. The film explores how one can persevere through hardship and embrace hard work with the goal of future success.

### Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.11-12.1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and



**Film:** 8 minutes

**Class:** 60 minutes

### SUBJECT AREAS

#### HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- Economics
- History
- Modern World Studies

#### COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- Economics
- History
- Psychology
- Sociology

### THEMES

- Family values
- Immigration and jobs
- Dedication and commitment
- Future generations

### MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing film

### PREPARATION

- None



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evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Psy.2.9-12. Investigate human behavior from biological, cognitive, and sociocultural perspectives.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards. D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

### Lesson

#### SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the story by telling students they will be watching a film titled, *Making it in America*, about a woman from El Salvador who immigrated to the U.S. as a teenager to escape the violence of the civil war. The central character in *Making it in America*, Alma Velasco, works at a clothing factory, American Apparel, in Los Angeles, and is striving to build a future for her three children. Ask students if they know someone (either a friend, family member, or a person in their community) who has migrated to the United States. What country are they from and how did they arrive in the U.S.?

Explain to students that the U.S. is one of the top destinations for immigration worldwide. The phrases “the American Dream” and “the land of opportunity” are attributed to the possibilities available in the United States. Ask students if they have heard these phrases and what they might know about them.

Share with students the following definition of “the American Dream,” by The American Academy of Achievement: “In this land of opportunity, it means something different for everyone. But no matter what the definition, each achiever’s dream is the key to his or her vitality. It nurtures the excitement of limitless possibility, urging us to plan, to work, and ultimately to believe in ourselves.”



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Ask students what they think of this quote. Do they have a dream or goal that they would like to live in their lifetime? If so, what? What qualities do they think are needed to be able to attain one's goals and dreams?

### ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Direct students to note as they watch the film how the main character, Alma Velasco, has a commitment to secure a better future for her family. They should observe the important people in Velasco's life, her struggles, and her motivations. What are some of the choices she makes for the future?

## Delving Deeper

After viewing the film, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- What challenges did Alma Velasco face in El Salvador before she moved to the U.S.? How does she describe these challenges in the film?
- What are some advantages and disadvantages of Velasco working at American Apparel? What evidence from the film depicts these advantages and disadvantages?
- During the opening sequence of the film, we hear Velasco's voice accompanied by no visuals. Why do you think the filmmaker made this choice? What effect does this have on the viewer?
- "My job is dignified but it is not a job for my daughters, for the girls that – for any child that's been born in this country. And yes, of course I would want them at American Apparel...but as executives." What does this statement say about Velasco's vision for her children's future?
- As the film mentions, many Central Americans living in the United States risk being deported. Families are separated—children often stay in the country and their parents are sent back to Central America. In response to this, Velasco said that our kids are the future of our world. She said, "So why would we damage our future?" Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- If you could rename the title of the film, what title would you give it?



## Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. Writer Nicholas Kristof, in his Op-Ed piece for *The New York Times*, "[Immigration Enriches You and Me](#)," takes a humanistic point of view on immigration. He states that we need empathy and humility towards immigrants. He writes, "What most defines the 11 million undocumented immigrants in America is not illegality but undaunted courage and ambition for a better life. What separates their families from most of ours is simply the passage of time — and the lottery of birth." What do you think about this statement? Do you think Alma Velasco's story reveals an "undaunted courage and ambition for a better life"? If so, in what ways? What values do you think her story portrays? Could you apply these values to your own life? If so, in what ways? (C3.D2.Psy.2.9-12)
2. A recent article, written in 2015 from [The Atlantic](#), indicates that teenagers today are losing confidence in the American Dream. A high school senior interviewed in 1996 conveyed what many students believed at the time that a lot of people could succeed "if they just tried." But in 2011, a student reflected shifting attitudes: "You can always work hard, but if you aren't given the opportunity or you don't have the funds to be able to continue working hard, you never get the chance to get out of where you are." Do you agree with the teenager from 1996 or the one from 2011? Why? What are some examples, either from your own life or from someone you know, to back up your argument? Write a paragraph explaining your opinion. (CCSS.ELA.SL.11-12.1.c)
3. [The Ellis Island Immigration Museum](#) in New York City chronicles Ellis Island's role in U.S. immigration history. Exhibits explore the earliest arrivals to the U.S. from the 1550's to 1890, as well as immigration from 1954 to present. Artifacts, photographs, videos, and oral histories are included among the exhibits. Imagine that you were to convince the museum to include Alma Velasco's story. In your proposal, explain



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why you think her story is important to include in the museum. How would you describe her story? What evidence from the film would you include? Would you include audio or video clips, quotes, photographs, etc.? If so, which ones and why?

(C3.D2.His.12.9-12)

### Resources

[American Academy of Achievement.](#)

Nicholas Kristof, "[Immigration Enriches You and Me.](#)" *The New York Times*, November 21, 2014.

Joe Pinsker, "[Teenagers Are Losing Confidence in the American Dream.](#)" *The Atlantic*, June 15, 2015.

[Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration.](#)

(Interactive Map) Matthew Bloch and Robert Gebeloff, "[Remade in America: Immigration Explorer.](#)" *The New York Times*, March 10, 2009.

Sarah Gammage, "[El Salvador: Despite End to Civil War, Emigration Continues.](#)" *Migration Policy Institute*, July 26, 2007.