Learning in Many Worlds: Momolu’s Journey from Liberia to New York City

STORY BY CELIA REDDICK
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Dedication

To all the children whose education has been interrupted by armed conflict, but who persevere anyway.

And to Momolu, whose smile inspires.
Learning in Many Worlds: Momolu’s Journey from Liberia to New York City is a Level Q reader on the Voices Leveled Library system. It is intended for high school students who may not have had the chance to develop on-grade reading skills, but who have age-appropriate emotional and psychosocial maturity. Thus, this book presents mature subject matter through language intended for students with a 2nd-4th grade reading level.

Momolu’s Journey is intended as the first in a series that explores the challenges that children face around the world. It is modeled on the Voices Leveled Library, and on the Catalyzing Conversation through Discussion and Debate (CCDD) project at the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP), both of which seek to present compelling topics for older readers through appropriately-level texts. The idea for this leveled reader emerged from my experience as a high school English as a Second Language and literacy teacher. My students were high school-aged new arrivals to the country, many of whom were also designated as SIFE - Students with Interrupted Formal Education. Because of their complex and often challenging life experiences, many had not developed on-grade reading skills but had immense personal and emotional maturity. I struggled to find reading materials that met them where they were in terms of both literacy level and interest. I hope that this book helps to fill that gap.

While this story is based on the experiences of the main character, Momolu, it is not a non-fiction account of his life. Rather, it uses his story as its starting place and then draws on further conversations with refugee students, ongoing research and imagination. All the names of individuals have been changed. I hope that in the end, the story provides a compelling and informative picture of one fictionalized experience against a particular historical and geographical backdrop.

I am grateful to my instructors and peers in the course Education in Armed Conflict at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for providing a lens through which to explore issues of education that has been interrupted due to conflict. I am also immensely grateful to Momolu for sharing his story so candidly, and to the many students in Momolu’s class who faced similar challenges and celebrated similar victories. Thank you.
Preview: When Momolu was a child, he lived in Banga, a small village in Liberia, West Africa. Momolu lived there with his family. He was surrounded by cousins and friends from the community.
Momolu lived in Liberia, in a village named Banga. He lived there with his two sisters, Hadja and Teta, and with his parents. His family farmed the land and sold vegetables at the market. Momolu and his siblings went to school, but it was very full. There was not enough space for everyone to have a seat, and so it was difficult to learn. Still, Momolu enjoyed school and went everyday.

**War in Liberia**

Then, one day, everything changed. War came to Momolu’s village and he and his family had to flee. They had heard warnings on the radio that rebel fighters were approaching, but they had not realized how fast the violence was coming. They left everything and spent weeks running and hiding in trees and bushes. They were afraid they would be killed because rebel soldiers were everywhere, attacking civilians.

One day, after they had been running for two weeks, Momolu and his father sat down by a stream. Momolu asked his father: “Father, why are we running? Who is chasing us?”

His father responded: “My son, our country has been in a struggle for many years. Now that struggle has turned into war. Sit down and I will tell you the story.” And Momolu’s father told Momolu about his country’s history.

**Liberia’s History**

Momolu’s father explained “for many hundreds of years, African people were stolen and taken to Europe and the United
States as slaves. Families were separated, and they were forced to work in terrible conditions. After slavery in the 1800s, many of the freed slaves decided to return from the United States to Africa. They chose Liberia as their new home.

But these **Americo-Liberians** found other people living in Liberia -- African people who had been there for generations. The **Americo-Liberians dominated** the Liberians they found there, taking land, money and power.

**Stop and Think**

1. **What is an Americo-Liberian?**
2. **Why do you think the Americo-Liberians mistreated the Liberians who were already in the country?**
3. **How do you think the Liberians felt about new people arriving in their country?**
4. **Who are Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor?**

Today, people are still fighting for power. The president, **Samuel Doe**, is trying to make some groups in Liberia more special than others, giving them better opportunities for school and jobs. **Charles Taylor** is a rebel who doesn’t like this and wants power for himself. They are fighting, and this means that we are not safe.”

**Life in Guinea**

“No do you understand why we have to leave our country, my son?” Momolu’s father asked. Momolu nodded that he did, but he was still very confused. He continued thinking about what his father had told him as he walked away from his home. Eventually, they walked so far that they crossed the border into Guinea, another country in West Africa.

They lived there for three years, waiting for **Charles Taylor**, **Samuel Doe** and their armies to stop their fighting.
After three years, the fighting stopped and Momolu and his family returned to Liberia. They were happy to be home, but they were also sad. Many people were dead and the village destroyed. Teta, Hadja and Momolu went to school and their parents continued cultivating the land.

But peace did not last. Soon, fighting returned to Liberia.

**The second war**

Charles Taylor’s army killed Samuel Doe and took the power. But he was an unjust ruler. He wanted all the power for himself, and this caused more fighting and suffering in Liberia. War started again, and many families began to flee once more.

Momolu’s family started to walk back to Guinea. This time, Momolu was older and understood that it was impossible to stay at home. They walked until they reached a refugee camp that was run by UNHCR - an organization that helps refugees. When they arrived, UNHCR “gave us something to eat and a place to live.” It was a very hard time.

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**Vocabulary**

- UNHCR - *the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. This is an organization that takes care of refugees, people like Momolu who have left their homes because of war.*
- Consequence - result, effect
- Unjust - unfair, unequal

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**Stop and Think**

1. What were the consequences of the wars in Liberia?
2. How do you think Momolu and his family felt when they left Liberia for the second time?
Momolu and his sisters were grateful for the safety that the refugee camp gave them, but they were very sad to leave home. They were afraid of what they saw:

“Everyone is very hungry” Hadja said. “Did you see that man crying?” “He is crying because his family was killed,” Teta responded. “Now, he has no sons or daughter and no wife, and nothing to eat.”

The children tried to think about other things. At first, their parents sent them to the refugee school. “I like school very much,” Momolu told his parents. “There is one teacher - Sekou - who encourages me to do my best. I am learning to read and write.”

But one day, Momolu’s mother came to him and sat beside him. “We have no money for school fees” she explained. “We are very poor. We need you to work to help feed the family.”

Momolu left school and took a job pushing a wheelbarrow, delivering things to other people in the camp. It was a hard job but he knew he had to help his family.

In this picture, one child is pushing another in a wheelbarrow. In the refugee camp in Guinea, Momolu was paid to deliver stones, bricks and water to people using a wheelbarrow.

VOCABULARY
- Refugee - someone who has to leave home because of violence or war
- Refugee camp - a place where people who are forced to leave their homes can live
- Wheelbarrow - a small container with one wheel at the front that carries things
- Child soldiers - children who are forced to join an army during war
- Resettle - move to another country
Child Soldiers

One day, Momolu came home full of questions. “Mama, why are there children with guns all around this camp? And why do they always watch me when I go out with my wheelbarrow?” Momolu’s mother looked very worried. She told him not to worry about those children. “They are children who have no families,” she said, and made him promise not to speak to them.

Then one day, Momolu was walking with his grandmother to the lake when some boys approached them. They watched him and his grandmother, and then threw stones at them. His grandmother rushed him back to the house and said “Never, ever talk to these boys. They have very sad lives.” Momolu felt sad for the boys but he promised he would not talk to them.

Waiting for school

Sometimes, Momolu watched as other children went to school. He wondered if he would ever have a chance to learn to read, write and count. He told himself that he would keep waiting for that opportunity to come.

One day, Momolu’s father came home with some news. “We have the chance to resettle” he told his wife. The children were building a fire nearby. They stopped their work. “What is resettle?” Teta asked. “It means that we could move to another country, far away from war. We might be able to move to America.”

The three children were very excited, and Momolu especially. Now he would be able to go to school! But Momolu’s father warned them not to be too happy. He explained that it was a long and difficult process. “I will have to have many interviews and then they will choose only a few families to go.” Mama explained “even in America, we will have to work very hard. It will not be easy to start a life there.” Eventually, they learned that they would leave Guinea and go to live in New York City.

STOP AND THINK

1. How would you feel if you were told you had to leave your home forever?
**Preview:** When he was 16 years old, Momolu arrived with his family in New York City. Everything was very busy and there were many people. Momolu started school, and at first it was hard for him to understand his teachers and make friends. This part of his journey was not easy either.
Arriving in New York City

Momolu, his two sisters and their parents boarded a plane for New York City. When they arrived, they expected to see only buildings and cars, but the airport was in a grassy field. “Is this America? Seriously?!” Momolu asked, laughing with his siblings. It looked more like Liberia to them!

When they finally left John F Kennedy Airport, though, they saw that New York really was a new place. There were yellow cabs everywhere and people talking very loudly. Hadja exclaimed “Oh my goodness! Even though there is no war, it is so loud!” She asked her mother, “How will we learn to live here?”

Momolu and his family arrived in the Bronx, part of New York City. They knew that there were Liberians living in a different area, but they decided to stay quiet and go where they were told. “When you are sent to a place, you just go” Momolu’s father explained. Even today, Momolu has not left the Bronx: “When you are resettled somewhere, you stay where you are sent. Where would I go if I left?” he asks.

Finding community in New York City

Momolu’s family began a new life in a big apartment building far away from the camp in Guinea, and even farther from their home in Liberia. But one thing stayed the same - their religion. Momolu’s family is Muslim, and so they found a mosque with other West Africans where they could worship safely. This made New York City feel like home.
School in the Bronx

On September 5, Momolu arrived in high school for the first time. He had not been in school for many years and he was very excited. The hallways were packed with students speaking many languages. Some were from West Africa, like him, and were also fleeing wars. But others were from different countries around the world that he had never heard of, like Bangladesh, Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

Momolu was amazed to see all the books around him. He wanted to sit and read all day. He asked to stay after school every day so that he could practice reading and writing. There was even a class that was just for asking questions about social problems. He asked his teachers about lots of things, including public transportation, dating and how to make friends.

Conflict at school

Some of the other students wanted to work hard but many of them did not. One day, a classmate yelled at the science teacher and said words that Momolu did not like. He went to speak to the principal of the school, Mrs. Maria.

Momolu said: “Mrs. Maria, please make these students stop swearing and being rude. In Africa, we don’t behave like this. I’m not used to it and I don’t like it.” Mrs. Maria said, “Thank you for telling me, Momolu. I will do what I can, but you know that it is not easy to control students in this country.”

Momolu was confused. Why couldn’t the principal of the school control the children? What was wrong with his class-

Vocabulary

- Allah - the god of the religion Islam
- Ramadan - a holiday in the religion of Islam
- Amazed - surprise, excited
- Permit - allow
- Burst - explode, react strongly
- Ramadan - a Muslim holiday
mates who did not know how to respect education? But nothing changed, and Momolu began to feel upset and angry.

One day, when a classmate named Diego threw a piece of paper at another student, Momolu burst. He punched Diego, and then felt very ashamed. He was sent out of school. Momolu’s mother asked him: “Momolu, why are you fighting in school? Don’t you know that Allah does not permit fighting?” Momolu’s religion was very important to him, so he felt upset. He promised not to fight anymore.

Stop and Think

1. Have you ever started a new school? What was easy and what was hard?

2. How could you have helped Momolu adjust to school in America?

Learning new things

Momolu spent most of his time by the yellow bookcase at school, looking at the books one by one and trying to read them. At first, he read them very slowly, aloud. But slowly, the reading became easier and faster. Soon, he was writing his own stories too.

Math was very hard for Momolu, though. His math teacher, Brett, worked with him every day after school. But still, he didn’t learn math as quickly as his friends did.

Violence in the community

Even though Momolu had experienced violence in Liberia, he was surprised to find it in New York City too. One Monday morning, the students were asked to sit together in the auditorium. The teachers were with them and they told Momolu and his friends that Moussa, a classmate from Guinea, had been shot. There were many gangs in this part of New York City, and Moussa had been in a fight.

Many other things started happening. Gang members attacked the school and another student died. The whole time, Momolu felt sad and worried for his friends, but he knew he had to continue his education. He told them: “you have to keep to yourself. Don’t get involved. Don’t waste your life.” He observed Ramadan each year and continued going to mosque, trying to remember the values he learned from his home in Liberia.

Stop and Think

1. Have you experienced violence at school? What happened?

2. How does Momolu’s religion help him to stay safe and continue learning?

3. How can Momolu’s teachers help him to feel safe at school?
Section 3

Dropping out of school

After five years in high school, when he was 21, Momolu felt very frustrated. He explained to his friend Abdu, who was also in school with him: “Abdu, I cannot pass my math exam. No one will help me. I have to leave school, it is too hard.”

Momolu left school and never came back. He had taken the math test three times and each time he failed it. He felt he couldn’t learn anything more.

Momolu’s teachers worried about him and wondered where he had gone. They knew how hard he worked, but they also knew that Momolu was not learning enough math to graduate. Even though he worked hard, he missed too much school in West Africa. He was very behind in math.

Momolu wondered if anyone would come to his home to check on him, but no one came. He waited and waited. Eventually, he accepted that he was alone. “I have to get on with my life,” he said.

He started looking for work and found a job at a restaurant. Then, he got his taxi permit. Even though all Momolu wanted to do was learn, he left school and became a taxi driver.

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**Vocabulary**

1. Frustrated - feeling annoyed or concerned about something that is difficult; not being able to succeed
2. Graduate - finish school and receive a diploma

**Stop and Think**

1. Do you ever feel that school is too hard?
2. Do you think Momolu made the right choice to leave school? Why or why not?
The Future

Preview: Momolu still wants to graduate from high school even though he knows it will be hard. He also misses Liberia and wonders what life is like there now. He wants to try to connect his life in New York City to his life in Liberia, and he is determined to achieve this goal.
**Section 1**

“I want to be the person I am supposed to be.”

Momolu still wants to finish high school, and he hopes that one day he will be able to. For now, though, he is focused on reconnecting with his community in Liberia.

This year, he turns 24 years old. Momolu plans to return to Liberia. It will be the first time he has been there in eight years. Momolu’s sister Teta asks “Why are you going back there? All we saw was war before we moved.” But Momolu insists: “We didn’t move, the war took over there. We didn’t want to move. I want to go back to see my motherland.”

**Vocabulary**

- Return - *to go back*
- Supposed to - *expected to, have to*
- Insist - *to say in a strong way, to demand*
- Motherland - *the place you came from, the place*

**Stop and Think**

1. What is the longest amount of time you have spent away from home? How did it feel?

2. What do you think it will be like for Momolu to return to Liberia after being away for 8 years? What will be different for him and what will be the same?

3. Momolu says he wants to be *the person he is supposed to be.* What do you think he means by this? Who is he supposed to be?

Momolu tells his sisters and his mother that he will have fun in Liberia. He will go back to the village where they lived, see his family and find out which friends are still there. He will spend a whole month back at home.
Momolu does not tell his family one part of his plan: he wants to find out if he can start a business in Liberia. He wants to connect the two places he loves. He says, “I want to be the person I am supposed to be.” He wants to forget about the war and build a new life, and he is excited to discover new possibilities in Liberia. He hopes to start a business shipping things from the United States to Liberia, and he will talk to many people during his trip to find out if this is possible.

For now, we cannot know what happens next in Momolu’s story. But Momolu feels the next steps will be good, and we are hopeful that he is right. Liberia is peaceful now. It is poor, but it needs people like Momolu who care. People like Momolu can rebuild Liberia after war. And you can help by learning more and getting involved. If you are curious about Momolu or Liberia, there are many ways to learn more. Look in the purple box!

**Learn More**

1. Write a letter to Momolu. Tell your teacher if you are interested in this.

2. Go to the public library to get more information about Liberia. You can ask a librarian for information, or use the computers to search key words like *education in Liberia, refugees, peace or war in Liberia*.

3. Listen to NPR, BBC News or another news radio station for more information about Liberia and many other places around the world.

4. Read newspapers and watch the news on TV. Use the internet to search “IRC.org” or other organizations that focus on refugees.

5. What other ideas do you have for ways you can learn more about the ideas in this book?
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

• Allah - the god of the religion Islam
• Amazed - surprise, excited
• Americo-Liberian - freed slaves and the children of freed slaves who moved from the United States to Liberia after slavery
• Burst - explode, react strongly
• Child soldiers - children who are forced to join an army during war
• Civilians - citizens who are not in the army
• Consequence - result, effect
• Dominate - control, have power over
• Eventually - after some time has passed, later
• Flee - to run away, escape
• Frustrated - feeling annoyed or concerned about something that is difficult; not being able to succeed
• Insist - to say in a strong way, to demand
• Mosque - the place where Muslims pray and hold religious ceremonies

• Motherland - where you came from; home
• Muslim - people who follow the religion of Islam are Muslim
• Permit – to allow
• Ramadan - a holiday in the religion of Islam
• Rebel - soldier fighting against the government
• Refugee - someone who is forced to leave home because of violence or war
• Refugee camp - a place where people who are forced to leave their homes can live
• Resettle - move to another country
• Return - to go back
• Supposed to - expected to, have to
• UNHCR - the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. The organization that takes care of refugees like Momolu.
• Unjust - unfair, unequal
• Wheelbarrow - a container with one wheel at the front that you push to carry things
• Worship - to pray or hold a religious ceremony
Momolu was a student of mine when I worked as a 9th grade ESL teacher in the South Bronx. During a course called *Education in Armed Conflict*, I interviewed Momolu. In listening to his story, I found myself wishing I had thought to interview him when I was his teacher. Momolu and I hope that this project might help other teachers ask questions of and support their students, particularly those whose schooling was interrupted (students designated *SIFE*). This next section contains ideas and suggestions for doing just that.
Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) are defined by the New York State Education Department as:

- immigrant students who speak a language other than English at home

and

- enter a US school after the 2nd grade
- have had at least 2 years fewer schooling than their peers
- function at least 2 years below grade level in reading and math
- may be pre-literate in their first language

SIFE students come from a variety of backgrounds. In New York City, where this story takes place, 1 out of 10 English Language Learners is designated SIFE; there are approximately 15,500 SIFE in NYC, nearly 40% of whom speak languages other than Spanish at home.

SIFE often enter classrooms well behind their peers in reading and math and as a result experience significant challenges in understanding and learning new content. As is the case for the protagonist in this story, the highest number of SIFE enter NYC schools as high school students. This means that they have only 4-5 years to make the same academic gains non-SIFE students make in 12 years, before aging out of the public school system at 21. Furthermore, they often enter the school system following very challenging experiences. The loss of
home, family members and/or exposure to violence can leave students emotionally vulnerable and in need of particular attention.

SIFE designation usually happens at school intake through the initial parent or family interview. However, it is vital that teachers remain vigilant to the key characteristics of SIFE in order to refer students who may not have received this designation at intake. These characteristics include but are not limited to:

- Attentiveness and engagement but lack of progress; slower learning gains.

- Challenges using learning materials appropriately (ex: holding pen in a fist, lack of familiarity with book format, lack of familiarity with computers, etc. Students may not have had previous exposure to classroom materials).

- Silent indicators of assent and understanding without the production of new language or content (students may have been taught to obey teachers, even if they struggle to understand the content; they may be hesitant to ask questions).

- Lack of engagement with other students; outbursts (school can be very frustrating for these students; students who may have experienced violence sometimes also respond violently to classroom disputes. Of course, outbursts can happen to any student, and many SIFE do not struggle with these behaviors!)

It is important to note that SIFE are often also designated as requiring Special Education services. While this can entitle them to additional services, it can also result in poorly implemented educational interventions. Mainstream environments are best.

2. Supportive Classrooms: Activities that strengthen literacy skills and provide positive socioemotional classroom experiences for Students with Interrupted Formal Education.

- Memoir Project - students write about a meaningful event or moment in their lives. To help students focus their work, they can write about something that brought about change, structuring their writing around the before and after.

  - Paired project - a pre-literate student (Student 1) can be paired with a student with slightly stronger literacy skills (Student 2). Student 1 tells the story to Student 2, who transcribes it. They can then read it together, having produced text that is at-level for Student 2 and slightly above-level for Student 1. They can also illustrate the story together and share it orally with other students.

  - Individual project - for students who require less literacy support, they can use a timeline or before/after graphic illustrator to plan their work, and then write it out to share with others. Encourage these students to illustrate their work as well (labeling the pictures to help with vocabulary development).
**Interview project** - students interview each other or family and community members about their experiences in their home countries. These interviews are then written up and shared in a variety of formats. Paired projects may be appropriate for pre-literate students (see Memoir Project). Some interview prompts that can structure the conversation and support vocabulary development:

- Please describe your journey from your old home to the United States.
- What are some similarities and differences between where you used to live and the United States? Specifically, what are difference in what you taste, hear, smell, see or touch in the two places?
- Who is a part of your community in the United States? Who was a part of your community where you used to live?

**Discrete reading instruction** - SIFE often enter with limited phonemic awareness and decoding skills. It can feel developmentally inappropriate to teach older students the alphabet, sound rules and other elements of decoding, but these skills are vital. A sample SIFE Literacy Program that can be implemented in small groups is available here.

- Additional ideas for creating supportive learning environments for SIFE are available here.

3. **It Takes a Village: Additional Resources and Support for SIFE students in NYC**

- Connect students, parents and school administrators to organizations that support refugees. In New York City specifically, the International Rescue Committee provides ongoing educational support to refugee students. Advocates for Children of New York supports all vulnerable learners, including ELLs or SIFE.
- There are schools in NYC - both public and charter - that cater specifically to new arrivals to the United States. Families may want to enroll students in one of these schools. As a teacher, you can draw on their best practices for refugee students in your own classroom environment. These schools include:
  - The Internationals Network for Public Schools
  - The work of this network of schools is featured in the film *I Learn America*
  - The Liberty High School Newcomers Academy

Further reading and resources for teachers:

Addressing the Needs of Refugee Students in Schools - *Beth Bogner, Teachers College Columbia*

Students with Interrupted Formal Education: A Challenge for the New York City Public Schools - *Advocates for Children of New York, 2010*

Q&A: The Refugee Children: Where will they go? - *The Brooklyn Ink, 2014*
References


