

Immigration, Any Small Goodness, and Integrated Social Studies

Michelle Bauml, Sherry L. Field, and Mary Ledbetter

Mary Ledbetter's fifth grade students at the University of Texas Elementary School know immigration well. Some of them are recent immigrants from Mexico, or they have family members who are. Several of Mary's students are first or second generation Americans. For Mary, immigration is one of the most important units she teaches, one that integrates several disciplines. When teaching about immigration, her goal is to have students understand that immigration is a constantly evolving issue, not just something we learn about in past tense.

Why Teach About Immigration?

Mary believes that teaching about immigration near the beginning of the school year serves several purposes. Because so many of her students are immigrants from south of the U.S. border, the unit helps her get to know her students, it helps the students establish a sense of community and get to know one another, and it provides a context for teaching traits of social-emotional learning such as empathy, compassion, and perseverance.

For the past four years, Mary has "inverted" her fifth grade American history curriculum, "working backward through American history," as she puts it. She begins the school year by teaching about contemporary aspects of the Constitution, followed by two units on civil rights and immigration. The rationale, as Mary says, is simple. "I want my students to constantly be responsive to a set of guiding questions:

1. Where are we in history?
2. How did we get here?
3. Does history ever repeat itself? (And corollary questions: If so, why? What issues today have roots in our distant past?) and
4. Where do we want to go from here?"

Over several weeks, as Mary's students work toward answering these guiding questions, they are motivated to explore social studies from present to past, and make connections that are meaningful and memorable.

Resources for the Unit

Mary typically plans integrated units by first identifying which "big ideas" in the curriculum should be addressed and then gathering resources to facilitate student learning.¹ After identifying big ideas for the immigration unit (SIDEBAR, page 18), Mary



searched for relevant passages from her *History Alive!* textbook² and collected several trade books on immigration (Selected **Trade Books**, page 19) to provide content for the unit. She also gathered maps, personal artifacts, photographs, artwork, primary sources, current events articles, sound bytes (files from the Internet), and other technology resources. Because Mary has been teaching for over 20 years, she had an abundance of resources from which to choose. Mary strives to assure that her integrated unit on immigration is aligned with *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, with *Common Core State Standards for Reading*, and with the Texas state content standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS) in social studies and English language arts.³

KWL and Immigration Statistics

Mary began her unit of study on immigration with the first step of KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learn) by finding out what

the children already knew about immigration and defining the term. When asked, “What is immigration?” Mary’s students responded, “moving,” “traveling,” “looking for a better place,” and reached consensus on a student’s (Averill’s) response, “When someone moves from one country into another country,” as the definition that should be used throughout the unit.

Next, Mary shared statistics from the Pew Hispanic Center: As of 2011, Mexico was the largest “source country” of immigrants coming into the United States, at 29 percent, with nearly 12 million Mexican immigrants in the United States.⁴

Big Ideas for a Fifth Grade Unit on Immigration

1. Immigration is the movement of people to a different country.
2. Immigration is caused by a variety of “push” and “pull” factors.
 - a. **Push:** Factors that “push” people away from their home country include unemployment, persecution, disease, limited opportunity for education, natural disaster, war.
 - b. **Pull:** Factors that pull people toward a new country include a better standard of living, a safer or healthier environment, and positive reports from relatives who have already made the move.
3. The United States has been called a “**melting pot**” and has handled immigration issues and immigrants in a variety of ways.
 - a. How immigrants are treated varies and depends on federal laws, economics, geography, politics, culture, language, and other factors.
 - b. An economic recession or depression in the United State can change the way citizens respond to immigrants.
 - c. Immigrants have faced civil rights challenges in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.
 - d. Immigrants who come to the United States without permits face special challenges.
4. Immigration has **shaped our nation** in many ways and will continue to be an important issue.
 - a. Our *U.S. Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* guarantee freedoms for all of our citizens.
 - b. Many of these rights and freedoms also extend to residents and visitors to the United States who are not citizens.
 - c. The Statue of Liberty has served as a symbol of freedom and equality for immigrants since 1886.

Looking at a single year, 2010, we see that about 140,000 immigrants arrived from Mexico, most of them legally.⁵ This number is down from 770,000 Mexican immigrants in 2000, the majority of whom arrived in the United States illegally at that time.

Mary also distributed photographs of her own family from the 1890s, when they emigrated from Europe. She also shared historic images of immigrants from Mexico⁶ on the classroom Promethean board in order to “personalize historically the diversity of the immigrants and citizens who helped build our country and immigrate to Texas.” Mary asked her students to observe each photograph carefully and make note of details, such as clothing, hairstyles, facial expressions, scenery, and objects in the photographs. Students noticed “unusual clothing,” “slick and parted-down-the-middle hair styles,” “serious expressions on the faces,” and, in some, “a look of fear or unease.”

Mary used these “artifact gallery walks” to teach the difference between observations and inferences. Her students quickly learned to make observations and then use those observations to make inferences about the images. Mary explained, “This transfers quickly to their reading across the content areas, especially in social studies and science, where making observations and drawing conclusions are critical skills.”

Integrating English-Language Arts: Any Small Goodness

A highlight of the study of immigration was the shared reading of *Any Small Goodness: A Novel of the Barrio* by Tony Johnston.⁷ In this young adult novel, Arturo, the protagonist, narrates the story of his family’s life in Los Angeles, where they moved from Mexico three years ago. His eloquent narrative expresses the life of a pre-teen trying to figure out who he is and what he stands for. Throughout the book, the Rodriguez family—Papi, Mami, Abuelita, Luis, Rosa, and Arturo—experience both challenges and overwhelming joy, as they affirm that “any small goodness is of value.” Arturo’s description of the family’s tradition of drawing names for Christmas and secretly making a gift by hand is an exemplar of the book’s message, “For the present, you have to give a part of heart. Like something you make or write or do. Whatever, that’s really from you.”

As both a Notable Social Studies Trade Book and a Notable Books of the English Language Arts award winner (2002), *Any Small Goodness* contains rich language to support learning for both National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies and the Common Core Standards for ELA. Throughout the novel study, Mary highlights figurative language, such as similes, alliteration, and metaphor, and asks her students to find and interpret examples. One student found the following quote to be illustrative, “Like some random, windblown weeds, we landed in L.A., home to movie stars and crazies and crazy movie stars” (p. 8). Another student repeated this passage: “We form a ring, a ring of Rodriguezes. Like a kind of prayer. No one says so, but I think we all know, right here we’re holding all that matters in the whole world. We’re holding each other” (p.



99). Someone else in Mary’s class offered an example of simile: “In this moment my history holds me. Like a warm serape” (p. 18). Students come to appreciate the use of rich, descriptive language found throughout the book.

Traits of Good Citizenship

Several of the book’s characters possess citizenship traits that Mary wants her students to emulate during the school year: Mr. Love rescues the family cat even though he is allergic to cats (enduring personal discomfort for a good cause); Ms. Cloud, the wealthy librarian of the neighborhood school, teaches the children to love books (love of reading and learning); Coach Tree, a former NBA star, coaches the school’s basketball team for a \$1 salary (volunteerism); and Officer Paster delivers a new lunchbox to Rosa on the first day of school to replace the one destroyed in a drive-by shooting the previous evening (countering violence with compassion). These characters’ actions support Mary’s commitment as a teacher to character development.

Reason for Emigrating

As shared reading of the novel continued, Mary also taught her students the notion that there are push and pull factors of immigration and asked students to apply the concepts to their own family situations: “Some of you have family members who are immigrants from Mexico. What are some of the factors that pushed them out of Mexico or pulled them to the United States?” Nancy quickly answered, “Safety.” Luc shared, “Better work opportunities,” and Ester noted, “Family.” By inviting student input based on personal experiences, Mary used students’ prior knowledge to help them make connections to characters in *Any Small Goodness*.

Mary highlighted the push and pull factors that Arturo’s family experienced in the novel in the following examples: “Three years ago our family came up from Mexico to L.A. From stories they’d heard, my parents were worried for our safety in ‘that hard-as-a-fist Los Angeles.’ But Papi needed better work.” And “Rosa, my little sister, wailed, “Nighted States, no! Too dark!’ My brother, Luis, and I pretty much clammed up. I guess numbed by the thought of leaving our home, and a little scared,

too, about the tough barrio” (page 8 in the book).

Written Responses

Mary paused in reading the book aloud, at the culmination of the book, and asked her students to respond to two writing prompts, the first of which was overtly related to the topic of

Selected Trade Books with Immigration Themes

Any Small Goodness: A Novel of the Barrio by Tony Johnston (New York: Scholastic, 2001).

Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan by Mary Williams (New York: Lee & Low, 2005).

The Candy Shop by Jan Wahl (Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2004).

Coming to America: The Story of Immigration by Betsy Maestro (New York: Scholastic, 1999).

Coolies by Yin (New York: Puffin, 2003).

From North to South/Del Norte al Sur by René Colato Lainez (New York: Children’s Book Press, 2010).

Grandfather’s Journey by Alan Say (New York: Sandpiper, 2008).

My Diary From Here to There/Mi Diario de Aqui Hasta Alla by Amanda Irma Perez (New York: Lee & Low, 2002).

René Has Two Last Names/René Tiene dos Apellidos by René Colato Lainez (Houston: Arte Publico, 2009).

Side by Side: The Story of Dolores Huerta and César Chávez/Lado a Lado: La Historia de Dolores Huerta and César Chávez by Monica Brown (New York: Rayo/HarperCollins, 2009).

Waiting for Papa/Esperando a Papa by René Colato Lainez (Houston: Piñata Books, 2004).

immigration: “What are some of the push and pull factors of immigration you learned about in *Any Small Goodness*?” In his response, Thomas wrote, “When Papi moved to the United States for a better job—that was a pull. A push was the drive-by shooting. That made them [the Rodriguez family] want to go back to Mexico.” Serena offered, “When Papi needed work, that was a pull to the U.S. There was a lot of violence in L.A. That was a push. When Ms. Pringle [Arturo’s teacher] changed his name to Arthur, that was a push.” This assignment allows Mary to assess students’ understanding of concepts related to NCSS Standard 3: PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS.

Current Events

Current events were an important part of the immigration unit. The expanding U.S. border fence was a topic in an issue of *Time for Kids*, and Mary used the article as a springboard for discussion of other immigration laws and possible reforms that were debated during the 2012 presidential elections. The students were eager to discuss the risks that immigrants take when coming to the United States. They came to the conclusion that the realities of a weak economy in the United States are outweighed by the even weaker economy in Mexico and the dangers of the drug cartel. They also voiced an opinion that “a fence is not going to keep people out.” Using the Promethean board, Mary showed video clips related to immigration from CNN and other major news reporting outlets as additional resources during the discussion. As this article goes to press, Congressional members are considering immigration law reform.⁸

Connecting Art to Issues of Immigration

Integrating the arts helps Mary teach valuable content and make connections to historical events. For the immigration unit, she utilized online images from a 2010 art exhibit in Arizona, “SB 1070: An Artist’s Point of View,” that was reported on CNN.⁹ The exhibit included photographs, prints, sculptures, and paintings from nine artists who responded to a call for artwork related to Arizona’s immigration laws.

Through artwork, such as Ernesto Yerena’s “Immigration Reform Now” and “Fight for Dignity,” students viewed key contemporary immigration issues represented by powerful imagery. One at a time, Mary displayed each piece of art. She asked the fifth graders to think of three words that they could use to describe each piece and to share their ideas with a partner. Students responded thoughtfully with terms such as, “social democracy,” “human rights,” and “hope.” Xavier passionately announced his response to the “Fight for Dignity” poster with the whole class: “Give me liberty or give me death!”

Forum for Discussion: A Classroom Guest

At the end of the unit, Mary’s classroom became a forum for discussing legal issues related to immigration. Hana Boston, an immigration lawyer, visited the class to explain what immigration law is and when her services might be needed. They asked Ms. Boston many questions, such as: What does an immigration

lawyer do? How do you fight against discrimination? How long does a court case take? How does someone find out about you and hire you? How did you learn about the Constitution and Bill of Rights? What made you want to practice immigration law? What changes would you like to see Congress make to immigration law? The range and depth of students’ questions demonstrated their comprehension and analysis of current issues. Ms. Boston led the students in listing possible pros and cons of different immigration policies and laws and public opinion evolved over the decades of American history.

This forum for discussion allowed Mary’s students to make connections to their previous social studies units, including those on the Bill of Rights and civil rights, and to persistent problems of racism, prejudice, discrimination, and the challenges that populations face when they are forced to compete for resources, jobs, space, etc. This discussion was a useful culmination of the class’s immigration studies, a helpful positioning of the class goal for a caring and considerate community, and a framing for the rest of the year’s lessons in social studies.

Conclusion

By integrating social studies with language arts, Mary’s unit on immigration created opportunities for her students to develop their own ideas based on our present and our past. Primary sources, current events, technology, literature, and dramatic simulations provide her fifth graders with rich experiences where “there is no wrong answer. The only wrong answer is no answer.” It is within this safe learning environment that delicate issues such as immigration can be discussed and future citizens nurtured. Teachers like Mary, who intentionally integrate social studies and language arts content, help students empathize with people in circumstances which may be different from their own, and build foundations as “integrated thinkers” who can actively—and capably—participate in our multicultural democracy.¹⁰

Notes

1. Sherry L. Field, Michelle Bauml, and Mary Ledbetter, “Every Day Successes: Powerful Integration of Social Studies Content and English-Language Arts,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 23, no. 3 (2011): 22–25; Janet Alleman, Barbara Knighton, and Jere Brophy, “Structuring the Curriculum around Big Ideas,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 23, no. 2 (2010): 25–29.
2. Bert Bower, *History Alive! America’s Past* (Palo Alto, CA: Teacher’s Curriculum Institute, 2003).
3. Common Core Standards for Reading: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.6 Describe how a narrator’s or speaker’s point of view influences how events are described. Texas state standards (TEKS) for Reading: ELA 5.8, Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Sensory Language. ELA5.6, Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Fiction. Texas state standards (TEKS) for Social Studies: SS.5.4 History. The student understands political, economic, and social changes that occurred in the United States during the 19th century. SS.5.5. History. The student understands important issues, events, and individuals in the United States during the 20th and 21st centuries. SS.5.22. Culture. The student understands the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups to the United States. NCSS Standards: Theme 1: Culture. Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change. Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments. Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance.
4. Seth Motel and Eileen Patten, “Statistical Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2011.” (2013), www.pewhispanic.org/2013.



5. Jeffrey Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "Unauthorized Immigrants: 11.1 Million in 2011." (2012), www.pewhispanic.org/2012.
6. Dorothy Hoobler and Thomas Hoobler, *The Mexican-American Family Album* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). This book is a good resource for historical photographs.
7. Tony Johnston, *Any Small Goodness: A Novel of the Barrio* (New York: Scholastic, 2001). The novel won several awards, including a listing in the *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People*.
8. Erica Werner, "Senators Mum as They Craft Immigration Bill." *Russellville Courier* (March 10, 2013): 9A.
9. Emanuella Grinberg, "Arizona Immigration Law Inspires Art Exhibit" (CNN, August 6, 2010), www.cnn.com.
10. Elizabeth Hinde, "Fractured Social Studies or Integrated Thinkers?" *Social Studies Research and Practice* 7, no. 3 (2009): 118-127

MICHELLE BAUML is an assistant professor in the College of Education at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

SHERRY L. FIELD is dean of the College of Education at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, Arkansas.

MARY LEDBETTER is a teacher at The University of Texas Elementary School in Austin, Texas.