

# Fourth Grade Historians: A Thematic Approach to Immigration

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**Our fourth grade class** began its unit of study on immigration with a videotaped interview of a child who had recently left her home in China for the United States. While the majority of the fourth graders were watching with interest, one student wandered over to me and said, “No offense Miss Henry but this is boring.” For the ten-year-old girl standing in front of me, immigration and the child on the screen were as distant and removed from her life as any other moment in history. I realized that a different approach was needed if every fourth grade student at Trinity School was going to actively engage the social studies curriculum. How could I personalize a topic as diverse and controversial as immigration? Could this fourth grader develop a connection to past and recent immigrants’ experiences?

## Context and Purpose

Located in the Buckhead district of Atlanta, Georgia, Trinity is a K-6 independent school. As the first private school in the state to racially integrate in 1963, it welcomes diversity and emphasizes the unique learning potential of each child. The student body largely pulls from upper middle class to affluent families with many of the children having traveled abroad. The racial composition is predominately white. Taking this context into account, my goal was to individualize instruction, personalize history, and connect each child to the world by developing my students’ skills as historians.

Fourth graders at Trinity spend

the third trimester learning about the Industrial Revolution and immigration. Immigration is a familiar topic to elementary social studies teachers, who have developed a variety of creative approaches within the classroom.<sup>1</sup> The unit of study that I developed at Trinity has much in common with the instructional experiences typical at the elementary level. Yet, I specifically set out to help fourth graders develop the high-level analytical skills necessary to interpret primary sources. Through a thematic approach, students would make historical connections across time and space to the current debate surrounding immigration.

### Getting Students' Interest

Familiar with a whole language approach to social studies, I decided to introduce the immigration unit by reading *Coming to America: The Story of Immigration by Betsy Maestro*.<sup>2</sup> I was worried that my classes would find the book "too babyish." However, I was surprised to find the students asking if they could sit on the floor at my feet. As I turned the pages and shared the colorful illustrations, one eager student raised her hand, "I think my family came over then," meaning during the 1890s.

As the story of American immigration continued, students enthusiastically shared what they knew about their family history. Other students seemed less certain and wanted to know where, when, and why their ancestors came to the United States.

One boy redirected the class's interest when he explained that his family had come from India and, therefore, they must have immigrated for reasons different from those stated in the book.



This break with the idea of immigration flowing from Europe to America perplexed the class. As the students' connected their family histories to the book, I asked them to write their questions about immigration on the interactive SMART Board. I later converted their writing to a text document, which would become the basis for the students' research. At the end of this lesson, students' interest and personal investment in the concept of immigration had grown.

### Primary and Secondary Sources

Before they began their own research, I wanted my fourth graders to examine a variety of primary and secondary

sources that spanned the course of the immigrant experience in America from the nineteenth century through the present. Lacking a textbook, these sources provided students with background knowledge, served as models for their own research, and allowed me the flexibility to differentiate instruction based on the students' reading level and interests or scheduling needs.<sup>3</sup>

After stirring the students' interest in their family history through the book *Coming to America* I turned to oral history. I wanted my students to hear the voices of children who had come to America at the turn of the century (1899-1901) and more recently. By reading stories and interviews aloud in-class, we brought to life the experiences, excitement and fear of children close in age. I could sense my students' depth of understanding and curiosity growing; I was laying the foundations for historical inquiry.

### Ellis Island

Every lesson began with a reading from *I Was Dreaming to Come to America: Memories from the Ellis Island Oral History Project*.<sup>4</sup> This collection of interviews and artwork tied the lessons together, which also gave me the flexibility to shorten, lengthen, or alter my plans to compensate for scheduling conflicts as they arose. To take into account the range of reading levels, the





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difficulty of the sources along with the instructional methods varied from lesson to lesson. From whole class to small group and partner reading, the students examined texts and images from the Internet.<sup>5</sup>

Each day, the students added questions to our list, which we had titled, "Who Cares about Immigration? Past and Present." The questions were beginning to take the form of an interview, "Where did our family immigrate from? When did they come? Why?" Students drew on the stories and interviews, using them as models for what they wanted to discover about their family histories. I also noticed a broadening in the students' definition of "family" to include other adults who were a part of their daily lives. "My nanny is from Poland. Where is Poland? She sometimes teaches me words in Polish ... why do you think she came to America?" One girl brought in pictures, while another boy taught the class a song in Spanish that he had learned from his housekeeper. Periodically, I would find groups of students crowded around the world map, pointing to where family and friends called "home." The goals that I had set for the unit, to individualize instruction, personalize history, and connect each child to the world, were in place. However, before asking the students to practice the skills they were beginning to acquire as historians, I felt they needed a greater foundation. It was time to pull in additional types of primary sources.

### Photographs

Knowing that many of my students were visual learners I wanted to also introduce photographs as a primary source. I organized the material collected around three symbols of immigration: Ellis

Island, Angel Island, and the Statue of Liberty.<sup>6</sup> In order to encourage all students to participate and contribute to a discussion of the meaning of these three symbols, I broke the class up by tables. Each table of three to four students was provided with photographs and artwork that I had collected from children's books and the Internet.

As the students paired images with words of immigrants who first saw the Statue of Liberty or passed through one of the entry points, they noticed what people were wearing and what they brought with them. These observations lead to questions about how immigrants, both legal and illegal, enter the country today. Our list on the SMART Board was expanding to include more detailed questions, to which I was not sure we would always be able to find answers. Yet I was proud of my students' growing inquisitiveness and perception.

The first half of the unit of study, concluded with a discussion of historic and contemporary opposition to immigration via political cartoons.<sup>7</sup> Some of my students had already brought up recent newspaper articles and began asking questions about the complex and controversial legal debates surrounding immigration. However, I believed it was important to stick with the thematic approach and discuss the prejudices and regulations of our nation's past and present. Concepts that normally would not have been discussed in a fourth grade social studies class, the Chinese Exclusion Act, quotas, the First and Second World Wars, Japanese Internment Camps, and the Immigration Act of 1965, became daily topics as the students sought ways to explain the waves of immigration.

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grade students how to think like historians, we were on our way to understanding how immigration has been a multi-faceted, controversial issue throughout our nation's history. Now it was time to make our own historical connections. As we began the second half of the unit, I became concerned. Were all my fourth grade students ready and interested in conducting their own research? Did they care about immigration?

### Research and Assessment

I had decided that I would assess the students based on the completion of an interview with a relative or family friend and the students would assess one another's research on different immigrant groups, which they conducted in cooperative groups. Both forms of assessment gave the class the opportunity to individualize instruction and personalize history.

The list of questions that we had been constructing throughout the unit became the basis for each student's interview. However, knowing that the idea of questioning an adult made many of the children nervous, I wanted to provide them with the opportunity to practice with one another at school. We revised our list of questions and worked in pairs. Each student practiced reading the questions. We also talked about how to take notes.<sup>8</sup>

Part of the Trinity School experience is its unique focus on the arts. Students take both music and visual art classes throughout the week. This year I was part of the Artist-in-Residence Task Force, which every other year invites a visiting Georgia artist to work with the students. Aima Bey and Baba Raa El, Georgia Council for the Arts educators, taught the fourth graders about the immigrant experience through drama.

Many of the techniques the students learned helped provide them with the confidence and understanding to conduct interviews with family members.

After engaging the students in a number of different drama techniques, the artists divided the class into three groups. They then assisted the students in creating their own scenes, recreating what immigrants might have experienced as they arrived at Ellis Island.

### Writing Assessment

At the end of two weeks I believed that the students' experiences with the artists had been so valuable and influential in shaping their understanding of immigration that an additional opportunity for assessment was needed. Students were asked to write about what they felt and imagined when acting under Aima Bey and Baba Raa El's direction. The students also elected to illustrate the immigrant experiences they had acted out with watercolor paints, similar to the artwork in *I Was Dreaming to Come to America*. Students' comments included, "I think Ellis Island was [a] sad, happy, and exciting place," and "I'll be all alone. Yes, the Statue of Liberty is beautiful. I miss home, but I think I can make this my home as well."

While most students described immigration as a past event, a few imagined what it would be like to come to the United States today. "I can't believe how many people are waiting at the airport [for] the plane to America," and "America is amazing! I feel like a new person with a whole new life." These written and illustrated depictions of their performances came to serve as a wonderful collection of the students' understanding of immigration.

### Multiple Sources

Upon sharing what they had learned through the interviews with family members, the students realized that the writing of oral history depended on more than conducting an interview. If the students were going to truly be his-

torians, then they would need to rely on additional primary and secondary sources, similar to those explored in the first half of the unit.

I broke the students into cooperative groups based on the immigrant group in which they were interested. Groups consisted of three to four students, with each group having access to a classroom computer. I explained to them their task was to discover as much as they could about the ethnic group to which they were assigned. The direction their research would take depended on the interests and creativity of their group. I did provide the students with secondary sources from two different websites.<sup>9</sup> The student-driven research and assessment that ensued allowed for extensive differentiation of instruction based on individual student's interests and needs. The result was a collection of maps, ethnic foods, clothing, a list of reasons for immigration, and stories of groups' struggles and contributions to America. Students were eager to share their new knowledge with children in the other groups.

### Reflection

As I reflected upon my students' work I asked myself, was the instruction individualized? Had I made history personal for my students? Did they more feel connected to the world? Above all, did the thematic approach to immigration allow for my fourth graders to develop their skills as historians? I concluded that this approach to the social studies curriculum placed each student's abilities, needs, and interests at the center. The direction that the learning, research, and assessment took depended in large part on my students. While each child might have learned in a slightly different manner, they all demonstrated a greater understanding of the diversity of experience and the controversy surrounding immigration through U.S. history. They also had come to see social studies as a body of knowledge that they helped to create. 🌐

### Notes

1. Robin Haskell McBee, Kristine Bone, Gail Mossop, and Carrie Owens, "Common Threads: Teaching Immigration in Elementary Classrooms," *Social Education* 62, no. 7 (Nov-Dec 1998): 417-19.
2. Stephanie Steffey and Wendy J. Hood, *If This Is Social Studies, Why Isn't It Boring?* (Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 1994) and Betsy Maestro, *Coming to America: The Story of Immigration* (New York, New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1996).
3. Carol Ann Tomlinson, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999).
4. Dennis Banks, "The Human Face of Immigration: A Literary Approach," *Social Education* 61, no. 4 (Apr-May 1997): 196-202 and Veronica Lawlor, *I Was Dreaming to Come to America: Memories from the Ellis Island Oral History Project* (New York, New York: Puffin Books, 1995).
5. "Immigration: Stories of Yesterday and Today," [teacher.scholastic.com/activities/immigration/index.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/immigration/index.htm); "Freedom: A History of US, Webisode 8, Segment 7," [www.pbs.org/historyofus](http://www.pbs.org/historyofus), and "NPR's Immigration in America: Becoming Americanized," [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4080127](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4080127). For students who were struggling with the reading material I suggest using the magazine *Kids Discover*, which has had several issues on immigration and Ellis Island.
6. "Selected Images of Ellis Island and Immigration, ca. 1880-1920: From the Collections of the Library of Congress," [www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/070\\_imm.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/070_imm.html); "Immigration: Ellis Island and Stories of the Past" and "Immigration: The Statue of Liberty," [library.thinkquest.org/20619](http://library.thinkquest.org/20619); "Selected View of the Statue of Liberty: From the Collection of the Library of Congress," [www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/077\\_stat.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/077_stat.html); "First Thrill of Liberty: American Treasures of the Library of Congress," [www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/hrm169.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/hrm169.html)
7. "Freedom: A History of US, Webisode 8, Segment 5," [www.pbs.org/historyofus](http://www.pbs.org/historyofus); "Rise of Industrial America, 1876-1900: Immigration to the United States, 1851-1900 and Progressive Era to New Era, 1900-1920: Immigrants in the Progressive Era," [lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline); "Immigration: Journey to America," [library.thinkquest.org/20619/Comics.html](http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/Comics.html).
8. Kathryn Walbert, "How To Do It: Oral History Projects," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 4 (March/April 2004): P1-P4; Susan Pass, "Teaching About Immigration, Past and Present," *Middle Level Learning* no. 20 (May/June 2004): 10-15.
9. "Immigration: The Changing Face of America," [frontiers.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/immigration\\_set2.html](http://frontiers.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/immigration_set2.html); "Immigration: The Living Mosaic of People, Culture, and Hope," [library.thinkquest.org/20619/index.html](http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/index.html).

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