

# Uncovering Immigrants’ Stories: It All Begins With Picture Books

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Many teachers enjoy teaching about immigration because it is a topic that allows students to share ethnic foods, pose questions to relatives, and perhaps take a real or virtual tour of Ellis Island or Angel Island. It is a topic that also allows students the opportunity to grapple with essential questions at the very heart of the immigrant and the American experience: What does it mean to be *American*? Do people have to change to become American? *Should* they have to? Are immigrants’ experiences more similar or more different? Is there such a thing as a *typical* immigration experience?

In the children’s book *Apple Pie 4th of July*, Janet Wong delves into a young Chinese American girl’s fears about being different and not fitting into American society. She is afraid that customers, who are

busy celebrating The 4th of July, won’t buy the food her parents are preparing in their restaurant. Much to her surprise, the restaurant is crowded with customers, who love to eat Chinese food, even on this very American holiday.

### Class Discussion

As we prepare to teach social studies concepts with a picture book, we first identify the social studies concepts found in it and then develop questions related to those concepts. After our initial reading of the book, we engage students in a discussion based on the questions. Here is an example of concepts and related questions.

## Social Studies Concepts and Discussion Questions

Social studies concepts	Questions to ask based on <i>Apple Pie 4TH of July</i>
<b>Cultural traditions</b>	What are some 4TH of July traditions? What do they signify?
<b>Cultural diversity and unity</b>	How does the young girl feel on the 4TH of July? Why does she feel this way? Can Chinese food and the 4TH of July go together? Is there such a thing as “American” food? To what extent are the little girl and her family both Chinese and American?
<b>Economics</b>	Describe the hardships of owning your own restaurant.
<b>Conflict</b>	Why does the little girl doubt that her parents “understand all American things?”

To deepen students’ thinking about immigration, we designed the gallery walk activity and an oral history interview described below. Each of these activities typically requires 1.5-2 hours of class time.

### Creating a Gallery Walk

There are myriad topics to explore in immigration: the factors that push people to leave their countries and pull them to America; the special circumstances of refugees and their special needs upon arrival; the difficulties of the journey; the processing at Ellis

and Angel Islands and other entry locations; life in and out of ethnic urban enclaves; how the move to America affects family life; the ways in which the work of immigrants builds America; and the discrimination immigrants face from community members, employers, and government officials at different times. These topics lend themselves to a Gallery Walk. To create a gallery walk, the teacher hangs five large sheets of chart paper on the walls around the classroom. As students move from paper to paper, they recall and write key elements of the topic at hand. See the Template on **HANDOUT A**, page 3.

To familiarize students with the activity, we model what we expect during the gallery walk from our reading of *Apple Pie 4<sup>TH</sup> of July*. Once we have read the book, students are asked to identify key details from the story that fit into each of the categories, which we record on the chart paper. This book illustrates the conflict between children and their immigrant parents over what it means to be American, which provides information for the “Family relationships” category.

### Comparing Immigrant Experiences

Using other picture books helps develop a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience. When students have read and discussed their book, and completed the Gallery Walk Handout (HANDOUT A), they do the actual gallery walk, moving around the classroom, from paper to paper, recording the details from their books that illustrate each theme. (Each group of students uses a different color marker to write its responses so that each book is represented by a different color.) After the gallery walk is complete, we engage students in a discussion in which students draw on the information from the charts, from their books and those of their classmates. The gallery walk and literature circles both provide an excellent vehicle for students to explore some of the key themes and essential questions related to immigration.

### Deriving Questions for an Oral History

Conducting and analyzing oral histories are worthwhile activities that help students develop the literacy skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as the social studies skills of inquiry and historical investigation. We engage students in the development of the interview questions that will help uncover immigration stories.

Developing interview questions is difficult; students need guided support in this work. After engaging in the gallery walk, our students know a lot more about the immigrant experience. They now work backward to figure out which questions elicited those stories, back when the author first conceived of the book.

Students return to their literature circles to generate a list of questions inspired by the picture book that they read – questions that they will ask of a guest who will visit our classroom.

The groups record the questions on HANDOUT B (which repeats the same five topics seen on the first handout and used in the gallery walk). For example, a group of students who read about Mei Mei’s school experience in *I Hate English* by Ellen Levine, wrote these questions under the topic “Experiences during the first few years (in school, at work)”:

**How did children treat you?**

**What’s your best memory of being in a new school?**

**What’s your worst memory of being in a new school?**

**What would have made school life easier for you?**

We compile all of the questions. Students then prioritize the top ten to fifteen to include in an oral history interview guide.

To demonstrate interview skills, we conduct mock interviews during which our students give input and feedback. Our mock interviewee has been prepped to, at times, give too-brief answers or go off on tangents. Students brainstorm ways to handle those situations.

### Conducting Classroom Interviews

Depending on grade level and ability of your students, the whole class can interview one guest (with the dialogue being supervised by the teacher), or each literature group can interview a different adult. If the latter, we end the period with a panel discussion, allowing all of our guests to add or emphasize any relevant information for the whole class to hear. Picture books and other reference books on immigration are at each table where the interviews are conducted to spark conversation. The day after these interviews, students add new information to the gallery chart papers around the room. Insights from our guest speakers allow students to deepen their understanding of issues that immigrants faced and continue to face as they “become American.” We derive our inspiration for this activity from the work of Paula Rogovin, who has shown that students as young as first graders can conduct successful interviews and process the information they have acquired from them.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1. The lesson ideas in this Pullout are derived from *Every Book is a Social Studies Book: How to Meet Standards with Picture Books, K–6* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2011), by the same authors. The book provides strategies and activities that enable teachers to use picture books for both language arts and social studies.
2. Paula Rogovin, *The Research Workshop: Bringing the World into Your Classroom* (New York: Heinemann, 2001).

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# Gallery Walk and Discussion

<p>Reasons for coming to the United States</p>	<p>Experiences on the journey and upon arrival</p>	<p>Experiences during the first few years (in school, at work) <i>24/7 job in early years in America</i></p>
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Family relationships

*Children have conflicts with parents over how to behave*

Positive/Negative Aspects

*Be prepared to discuss these questions with the whole class:*

Are immigrants' experiences more similar or more different?

Is there such a thing as a typical immigration experience?

What struggles did characters face as they adapted to their new home?

(For example, name changes, eating customs, dress, role of elders, expectations for boys and girls, homesickness, getting along with other immigrant groups, fitting in both old and new cultures, etc.)

What does it mean to be American?

Do people have to change to become American?

Should they have to?

## Classroom Interview

Our group's selected book was \_\_\_\_\_ written by \_\_\_\_\_

Aspects of the immigrant experience	Suggestions for questions to ask during the oral history interview based on our book.
1. Reasons for coming to the United States	
2. Experiences on the journey	
3. Experiences upon arrival	
4. Experiences during the first few years (in school, at work)	
5. Family relationships (with parents, siblings, cousins, etc)	
6. Positive/Negative aspects of the immigrant's experience	

### Picture Books About the Immigrant Experience

Aliki, *Marianthe's Story: Painted Words and Spoken Memories*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1998.

**Two stories in one book show the difficulties a child faces when coming to a new land.**

Elisa Bartone, *Pepe the Lamplighter*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1996.  
**Despite his father's disapproval, Pepe becomes a lamplighter to help support his immigrant family in New York City in the late 1800s.**

Eve Bunting, *How Many Days to America?: A Thanksgiving Story*. New York: Clarion, 1988.  
**A family from a Latin American country flees its village when the soldiers come. After a harrowing boat trip, the refugees land and are welcomed to America on Thanksgiving.**

\_\_\_\_\_. *One Green Apple*. New York: Clarion, 2006.  
**A Muslim girl's headscarf sets her apart in school with varied reactions from classmates.**

Barbara Cohen, *Molly's Pilgrim*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.  
**A Russian immigrant girl finds parallels between her immigration experience and that of the Pilgrims.**

Ina Friedman, *How My Parents Learned to Eat*. London: Sandpiper, 1997.  
**An American sailor courts a Japanese woman, and each tries to learn the other's way of eating.**

Sherry Garland, *The Lotus Seed*. London: Sandpiper, 1997.  
**A Vietnamese immigrant woman plants a lotus seed to bring her traditions to her new home.**

Margy Burns Knight, *Who Belongs Here? An American Story*. Gardiner, ME: Tilbury, 2003.

**A ten-year-old Cambodian boy tells of leaving his homeland and settling in this country.**

Ellen Levine, *I Hate English*. New York: Scholastic, 1995.  
**An immigrant girl from Hong Kong has difficulty, then fun, adjusting to a new language and culture.**

Allen Say, *Grandfather's Journey*. London: Sandpiper, 2008.  
**A Japanese American man recounts his grandfather's journey to America and the feelings of being torn between two countries.**

Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed, *My Name Is Sangoel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009.  
**A refugee from Sudan to the United States, eight-year-old Sangoel is frustrated that no one can pronounce his name until he finds a clever way to solve the problem.**

Belle Yang, *Hannah Is My Name: A Young Immigrant's Story*. Boston, MA: Candlewick, 2007.  
**Hannah takes a new name and adjusts to a new life, as the family awaits green cards that mean they can stay.**

Janet Wong, *Apple Pie 4th of July*. London: Sandpiper, 2006.  
**A Chinese-American girl predicts, incorrectly, that her parent's restaurant won't be visited on this national holiday.**