Literature: Teaching Children about Diversity

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“Go back to Africa!”
“Just look at that banana!”
“You don’t belong here. Go back home!”
“This is an English-speaking country. Speak English!”

These are just a sampling of insults many immigrant children encounter as they negotiate their way in a new country and a new school with non-immigrant peers. As schools across the United States become more aware of the plights of immigrant children, teachers are increasingly implementing cultural diversity study in their curricula. In a small, northeastern community, teachers became concerned about the local students who treated their minority peers with contempt. The school district, located in an affluent area, serves the local university—one of the largest land-grant institutions in the United States. The town’s population is predominantly white and middle or upper-middle class. Because the university is the center of the town’s economy, everyone has some link—whether directly or indirectly—to the university. The minority population in the town and school district is less than one percent. This article describes how the teachers in this small suburban school district dealt with issues of diversity as they taught their students, through teaching units that integrate literature and social studies, about treating others with respect.

Because the local students’ only exposure to minority populations or peers was through their association in schools, teachers worried that they did not have a broad notion of the issue of diversity. Many students could talk about the negative representations of minority people they saw on television and in other popular media and felt that these representations were true of the few minority students around them. Over the years, the teachers had noticed that the level of antagonism between culturally diverse students had increased. White students used derogatory words when talking to and about their minority peers. Teachers also noticed that the minority students seemed isolated. As the teachers discussed the disconnection they observed in their classrooms and throughout the schools, they decided to do something to change the pervading negative atmosphere. They wanted to use children’s books and historical studies to help their students learn about people who were different from them.

Immigration in America

Immigration in America begins anew every day as airplanes land at the airports, ships reach the shores, and people on foot make their way to the borders (Johnso & Smith 1993; Nieto 1996). The Immigration Act of 1965 acknowledged a decline in European immigration but a dramatic increase in Asian, Latin American, and West Indian immigration—groups regarded as minorities in the United States. In the 1980s, eight million immigrants entered the United States (Rolph 1992); over two million were children. By the year 2020, 47% of the students in the United States will be of minority status (Banks 1997).

Immigration in the United States is often talked about in hushed circles or loud nativists cries. For years people have debated both sides of the issue. Proponents feel that immigration should be continued because people outside the United States want the same opportunities earlier waves of immigrants enjoyed. Opponents argue that the United States does not need new immigrants and that laws should be changed so that the increasing numbers of immigrants—especially the large influx of minority and illegal immigrants—is lowered. Nelkin (1995) finds that the negative reaction to immigrants is not new; it dates back to earliest immigrant eras. Children today are no less impacted by these negative reactions to immigrants. Thus it is...
important for young children to explore issues of immigrants.

The dramatic increase in immigrants since the 1960s signals the need for greater immigrant-sensitive curricula. This marks an important shift in traditional educational attitudes and practices in immigrant education. The realization that negative sentiments are common demonstrates that the immigrant discussion cannot be ignored. School is the main, and least restrictive, public place where American students meet their immigrant peers. For students without this experience, immigrant literature incorporated within the larger curriculum can be their most viable exposure. Books about immigrant experiences can educate children who rarely see other people’s stories portrayed. Through stories, children can see the different immigrant groups, what brings many of these people to America, and how immigrants try to adjust to new lives and become a part of the United States.

Selecting Immigrant Literature

After deciding that they wanted to implement a language arts and social studies unit on immigration, the teachers met and brainstormed ideas for children’s literature selections. They perused literature journals, read book reviews, visited their local libraries, and asked others for input. They came away with over one hundred books and read extensively throughout the summer to narrow the reading list. After sharing their individual views about the different books, the teachers selected nineteen titles they felt would give the students a broad exposure to the issues of immigration in the United States.

The core set of books incorporate the history and experiences of people from across various historical immigration periods, from 1850s Irish immigrants: Wildflower Girl (Conlon-McKenna 1991), to 1870s Bohemian immigrants: My Antonia (Cather 1918), to 1900s Russian-Jewish refugees: Land of Hope (Nixon 1992), to 1970s Cambodian refugees: Children of the River (Crew 1989), to current Mexican immigrants: The Crossing (Paulsen 1987). The teachers assigned the nineteen books as the general immigrant reading list. Students had to read at least nine books and had the freedom to choose which books they read.

When the teachers began critical discussions of the books, the students’ interests were piqued. They would read, share common books in reader-response groups, and write in their journals. In social studies, the students then conducted research on the different countries these immigrants came from and looked at the history of the time period in which the stories occurred. They were shocked to learn about the different factors that caused many immigrants to seek a new life in the United States. They created elaborate poster boards and other pictorial presentations to demonstrate what they had learned. A part of the exercise included looking at their own heritage and how they related to the different immigrant periods.

As they delved deeper into the history of immigration and read the stories that related to these histories, the students began to ask hard questions. They began to research their own family histories and learned further about the patterns in early immigration periods. Many became perturbed when they learned about some of the injustices their forefathers had faced when they first came to the United States. They began to see how new groups entering the country were met with the resentment for various reasons of groups already living there. Without a teacher overtly pointing out the similarities of their experiences, the students began to make connections with the relationships they shared in their schools.

As teachers enhanced their immigration unit, they found that more and more students were reading all nineteen books. Many students wanted to understand how the characters in the different immigrant groups experienced new lives in the United States. For some, the unit became more than a language arts assignment. They really wanted to learn about the different immigrant groups. The students aesthetically lived through the experiences of the immigrant characters.

Synopses of Immigrant Literature Used in Language Arts and Social Studies Unit

Each book in the immigrant unit weaves a tale of people going from one place to another and highlights their experiences of negotiating
their way in a new environment. The stories incorporate experiences of voluntary and involuntary immigration. Through these stories, the students connected with the larger world outside their realities. With this diverse selection, the teachers showed the students that people have been treated unfairly across different immigration periods simply because of who they were. They wanted the students to see injustice in its many forms.

The books are divided into three immigrant periods: Early Immigration Wave: 1820-1899; Middle Immigration Wave: 1900-1964; and New Immigration Wave: 1965-Present. One book, *Between Two Worlds* (Lingard 1991), describes the experiences of Latvian immigrants to Canada, and another, *Going Home* (Mohr 1989), describes a young girl’s experience of going to Puerto Rico to visit her family. These two books show that though these experiences occurred outside the immediate United States there are similarities with how people view others who they think are different.

**Early Immigration Wave: 1820-1899**


At age fourteen, Antonia Shimerda immigrates with her Bohemian family to Nebraska. Longing for his homeland, Antonia’s father commits suicide. Antonia struggles, along with her family, to survive the harsh realities of poverty in early America.


Thirteen-year-old Peggy O’Driscoll, orphaned and homeless by the Great Famine of the 1840s, journeys to Boston from Ireland with hopes of finding a better life for herself. She struggles to survive and is determined to be successful in her new homeland.


Jesse Bollier often plays his fife at the New Orleans docks to earn a few pennies until he is kidnapped and carried aboard a slave ship to Africa. Jesse is expected to play his fife so the slaves can “dance” to keep their muscles strong and improve their marketability.


Bright Morning, a young Navajo girl, is captured by Spanish slavers and sold into slavery. She escapes and returns home but is forced to live in a concentration camp, guarded by white settlers.

**Middle Immigration Wave: 1900-1964**


After surviving racial and religious persecution in their homeland, a Jewish girl, Rifka, and her family escape from Russia and go to the United States.


The Platts, a Jewish family, flee persecution in Germany in 1938. Mr. Platt first escapes and then sends for the rest of his family to join him in America.


Sequel to *Journey to America*, this story highlights the Platt’s struggles after their arrival in America. As the family moves from New York to California, they rise above their humble beginnings.


The Peterson family, 1940s Latvian immigrants to Canada, escape from Latvia during World War II to start a new life in Canada. When their father has a heart attack, the children must do menial jobs to help the family survive.


Nine-year-old Chanah travels with her Polish family to live in America. Escaping the poverty of their homeland, Chanah’s father is determined that all his children will have “opportunities” in America.

Rebekah Levinsky and her Russian family immigrate to America in search of a better life. The family is forced to work in her uncle’s sweatshop, and Rebecca almost abandons her dreams of going to college as she helps her parents.

Thirteen-year-old Fagel Fratrizky is chosen by her mother to travel from Russia to America for a better life. Fagel arrives in Massachusetts hoping to work hard and bring the rest of her family to America.

*Good-bye Billy Radish* relates a story of friendship between an American boy named Hank and a Ukrainian immigrant named Bazyli, “Billy.” Through Hank’s eyes we see the struggles of two friends as they come to grips with their differences.

In 1927, Joan Lee and her family move from Ohio to West Virginia, hoping to open a laundry and start new lives. However, the Lees, the first Chinese-Americans to move into town, face racial discrimination from the outset. With the help of the landlord, Miss Lucy, the community slowly accepts the family.

**New Immigration Wave: 1965-Present**
Fifteen-year-old Maria, her sister Julia, and her brother Oscar are nailed into a crate and smuggled in the back of a truck across the United States-Mexican border and on to Chicago. Illegal Salvadoran immigrants, they struggle to survive, along with other undocumented immigrants.

Thirteen-year-old Sundara fled Cambodia with her aunt’s family to escape the Khmer Rouge army. A church group in Oregon sponsors the family, and they settle there. Sundara struggles to fit in with her American classmates and still remain “a good Cambodian girl” at home.

Although sixteen-year-old Kim shares a loving relationship with her mother, stepfather, and half-brother, she longs to find out about the Japanese-American father she never knew. Always the object of disgust whenever Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor is discussed in her history class, she goes on a quest to find out about her Japanese father’s family. She discovers Japanese-American history never mentioned in her history classes.

A story of prejudice faced by a young Puerto Rican-American girl, who was born and raised in New York, when her family returned home to Puerto Rico to visit their extended family. Felita becomes the outsider in her parents’ homeland.

Manny Bustos is an orphan who scrounges to survive on the streets of Juarez, Mexico. Manny dreams of crossing the Rio Grande River and finding a better life in America.

Mai and her family thought they were safe from the war in their isolated Vietnamese village until agents of the “new government” arrive, bringing an end to the village’s peace. They become “boat people,” risking the dangers of the ocean in their quest for freedom.

**Conclusion**
Children’s literature remains the most viable source of information for acclimating children to people outside their cultural milieu. Books transmit values and perceptions of the world. Stories should highlight the cultures and serve as a positive introduction for students. Marshall (1998) articulates that teachers should model ways to avoid stereotyping and provide multiple
opportunities of exploration for children. The terrible tragedy of September 11, 2001 demonstrates the importance of understanding others, learning about others, and giving others a chance to understand us.

While many picture books may not address critical issues, as children mature and become more critical readers, they are able to read books on a deeper level. As students learn the history of American immigration, they can better appreciate books on immigrant experiences. Although all the books included in this unit may not be readily available, teachers can find other good books to supplement their curricula. Today, more books are being published that chronicle the experiences of children across immigrant periods. Many relate tales of recent uprisings in other countries and how these events force children and their families to become immigrants.

Children need books that represent authentic experiences of immigrants. As educators, we play active roles in ensuring that children have positive exposure to their immigrant peers. This was the main concern for the teachers as they developed curricula with an immigrant focus in their language-arts and social-studies classes. They wanted the students to understand that their immigrant peers were normal individuals, suffered some of the same experiences as their forefathers did, and that they shared some of the same ideas, feelings, and dreams. Through their efforts and concern for all students, the teachers were able to develop a caring environment within their schools. Children’s books have the power to evoke change in children’s lives.

References


Immigrant Literature Cited