



Teaching Immigration History

Immigration is central to the identity of the U.S. as a nation, and to the history of its citizens. For some people, the history of their ancestors' immigration to the U.S. is ancient. Native American peoples arrived in the western hemisphere across the Bering Straits many thousands of years ago. For others, the history is almost immediate – they are immigrants themselves. Between these two extremes lie many variations. Some families know which generation of their ancestors immigrated and from which country(ies). Other families have lost the knowledge or records of their past and don't know when or from where their ancestors came to the U.S. Still other families include children or parents who were adopted and may not have knowledge of their biological ancestry. Teachers need also to be sensitive to the possibility that children may be undocumented immigrants or that they may be political refugees and that discussing their heritage may be dangerous or uncomfortable.

The BHH immigration unit invites children to learn their ancestors' native countries of origin. This activity has the potential to engage and excite students as they learn about their family connections to a wider world and their own connections to the immigrant experience. It also has the potential, however, to alienate the students in your class who do not know their ancestry or family immigration history. To prevent this, the take home page for family ancestry offers several alternatives to citing a specific family immigration history. Children may “adopt” a country from which they can imagine their ancestors emigrated; they may list a country from which an adoptive parent's ancestors emigrated; they may list a country from which an adopted sibling or neighbor or friend emigrated.

Studying immigration provides an excellent natural context for children to be introduced to the incredible diversity of ethnicity and cultures in the U.S., and for children to imagine a nation of people coming together, all sharing the common experience of migration, albeit from different places. If your classroom has a majority of students from a particular part of the world, such as Europe or Mexico or Africa, pay particular attention to the children in your class from areas less represented. Emphasize the importance of diversity in the U.S., and celebrate that your class not only has many children from Scandinavia, but also from Mexico and Cambodia. Talk about how amazing it is that we all come from many different places, but now we're all together in Chicago (or Dallas or Indianapolis or Sioux Falls or Denver or Tucson...), playing on the same playground, coloring and reading and learning together. Too much emphasis on where we came from can be divisive. Ongoing celebration of our uniqueness together can create unity and friendship.

Finally, in this unit we have chosen not to introduce the forced migration of African American peoples into slavery. Because the immigration waves included in the BHH unit occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries and the nature of the material is simplified



for the 2nd grade level, this omission should not raise questions. Should you wish to explore the issue of enslavement and forced migration of African peoples, please see the pre-unit lessons for the 3rd grade Segregation unit for some activity ideas.