

Second-Grade History Detectives Explore Immigration

The second-grade study of immigration through primary sources cultivates student skills across many disciplines while making learning interesting, relevant, and important to gifted learners.

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Guiding Questions:

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WHO ARE WE?

WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Content-Driven Questions:

WHAT ARE THE PUSHES and pulls that motivate people to immigrate?

WHAT CHALLENGES can immigrants face?

WHAT IMPACTS CAN immigrants have on their new communities?

Skills-Driven Questions:

WHAT QUESTIONS can we ask to help guide our explorations?

HOW CAN WE USE primary and secondary sources to piece together what happened in the past?

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT our theories and hypotheses with evidence?



Our study of immigration begins and ends with their families' own immigration stories. The year begins with a homework assignment: Students and their families are tasked with gathering the birthplaces of their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and their own birthplaces. Using sticky notes color-coded for each generation, students group their relatives by the continent of their birth. They analyze this room-sized infographic to generate questions about where our families came from: On which continent were most of us born? What about our great-great-grandparents? Can we divine any patterns through the generations?

We transfer this information to a wall map of the world. Sticky notes are exchanged for color-coded map pins which are placed into the specific birthplace of each person. This new infographic becomes a much more detailed depiction of the movement of our families over the last five generations. The students look at it and talk about it all year long.

Our year ends with another study of the students' own family immigration story. This time, instead of going for breadth, the students dive deeply into one family member's immigration story. Students have represented these stories in many different ways: puppet shows, graphic novels, poetry, dioramas, a collection of original songs, and historical diary entries, among others. The students' families, and even some of their immigrant interviewees, then come to school for Culmination Night. Proud of their work, students enjoy explaining their investigative process and telling their family history they now know so well.

In between these personal immigration projects that bookend the school year, students learn about the succeeding waves of immigrants who entered California: Immigrants from Spain in the 1700s. Chinese workers during the Gold Rush and the building of the railroads. Immigrants from Mexico and Central America, and people from all over the world moving into Silicon Valley to participate in the tech boom.

We also take time, as needed, to look at issues that students bring up in class. Two years ago we investigated the Syrian refugee crisis as that situation saturated the news and students asked about it. Because this kind of issue can feel overwhelming, it can be important to allow the students to feel they are doing something to help those in need, no matter how small.

Our students chose to make art projects to raise awareness about the crisis, and also to encourage the refugees that their situation would improve. The empathy imbued in these projects was moving and astounding.

We look forward to seeing this curriculum evolve as it grows and changes based on new ideas and student interest. We enjoy hearing from our alumni and parents about how these ideas remain fresh in their minds.



As adults living in the United States in 2017 the immigration debate surrounds us. On the news, in comedy routines, and in conversations with friends and colleagues, the topic is pervasive.

It might still be surprising, though, to find immigration discussed nearly every day in a second-grade classroom. How could such a thorny, charged, complex topic be meaningful to a group of seven- and eight-year-olds? Could they really understand anything about the Syrian refugee crisis, about Mexican and Central American immigration, and about the impacts of the Chinese Exclusion Acts?

Over the three years that we have engaged with second graders in this area of study, we have found that, yes, they can understand many things about immigrants and immigration. They come to understand that the impulse to leave one's home country is often a combination of pushes (factors that encourage one to leave, like war, poverty, persecution) and pulls (factors that draw one to a new country, like safety, job opportunities, freedom). They understand that it is difficult to enter a new culture, and that this can be a traumatic process.



Curiosity is piqued, but the teachers are keeping mum about what this object might be.

