

Immigration beyond Ellis Island

Suggestions for Teaching about Immigration in the Now

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Introduction

“American is a land of immigrants” is probably the most common line in many of our social studies textbooks. Immigrants are part and parcel of American society. They are the fabric that creates the “quilt of the American population.” Our history books are abundant with stories of immigrants who contributed to the development of this country. In terms of social studies curriculum, all states require schools to teach about immigration. However, the question is how to teach this topic in a manner that will give our students—elementary through high school—a better understanding of this important topic.

For example, the presidential election of 2012 was significant in many ways. Obama was the first Black president seeking a second term. His opponent was the first Mormon presidential candidate. Both candidates need to respond to a financial meltdown, high unemployment, and other societal crises. Yet another significant topic that took center stage in the presidential debate was the issue of comprehensive immigration reform.

This discussion became more heated with the passage of Arizona’s controversial immigration law S. B 1070 in 2010. America’s concern about immigration goes in cycles, gaining momentum mostly in election years, as was the case in 2012.

My expertise on this topic comes in part from my own experiences as an immigrant who came to the United States as a graduate student some 24 years ago. My understanding of how this topic is being taught in our school classrooms comes

from observing student teachers teaching “immigration” units in fifth and sixth grade classrooms. All of these observations involve student teachers teaching “immigration” from what I see as the Ellis Island perspective.

Most of these units I have observed have these common elements: where our forefathers came from; asking children in the classroom to interview their parents or grandparents to find authentic information about their country of origin; watching a video on Ellis Island; taking a virtual tour of Ellis Island called “An Interactive Tour of Ellis Island: An Immigration Activity” published by Scholastic; and role playing the experiences the students’ parents or grandparents may have had at Ellis Island.

These units also include books about Ellis Island and the life of immigrants here in the United States. Plans for these units have the approval of the cooperating teachers, likely because they probably have taught the unit in the same manner.

One thing that is glaringly missing from the above mentioned scenario is any discussion on current immigration issues. Observing the student teachers teaching these units on immigration creates the impression that “immigration” happened only in the past and thus is considered an historical event.

To verify if this teaching scenario is only taking place in fifth and sixth grade classrooms, I asked my student in a multicultural education course at a state university campus about their experiences in learning about immigration. In every semester for the last 12 years, nine out of ten students indicated that they learned about immigration—both at the middle and high school levels—through the Ellis Island perspectives without any discussion of current events related to immigration.

Very few of my college students indicated that their teachers at the middle and high school levels have ever entertained any

discussions of immigration from present day perspectives.

Why Go beyond Ellis Island?

If one seeks to make a list of famous landmarks in the U.S., Ellis Island will probably be among the first ten. It is indeed one of the most recognized landmarks in the world. It goes hand in hand with the famous statement “America is a land of immigrants.” Ellis Island cannot be excluded when discussing the topic of immigration, whether in classrooms, in social settings, or in the political arenas.

However, the discussions that revolve around the historical role of Ellis Island seldom bears any relationship to present day immigrants’ experiences. In order to highlight the current immigration process and experiences of the newly arrived immigrants one must go beyond the Ellis Island perspectives.

Holistic understanding of contemporary immigration issues in the U.S. must involve discussion of current government procedures and political debates. To do otherwise will create misconceptions and misunderstandings. If the current immigration process and experiences are not addressed, students at all levels will continue to maintain “Myths About Immigration” (Costello, 2011).

Some of the most prevalent myths identified by Costello include:

Most immigrants are here illegally.

Today’s immigrants don’t want to blend in and become Americanized.

Immigrants take good jobs from Americans.

Undocumented immigrants don’t pay taxes but still get benefits.

Anyone who enters the country illegally is a criminal.

It is the responsibility of the teachers to debunk these myths in order to allow our

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students to have a better understanding of current immigrants and the contemporary immigration process. Teachers need to compare the past immigrants' experiences through Ellis Island with the immigrants' experiences of today.

However, before this comparison can take place in a classroom, teachers must have some solid knowledge about current immigration processes. The intent of this article is to provide background information and resources for teachers to teach about immigration through current perspectives.

Legal vs Illegal Immigrants

We are all familiar with the term "Illegal Immigrants" due, at least in part, to the last presidential election. These immigrants are defined as the individuals who came to the U.S. without proper documentation and the majority of them came through the southern border from Mexico in the middle of the night to avoid U.S. Custom and Immigration Service (USCIS) officials.

These illegal immigrants are in our conversations through news reports, articles, talk radio shows, and even from the chambers of the U.S. Congress. Unfortunately, most of these conversations are negative, including such phrases as:

- ... they are taking our jobs,
- ... they drive our labor wages low since they are willing to work less than the minimum wage,
- ... they come to use our welfare system, get free education for their children,
- ... their presence has increased the crime rate, etc.

The list goes on.

In the midst of the discussions on illegal immigrants, the experiences of the legal immigrants got lost in the process. The absence of the legal immigrants in the above mentioned conversations gives a perception that "Legal Immigration" is something of the past that only took place through Ellis Island when our grandparents and great grandparents came to this country.

Most state curriculum standards require schools to teach about "immigration." To fulfill this requirement, teachers address this topic from historical perspectives, leaving aside the issues involved in current debates. During the historical period of Ellis Island, on the very day people arrived in the United States they would become U.S. residents or citizens immediately.

However, the present day immigration processes are much more complex, time consuming, and costly. The complexity of this process is rightly stated by Vargas (2012): "The road to citizenship can go on months—or decades." The following section offers background on current immigration and citizenship processes.

Pathways to Legal Immigration

Teachers addressing immigration in today's middle and high school classrooms need to understand and teach about the structure and procedures of the current system. Following are some basics for beginning that conversation.

Today, legal immigrants can come to the United States in many different ways and can enter the country through any major city by air travel as well as by land—crossing the U.S.-Mexico or U.S.-Canadian borders. The four major legal approaches to immigration are: family sponsorship, employer request, refugee and asylum status, and DV lottery (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013).

Family Sponsorship

Any U.S. citizen can sponsor their immediate family members from their country of origin. To complete this process can take anywhere between three months to about ten years. This type of immigrant comes to the U.S. as a "Permanent Resident" or "Green Card" holder. The applicant must pay \$420 for each person being sponsored (USCIS, 2013). They are eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship after completing five years as a "Permanent Resident."

Employer Request

U.S. companies and various other organizations can request federal government permission to hire people from overseas or foreigners who are currently in the U.S. This is most commonly known as an H1-B visa. Under this visa, an employer can hire a person with "extraordinary ability" (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013) in the field of science and technology, professionals with an advanced degree, athletes, and skilled and unskilled workers—in any area where there is a shortage of expertise.

USCIS, a federal government agency, has issued 65,000 H1-B visas each recent year (USCIS, 2013). To apply for the employment visa either the employer or the applicant must pay fees that range between \$320 to \$580 depending on the type of employment. Many business organizations and corporations have been

urging Congress to increase the number of H1-B visas, particularly to meet the need in the field of science and technology. To this effect, Microsoft's Bill Gates in 2008 urged Congress to do just that in testimony to the House Committee on Science and Technology (*New York Times*, 2008).

Immigrants under this category can later apply for "Green Card" or "Permanent Resident" status, which could then lead them to citizenship in a manner similar to the people who arrive through "Family Sponsorship." However, to apply for a "Green Card" from an H1-B visa an applicant must pay fees of \$1650 or more.

It is important to note that foreign students who earn either an undergraduate or a graduate degree from U.S. universities or colleges are also required to apply for an H1-B visa if they choose to work while in America. Hiring organizations must apply for an H1-B visa on behalf of the student. In addition, the hiring organization must prove to the USCIS that the candidates they select were the best qualified individuals among all the applicants—both U.S. citizens and non-citizens.

Refugees & Asylum

In various parts of the world people get displaced due to civil war or war with another country. These displaced people typically take shelter at refugee camps. Examples of conflicts from which refugees have fled include Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Balkan War in the 1990s, and civil wars in Liberia and Somalia. According to USCIS (2013) these refugees and asylees are defined as, "... people who have been persecuted or fear they will be persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, and/or membership in a particular social group or political opinion."

The individuals under these categories do not have to pay any fees to apply for refugee or asylum status. Refugees are given government assistance for medical examination and travelling cost from their refugee camps. Many of the refugees get assistance through various religious and non-profit organizations in coordination with the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Both refugees and asylees are required to apply for a "Green Card" within a year of receiving their initial status.

DV (Diversity Visa) Lottery

According to the U.S. State Department (2013), "The congressionally mandated Diversity Immigrant Visa Program

makes available up to 55,000 diversity visas (DVs) annually, drawn from random selection among all entries to persons who meet strict eligibility requirements from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States.” However, winning this lottery does not guarantee that an individual will be eligible to enter the U.S. Each individual has to complete a lengthy form, go through a rigorous background check and a medical check up, and pay immigration fees. These immigration fees sometimes are a huge burden for many who comes from developing countries.

Once an individual receives notification from the U.S. government that he or she is the winner of the DV Lottery, completing all the formalities may take anywhere from three to six months before the person can come to the U.S. All DV winners come as a “Permanent Resident” or “Green Card” holder. Just like the first two categories, these DV immigrants are also eligible to apply for citizenship after five years from the time of receiving their “Green Card.”

It is important to note that once these DV winners come to the United States, it is their responsibility to find jobs and housing accommodations. The U.S. government does not provide such benefits for the DV winners. In other words, DV winners are not eligible for any unemployment benefits or welfare assistance because they are only in “Permanent Residence” or “Green Card” status and are not a U.S. citizen.

Many of the DV immigrants do odd jobs even though they may have bachelors, masters, or medical degrees from their home countries, because their degrees often are not recognized or accepted in the U.S. For example, people with foreign medical degrees must pass the Medical Board Examination and complete a medical residency before they are eligible to practice medicine in the U.S.

This exam involves significant preparation time and financial cost, which many of the DV immigrants don’t have because they are working long hours just to make ends meet. While there are many who do find time to prepare for the exam and save money for the exam fee, it typically takes many years to achieve this goal.

Others DV immigrants also try to earn a degree from U.S. colleges or universities in order to make their lives better, in a manner similar to earlier immigrants who came through Ellis Island.

Legal Assistance Often Needed

It is important to note that in many cases, the immigrants who apply for “Green

Card” status either through sponsoring family members or an employment visa (H1-B) may hire an immigration lawyer to help process their papers. In such cases in addition to the immigration fees collected by USCIS, the immigrants also have to pay lawyer fees which range anywhere from \$3,000 to \$6,000. I personally paid \$4,300 in lawyer fees back in 2002.

It is important to remind students as they study immigration that the goal of all immigrants—from the time of Ellis Island to the present day—is to make their lives better than what they had prior to coming to the U.S. This is why America is known around the world as “A Land of Opportunity.”

Pathways to Citizenship

All legal immigrants, regardless of the path they choose to become a permanent residence or “Green Card” holder, ultimately have to apply for U.S. Citizenship in order to obtain the same full privileges of a U.S. born citizen. Without citizenship, legal immigrants are not eligible for the following privileges: voting in any election, service as a juror, running for any elected office, receiving unemployment benefits, or receiving social welfare benefits. However, legal immigrants can serve in the military without being a U.S. citizen. Once legal immigrants become a U.S. Citizen, they are called “naturalized citizens” to distinguish them from a U.S. born citizens.

The process of getting U.S. citizenship is now vastly different from the Ellis Island period. Today’s process is more lengthy and costly and involves several steps. To apply for naturalized citizen status a legal immigrant must proceed through the following steps:

1. A legal immigrant must be a “Green Card” holder or “Permanent Resident” for five years. However, if a person is married to a U.S. citizen, he/she is eligible to apply for citizenship in three years.
2. The legal immigrant must complete “Form N-400: Application for Naturalization” (USCIS, 2013). With this application the applicant must pay a fee of \$680.00 (USCIS, 2013). This amount is non-refundable even if the application is denied for any reason.
3. The legal immigrant must complete a medical check up by a designated physicians approved by the USCIS.
4. The legal immigrant must go through rigorous security clearances which include, among other things: finger printing, an

FBI clearance, and a criminal background check.

5. The legal immigrant must pass the “Citizenship Test” which includes testing in both English and civics. The English section has three parts: reading, writing, and oral tests.

6. Once all of the above steps have been successfully completed, a candidate for citizenship must take the “Citizenship Oath” to complete the process. After taking the oath, the immigrant receives a “Citizenship Certificate.” This certificate allows them to obtain a U.S. Passport and enjoy all the other privileges similar to those of the U.S. born citizens. However, these naturalized citizens are not eligible to run for the office of president, as that privilege is reserved for U.S. born citizens.

Conclusion

When the United States of America is concerned, immigration is a never ending event since the U.S. is indeed a land of immigrants. Thus teaching aimed at developing an appropriate awareness of the immigration process is essential. The question, however, is how should we present this to our students so that will be meaningful and relevant?

Addressing this topic only from the historical Ellis Island point of view does not give a clear picture of this very complex set of issues. In this article I have attempted to provide some current information about immigration that educators can use to enrich and update their curriculum and their teaching.

Teachers must update their knowledge on this topic frequently because the processes and the information provided in this article will likely change down the road, just as it has since the time of Ellis Island. To aid in this updating, another resource teachers can use when covering this topic is to contact an individual who has recently become a naturalized citizen. Educators can invite such an individual into their classrooms and allow them to share their experiences with students.

All such efforts will greatly assist our students to have a better understanding of and appreciation for immigrants and the immigration process in order to overcome the misconception that “all immigrants are illegal” or that “immigration is an historical events that took place during the Ellis Island period.”

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