From Free White Persons to 'Illegal Imigration':
Dilemmas of Teaching U.S. Immigration History

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Abstract

This paper examines the process of researching and building classroom resources on U.S. immigration history. Three dilemmas emerged for the author that would closely parallel the challenges elementary and secondary educators would face: 1) deconstructing politicized misperceptions on immigration, 2) navigating a highly politicized topic, and 3) grappling with a system in need of reform, where no clear answer is available. The paper concludes with an example of how teachers and teacher educators might handle immigration history in the classroom.

Introduction

During a lecture in 2018, historian Madeline Hsu asked teachers to consider the following: in a democratic nation such as the U.S., where the government is supposed to be "by the people," *who* is allowed to become a voting citizen is perceived as enormously important. Immigration policy, therefore, is not only about what kind of human being is excluded, but what kind of human being is wanted. Many historians have shown that U.S. immigration is bound tightly to global and domestic political, cultural, scientific, and economic history, as well as ideologies of white supremacy, class, and gender (Hsu, 2015; Jacobson, 1998; Madokoro, 2016; Ngai, 2004, Parker, 2015). Yet, the U.S. is commonly positioned as a "nation of immigrants" welcoming "tired... poor... [and] huddled masses," when history shows a far narrower gateway that in many ways helps us understand what is happening today. Social Studies teachers have a choice, therefore, whether to uphold or disrupt such historical narratives of progress that obscure discriminatory norms of the U.S. both past and present (Epstein, 2009; Loewen, 2007; VanSledright, 2008).

As immigration policies have been used to shape the demographic landscape of the U.S. (i.e. keep the U.S. white, Christian, capitalist, and globally competitive), but often with unintended results (e.g. increased immigration from Asia and Latin America following 1965), every individual in the United States, including students too young to vote, has a stake in the construction of this history as it is the story of every individual and community who calls the U.S. home. The rising visibility of injustice in current immigration policies and enforcement make it more difficult to ignore its relevance to students and teachers, especially those who are themselves, or have loved ones who are immigrants. And immigration policy in the U.S. has grown increasingly complex in the last century especially legally and institutionally (Hester, 2017; Kang, 2017). Teachers may also find themselves negotiating personal and/or student trauma (Cornell, 2010; Naseem Rodríguez & Salinas, 2019), as well as parent, administration, and student political leanings which often uphold the status quo, perpetuating oppressive systems.

Teachers have much to consider and to juggle when teaching U.S. immigration history especially when current issues affect and endanger the students in our classrooms. How do educators grapple with such a long and multi-faceted history that has set up the present reality? What resources are necessary and available to educators? What are the challenges they face when they attempt to learn and teach a relevant U.S. immigration history?

What Research Shows

Despite the prevalence of immigration issues in the national conversation and its personal significance to many students and teachers, the history of immigration is severely limited in many social studies classrooms (Naseem Rodríguez & Salinas, 2019). For example, state standards in Texas, a border state, not only compartmentalize the history of immigration into specific moments in U.S. history (e.g. Chinese Exclusion in 1882 and European immigration in the 1920s), but also limit most narratives to those of "cause and effect" and "demographic patterns" (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills). Journell's (2009) examination of nine state standards also reveals a focus on European immigration with little or no portrayal of current issues and discrimination. Additionally, even a cursory exploration of resources such as Scholastic's Ellis Island (where most European immigrants were processed) and Angel Island (where most Asian immigrants were processed) websites show an emphasis on historical immigration processes that highlight the European experience (Naseem Rodríguez, 2015). In comparing the two sites, the depth of content, the complexity of the narrative, and the use of technology for Ellis Island far surpasses that of Angel Island. Narrowing content and separating immigration policies by historical era may condense immigration history into manageable units for teachers; however, doing so can create a disjointed story that stereotypes and marginalizes the history of Asian Americans and Latinx in particular, and de-historicizes current immigration policies, obscuring the racism, classism, and overall discrimination that has permeated immigration policy (Hilburn, Journell, & Buchannan 2016).

Research on the teaching of U.S. immigration history in PK-12 classrooms and curriculum is also limited. Early analysis of textbooks offers a de-contextual celebration of maintaining ethnic identity and enclaves as evidence of cultural diversity and not necessarily the role of enforced segregation or racism (Smith, 1987). More recent analyses show a continued celebratory narrative that misrepresents immigrant experiences, focusing largely on their economic contributions to the U.S. and the past-tense overcoming of challenges (Hilburn and Fitchett, 2012; Suh, An, & Forest, 2014). A number of articles that explore the teaching of immigration history emphasizes personal histories through family interviews, primary source analysis, or the use of picture books (e.g. Avery, Carmichael-Tanaka, Kunze, & Kouneski, 2000; Bersh, 2013; Bousalias, 2016; Ciardiello, 2012; Potter, & Schamel, 1998; Simmons, 1986). Few, especially in more recent research, explore the practical dilemmas that many educators face when learning and teaching immigration history that reveals how the immigration system was built to become what it is today. This paper seeks to answer the question: what challenges do educators face when learning and teaching about immigration in the United States? Additionally, I offer an activity to introduce the topic of U.S. immigration history in upper elementary through secondary classrooms as well as in teacher education.

Principles to Shape How We Teach Immigration History

I draw from three related concepts when considering the teaching of U.S. immigration history. Freire's (2015) *conscientização* "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35). Accordingly, education as an institution can both reproduce oppression and oppressive discourse or it can be a means through which liberation might take place. When teaching a relevant immigration history, two additional concepts may be of significance: Mae Ngai (2004) in her book titled *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, writes that civic illegality is a constructed human attribute. In *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical power*

of Racial Scripts, Natalia Molina (2014) describes *racial scripts* as an elaboration on how institutions re-calibrate systems of racial and civic oppression across communities and time.

Focusing on a once marginalized period of immigration history, Ngai examines immigration history in the U.S. between 1924 and 1965 (i.e. the Johnson-Reed Act to the Hart Celler Act[1]) concluding that U.S. laws created the "impossible subject," "a social reality and a legal impossibility . . . a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved" (p. 4), essentially an undocumented individual. Historically, the fluctuating boundaries around civic legality (e.g. *Ozawa v. US*, *Thind v. US*, 1935 pre-examination program[2]) prove that race and power must be considered and that one's humanity, as opposed to illegality, and vice versa, can easily be the primary consideration if those in power choose to make it so. Yet, Ngai points out that impossible subjects, or individuals deemed "illegal", are recent designations, though the label is commonly seen as natural and eternal. She explains, "there were so few restrictions on immigration in the 19th and early 20th centuries that there was no such thing as 'illegal immigration'" (Ngai, 2006).

Molina's "racial scripts" traces how racialized categories are structurally maintained and applied in comparative ways across and within ethnic groups (e.g. barrio, ghetto, "dirty Chinatown"). Even when racialized concepts are debunked or fade away, they appear again as an iteration specific to another context and community (e.g. "diseased" immigrants[3]). Due to the familiarity of the racialized concept, the public is more likely to accept the new application. Given such comparative and relational racializations, Molina urges communities to work in relationship, or solidarity, against white supremacy rather than attempt to move one's own group closer to whiteness and its privilege.

While Ngai's impossible subject is present in almost every ethnic group, a creation of immigration policies that distinguish between White and non-White, Molina untangles a broader, relational history that reveals how inequalities are structurally applied and maintained across different ethnic populations. Both reveal strategies such as laws and labels, that are part of a larger toolkit from which institutions, public figures, and the general public can pull for the purpose of continuing oppression and upholding white supremacy. Taken together, the concepts of the "impossible subject" and "racial scripts" are prescriptive because they help identify that systems are constructed and can therefore be deconstructed as we "take action against oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 2015, p. 35).

Creating a Resource

From 2017 to 2018, I worked with an immigration historian to create a digital resource for teachers (www.immigrationhistory.org), sponsored by the Immigration and Ethnic History Society and the University of Texas at Austin. This resource includes a timeline of immigration laws, policies, and court cases from 1790-2015, analysis of immigration themes written by a historian, additional resources on the topic, and lesson plans. With the help of an in-service teacher and two teacher educators, I created lesson plans for twelve major themes identified by consulting historians. Through the course of this project, several challenges arose. As the only secondary educator involved in the whole project, and the only participant without immigration and ethnic history expertise, my experience most closely paralleled the process of current classroom teachers seeking to teach about immigration history in a way that attends to current political and cultural realities. I took on this work as a former classroom teacher of six years, as a researcher beginning with little to no content knowledge of immigration history, and as a scholar committed to exposing racial, ethnic, and other forms of inequity and injustice.

Dilemmas of Teaching U.S. Immigration History

This experience has brought to light three dilemmas that educators face when researching and teaching about U.S. immigration history. First, immigration history is complex and rife with Freire's social, political, and economic contradictions, ones that are often obscured from general view. A study by Harvard economists, highlighted by the *The New York Times*, shows widespread misperceptions of immigration statistics among the U.S. public—for example the perceived percentages of immigrants who are Muslim, poor, unemployed, etc. are much higher than the actual statistics (Porter & Russell, 2018)—thus, teachers not only must overcome their own biases but they must also guide the deconstruction of firmly held beliefs and notions (such as "illegal" human beings[4]) that have no basis in facts, are dehumanizing, and uphold white supremacy. As a researcher, I also struggled at times between choosing anti-racist, critical resources and others that might appeal to a broader audience. Additionally, immigration history, especially modern history, is complex. The facts themselves can be incredibly difficult to find and understand unless one is well-versed in immigration law. Our project required consultation with immigration lawyers and political science scholars, especially as we began covering recent laws and policies.

Second, immigration is a highly charged political issue. In researching state and national organization standards for spaces where teachers could incorporate immigration history, it became clear that depending on state policy, teachers might have great difficulty justifying the teaching of immigration *as a social issue* through standards. Take for instance two border states: The curriculum framework for Social Studies in California includes several references to immigration history including one where "students may consider the nation's objectives and attitudes about other nations and diverse people in analyzing its immigration policy, limitations, and scrutiny of those already in the U.S., and exclusion of people considered to have disabilities…" (California State Board of Education, 2016, p. 389). Texas standards, however, are far less explicit and tend to fit within the promotion of a celebratory narrative of the U.S. and capitalism. For example, in U.S. history standards, students are expected to understand immigration policies in the context of "domestic and foreign issues related to U.S. economic growth from the 1870s to 1920" (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills).

Further, an investigation by *The New York Times* compared two textbooks supposedly for the same course, by the same publisher, and found that "political divides shape what students learn about the nation's history" (Goldstein, 2020). With regards to immigration, the textbook in California includes an excerpt from a story about a Dominican-American family. In the same part of the textbook for Texas, Michael Teague, a U.S. Border Patrol Agent, is quoted. This comparison also notes that not only is the California textbook more likely to describe key historical figures as immigrants, but that there is more content around the complexity of immigration history in the U.S., such as with the inclusion of the Supreme Court case around birthright citizenship (*United States v. Wong Kim Ark*).

Third, learning a more complex narrative of immigration history will lead some students to grapple with what kind of immigration system they want to support now through "taking informed action," especially if using the C3 Inquiry Design Model for Social Studies. Whether or not this action is a call for immigration reform through a letter to a representative, or working with a local organization, a question emerges: what kind of transformation is possible when the entire system has largely been premised on settler colonialism as well as racial, class, religious, and ideological exclusion from its inception with the Naturalization Act of 1790?[5] Further, while few people, including activists, immigrants, and scholars advocate for open borders, educators must learn how to approach an obscured and complex history that has led to a modern system that acts as gatekeeper to individuals and communities who are engaging in a human behavior that has been ongoing since before the beginning of recorded history—migration. Essentially, the challenge that educators face in studying and teaching immigration history, is the possibility that even when Molina's racial scripts inspires solidarity among different

groups, there may not be a satisfactory answer to the question, "now that we've learned about immigration, *what* should we change and *how* should it be changed?"

## Addressing the Dilemmas in the Classroom

Few would disagree that the US immigration system must be transformed. While some in the U.S. have called for the hardening of borders through their chants of "build that wall" (35% of Americans according to the Pew Research Center), others might seek an ideal world without nation-states or borders (Carrans, 1987). Regardless of the range of opinions in the classroom, content knowledge of immigration history among students and many teachers may be limited or severely misinformed by propaganda promoted even by government administrations. Thus, as we seek solutions to a seemingly impossible problem in our current context, unveiling and then unraveling the construction of a system that narrowly defines "human being," at least legally and civically, is essential to recognizing not only the buildup of challenges we face today, but also the possibilities of what could have been and what still could be. As historians Mai Ngai and Natalia Molina point out, the current immigration system and discourse is a more recent creation that racializes and criminalizes.

Take for instance, the recent Muslim Ban which went into effect in 2017 and prohibited visitors and immigrants from mostly Muslim-majority countries, from entering the United States. As this order took shape on the ground level, students, scholars, refugees, and tourists, were affected as they were all categorized as potential terrorists: "Numerous foreign-born individuals have been convicted or implicated in terrorism-related crimes since Sept. 11, 2001, including foreign nationals who entered the United States after receiving visitor, student or employment visas, or who entered through the United States refugee resettlement program" (Executive Order No. 13769, 2017). Regardless of their occupation, innocence, or reason for traveling to the U.S., travelers from parts of Southwest Asia were denied entrance to the U.S. based on an overgeneralization.

As a teacher educator working within a context rife with the dilemmas outlined above, I seek to denaturalize understandings of immigration policies that value criminality over humanity; however, I face the dilemma of having to teach a complex topic within one or two sessions, and in an environment where students (both preservice teachers and eighth grade students) are often entrenched along ideological lines. I approach such lessons with two goals in mind: first, that students would end the lesson with an open mind, and second, that students would identify at least one theme from U.S. immigration history that they could then use in their own understanding and/or teaching about immigration.

Drawing from a timeline of immigration laws, court cases, and policies, created by immigration and ethnic historians on www.immigrationhistory.org, I adapt the short descriptions of twenty or so immigration laws, policies and court cases, writing each on a notecard with the title and date on the back. Asking pre-service teachers to place these notecards, usually ending with DACA in 2012, into an accurate timeline will require reading through the items and discussion about immigration amongst students. To ensure participation from everyone, each student receives one notecard. As a class, they work together to create a human timeline of U.S. immigration history. For middle and high school students, these same notecards can be given to students who are put into groups. Each group can choose two of the notecards that were most interesting to them and then create a poster conveying the main points of their law, policy or court case, using only images, which they will share with the class. At the end of this and the timeline activity, we compile a list of patterns and themes students observed. Regardless of which policies, laws, and court cases are chosen, there are several themes that will often emerge for students: exclusion (by race, gender, class, political leanings, etc.), the changing nature of race (or "who is White?"), and the economic utility of immigrants. In the case of one teacher education class, some students made a connection to settler colonialism and citizenship and identified a pattern that created foreigners within U.S. borders (i.e. Indigenous peoples) (Lim, 2017; Parker, 2014). These student-generated patterns can then be used to analyze other sources related to immigration in a gallery walk: political cartoons, social media posts, quotes, recent immigration news, and statistical graphs and charts. For example, using the famous cartoon

of European migrants being literally funneled into the US at 3% (Image One, depicted below), students may identify, as one did in an elementary social studies methods class, that the 3% "was not random."
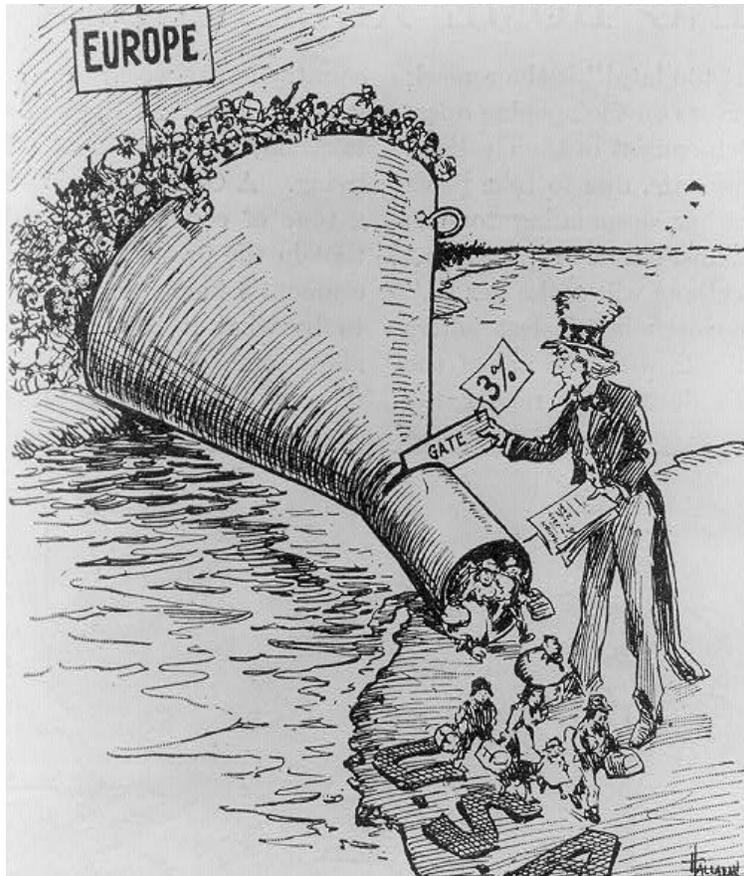
Hallahan, "The Only Way to Handle it," 1921. Library of Congress

Similarly, when students examine a graph of immigration numbers to the U.S. by region over a period of time,[6] they are able to point out that the flows are manufactured by one of the patterns students earlier identified (e.g. economic concerns, racial preferences, etc.), though they may not be able to identify the exact policy behind each trend beyond a national origins quota. These sources for the gallery walk can be either curated by the teacher or researched and compiled by students themselves. Adapted for remote teaching, I asked students to skim through the online timeline on their own from www.immigrationhistory.org, and then on a shared Google doc, add patterns they noticed. On that same Google doc, I included a variety of sources related to U.S. immigration that would normally be a part of the gallery walk. Instead, students went through the Google doc and added comments and replies to the various sources. Whether synchronous, asynchronous, or in class, student generated findings and comments have remained consistent.

As an extension of this lesson, teachers could focus on one theme in immigration history and use primary sources to convey a snapshot of public perceptions in one context, or to construct a narrative of change and continuity over time. For example, teachers could compile political cartoons from the resource *The Coming Man: 19th Century American perceptions of the Chinese* (Dong & Choy 1995) related to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and ask students to discuss what patterns of immigration history emerged in this moment. With regards to change and continuity, primary sources, such as anti-Chinese cartoons from magazine *The Wasp* in 1882, "The

immigrant. Is he an acquisition or a detriment?" (Image 2), "Physicians examining a group of Jewish immigrants' (Image 3), "Angel Island immigration station: Examinations for trachoma" (Image 4), "The Stranger at Our Gate" (Image 5), and more modern examples,[7] can be analyzed by students as an inquiry that reveals how the label of "diseased" has been applied to many immigrant communities throughout U.S. history.

Conclusion

Despite the many challenges of teaching a complex and politicized topic such as U.S. immigration history, zero-tolerance border policies that separate children from their parents, the abuse that detainees have faced within detention centers, and the terror that many of our students have faced for themselves and their families as ICE agents waited outside schools (Hughes, 2020; Castillo, 2017), require a response in our classrooms. More recently, as a wall lengthens along the U.S.-Mexico border (Main, 2020), and as the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened dangerous conditions in crowded detention centers (Trevizo, 2020) as well as increased attacks on individuals of Asian descent, or "forever foreigners" (Tuan, 1998), it seems that the topic of immigration reveals part of the boundaries we set around humanity, citizenship, and empathy. For some, separating children from parents is the line they draw in terms of moral or ethical acceptability. For others, the detention of migrants, regardless of family situation or age, goes beyond human decency. As students learn their place (or lack thereof) in U.S. democracy, teachers can be well positioned to help them recognize not only the racialized and classed misperceptions of immigration history— "the barriers erected by wealthier nations" (Porter & Russell, 2018) against those deemed unworthy—but also what the determination of who is welcome and who is not reveals about the nation and a citizen's role in maintaining or transforming their home.

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Notes

1. The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, was the first "comprehensive restriction law" (Ngai, 2004, p. 3) that set up a hierarchy of desirable immigrants based on their country of origin (i.e. race and ethnicity). The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, or the Hart-Celler Act, remains the current policy where national origins quotas were eliminated, but for the first time, capped the number of immigrants from within the Americas. The Hart-Celler Act helped create greater numbers of "undocumented immigrants" by disrupting an historically common practice of constant migration between the U.S. and Mexico border.

2. *Ozawa v. US* determined that Asians could not naturalize as citizens because they are not "caucasian" and a year later, in *Thind v. US*, the same Court ruled that South Asians could not naturalize as citizens because although Caucasian, they are not considered "white" in popular understanding. A little over a decade later in 1935, the pre-examination program allowed white undocumented immigrants to naturalize as citizens.

3. See Wu (2020) from the Smithsonian Magazine and Stribley (2019) from Medium for more primary sources and historical content on the history of how immigrants were and are often labeled as diseased.

4.] Teachers should avoid using the term "illegal immigrant." For a brief. History of the term and reasons to avoid its use, see Garcia (2012).

5. The Naturalization Act of 1790 states that only a "free white person... may be admitted to become a citizen..." (Act of March 26, 1790, I Stat. 103)

6. See visual at this website: https://insightfulinteraction.com/immigration200years.html

7. See references from note 3 for more modern examples.