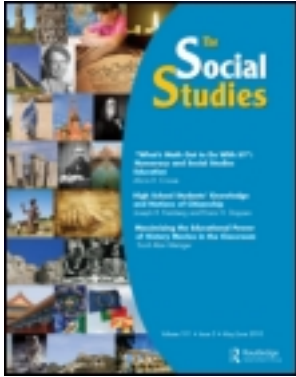


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Is Angel Island the Ellis Island of the West? Teaching Multiple Perspective-Taking in American Immigration History

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Education in the twenty-first century requires that all students learn the social studies skills that help them understand the complex issues related to civic ideals and practices. One of these skills is developing multiple perspective-taking. Many educators believe that this critical thinking ability is not only for upper level students but also plays an important role in elementary social studies education. The author shows how he has worked with elementary preservice teachers to develop multiple perspective-taking. Immigration history is one of the areas that is especially appropriate for using multiple perspective-taking. This article shows how to develop these skills by comparing two main immigration stations, Ellis Island and Angel Island, during the first half of the twentieth century. It challenges the commonly held perspective that both immigrant stations served very similar functions. Indeed, it shows how to teach the perspective that the treatment of the Chinese immigrants at Angel Island was more inhumane and racially discriminating than that experienced by their counterparts on Ellis Island. It is important for students of all ages to learn that the immigration policies of our nation have not always lived up to the civic ideals and practices of a democratic pluralistic society.

Keywords: Angel Island, Ellis Island, immigration, perspective-taking

Teacher: Today, we are going to learn about immigration. What words or ideas come to mind when I say the word immigration?

Student: Well, I think of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty and people leaving from their old country and coming to a new country.

This dialogue between an elementary preservice teacher and a fourth grade student (all students' names are pseudonyms) reflects the typical reaction to the idea of American immigration. This association between Ellis Island and American immigration is so ingrained into our historical consciousness that it forms a meta-narrative or official story of the golden age of immigration (1882–1954). But there is another immigrant experience that is also important but largely neglected. It is the Angel Island immigrant chapter that occurred on the West Coast of the United States at nearly the same time (1910–1940) as the Ellis Island chapter on the East Coast (1892–1954). Indeed, Angel Island is often described as the “the Ellis Island of the West” (Bamford 1917, 1). As early as the second decade of

the twentieth century, Angel Island was viewed as a book-end model of Ellis Island. But in reality the immigrant experiences were vastly different. As teachers we need to help our young students develop another perspective about the diverse immigrant origins of our pluralistic nation.

These two different immigrant stations and the stories that they tell are rarely told together (Lee and Yung 2010). This divergent view presents a challenge because research indicates that many state standards for social studies curriculum present the topic of immigration as a unified or monolithic experience (Journell 2009). The purpose of this article is to present an instructional model with illustrative examples of an alternative immigrant saga. It seeks to provide elementary students with an approach for developing historical thinking about Angel Island through multiple perspective-taking.

Background of “Angel Island” Discovery

I am the grandson of an Italian immigrant who came through the golden door of Ellis Island to America. From the recorded data on the passenger list of the steamship, I learned that my maternal grandfather Giuseppe Biondi came to America in May 1906. I also learned that he traveled alone, as a single, literate, healthy, and determined

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newcomer. His journey was long and hard; it took him three weeks living in the steerage compartment of a steamship. The ship's manifest indicated that he had ten dollars in his pocket. On Ellis Island, Grandpa Biondi passed the required medical and legal examinations in a few hours and then made his way to the home of a cousin who sponsored his voyage. On May 25, 1906, he entered through the golden door comforted by the writing of poet Emma Lazarus engraved on the Statue of Liberty, declaring that her "beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome" (1883). The entire poem of Lazarus's "The New Colossus," was engraved in bronze and placed on the interior wall of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. Biondi's story, like so many other immigrants from Europe, is the stuff of the American Dream.

In contrast with Grandpa Biondi and other European immigrants, the Chinese working-class immigrants were viewed as inassimilable. It was believed that they would never mix into the American melting pot (Lee 2003; Saito 2007). For many immigrant groups, especially non-white races, the "talking walls" on the Statue of Liberty's pedestal did not speak words of welcome to them. For them, the "mother of exiles' welcoming lips" were silent. This was true for Asian immigrants in general and Chinese immigrants in particular. Indeed, most Chinese immigrants who entered during the great period of immigration (1880–1924) did not disembark on Ellis Island. They arrived through a western gate known as Angel Island in San Francisco Bay during the years 1910–1940. Their experience did not fit the meta-narrative. Indeed, U.S. Congress had passed an Exclusion Act (1882) specifically barring the entrance of all Chinese laborers while admitting only merchants, students, tourists, foreign diplomats, students, and children of United States citizens. Relatives of merchants could enter too. Not only were the great mass of Chinese immigrants barred but those who were allowed admittance were denied future American citizenship. According to the Chinese Exclusion Act, allowing the Chinese laboring class to enter would "endanger the good order of American culture." They were a threat to American workers. However, some Chinese immigrants found a way to circumvent the law. They purchased false identity papers containing detailed biographical information trying to show a blood tie to a United States citizen. Many entered illegally with false identities.

Profile of the Angel Island Immigration Station

From its origins in 1910, the Angel Island Immigration Station showed its indebtedness to Ellis Island, even though it was located some three thousand miles westward. Before creating the plan to build the Pacific depot, the chief architect visited New York harbor to study the design of Ellis Island. He created the building structure to resemble the campus-like design of the New York depot with its different buildings serving specific purposes. Among the various

buildings were the administration, detention barracks, and hospital facilities. Both immigration stations were built on islands outside a major metropolitan area.

But the newer facility's location was built in a more isolated area about forty-five minutes from San Francisco and could only be reached by a ferry ride. It was meant to keep a "watch-full" eye on the newcomers and was thought to be escape proof. Immigration officials labeled the depot as the "Guardian of the Western Gate" (Natale 1998, 125).

Angel Island was built on the principle of exclusion. Indeed, it served to accommodate the legal requirements of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was to prevent potentially immigrant lawbreakers from entering the mainland. The detainees were treated as prisoners. Families were separated into different living quarters. Guards were stationed outside these facilities and fences surrounded the barracks. Detainees were kept on the average of two weeks (some up to two years), in contrast to an average of hours for Ellis Island detainees.

During the period from 1910 to 1940, Angel Island served as the point of entry for 175,000 Chinese immigrants. But other nationals entered through the Pacific gateway. These included Japanese, Koreans, South Asians, Russians, Filipinos, and Australians. Altogether representatives from more than 80 countries were detained. Estimates of people entering and leaving the depot reached the one million mark (Lee and Yung 2010).

In 1940 the Administration Building caught fire and was demolished. During the World War II years, the immigration station served as a holding pen or internment center for German and Japanese enemies. In 1943 the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed largely because of the insult brought to bear on China, a wartime American ally. The immigration station was largely neglected during the postwar years and was scheduled for demolition. In the 1970s scores of poems were discovered on the walls of the barracks and interest was created.

Thought first to be graffiti, the walls were covered by layers of paint and putty to hide the writing. Two local historians and a poet were called to investigate. They found over one hundred anonymously written poems by former detainees of Angel Island. These poems were translated by the academic team and published in a monograph entitled *Island: Poetry and history of Chinese immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*. These unique writings on the walls have been carefully preserved. The rediscovery of Angel Island's walled poetry and the publication of *Island* illuminated this neglected chapter in Chinese American immigration. The poems became a historical resource as well as a literary experience (Lai, Lim, and Yung 1980).

Renovations were begun in the 1990s. In 1997 the Angel Island Immigration Station was declared a national landmark. On its centennial birthday, January 21, 2010, President Obama officially proclaimed National Angel Island Day. In his remarks the president compared the different histories of Angel and Ellis Islands and urged schools to

teach more about the immigration history of America. It is only in the last few decades of the twentieth century that the story of Angel Island has started to make its way into school textbooks and social studies curricula (Ettinger 2010).

Professional Development

My discovery of the story of Angel Island is illuminating. A few years ago I was invited, along with several other teacher educators from New York metropolitan area colleges and universities, to participate in a three-year professional development program sponsored by the Asia Society, a nonprofit educational and cultural organization with headquarters in New York City. Through a grant funded by the United States Department of Education, we were trained by experts in the field of Asian culture and history. We were called upon to integrate this new knowledge into our teaching methods courses to create an awareness and understanding of Asian culture in our preservice teaching candidates. In effect, we were challenged to provide a greater international focus for our students.

During this experience I conceived of an instructional plan to modify the Western world focus of my social studies methods course by altering the nature of my capstone unit plan project on immigration. Instead of focusing mostly on European immigration, with detailed investigation of the Ellis Island experience, I shifted emphasis to Asian immigration, specifically Chinese immigration through Angel Island. I learned from my research and professional development experiences that the Ellis Island experience was not the only pattern of the American immigration saga. There was another perspective—a darker tale but one that is necessary for our young students to know as part of citizenship education (Werner 2009). I introduced this program to my preservice teachers, and they created lesson and unit plans for their field experience teaching assignments. It was my goal that elementary preservice teachers would integrate this instructional model into their future teaching. Below are samples of my preservice students' strategies for learning about Chinese American immigration through the skill of multiple perspective-taking.

What Is Multiple Perspective-Taking?

Multiple perspective-taking is a tool for cultivating historical understanding that consists of certain identifying characteristics. First, it is considered a cognitive ability that involves historical understanding and analysis. This ability calls for explaining the concepts and details that are different from one's own. It uses the perspectives of people in the past to explain their actions. This consists of reflecting on the frame of reference that distinguishes the learner from a historical agent or action (Barton and Levstik 2004; Davis, Yeager, and Foster 2007). Second, it contains an

affective dimension that transcends cognitive understanding and moves toward "feeling with others" (Field 2001, 115). It consists of an empathic component that seeks to make personal connections between the learner and historical characters and events (Barton and Levstik 2004). It attempts to get "under the skin" of the historical characters, knowing full well that no one can truly do this completely. Though one can never comprehend the full reality of another's situation, one can still build toward an understanding and appreciation of the experience (Field 2001). One might not know what it is like to be an unwelcome immigrant, but one knows what it is like to be excluded from a larger group of people. Young students have had everyday experiences on which to build ideas or to "conceptually elaborate" on those initial personal experiences (Egan 1982, 440).

Several history educators believe that with proper instruction and appropriate sources of information, the foundational practices of multiple perspective-taking can be introduced in the elementary grades (Downey 1995; Dulberg 2006; Geneser 2005; Skolnick, Dulberg, and Maestre, 1999). To simplify the concept of perspective taking, this article breaks it down into its cognitive and affective dimensions. In both dimensions it shows the importance of content knowledge, especially through reading and understanding primary source materials. I provide samples of work from my preservice elementary teachers to show how certain strategies are suited to each dimension.

An Example of the Cognitive Dimension of Multiple Perspective-Taking

Sarah, one of my preservice elementary education students, decided to create lessons comparing the treatment of immigrants on Ellis Island and Angel Island. She selected the curriculum strand of **Time, Continuity, and Change** as the most appropriate social studies national standard (National Council for the Social Studies 1994). She reasoned that her students would learn how to reconstruct the past and develop a historical perspective about it in the present. She used two digital primary sources. One source presented the experience of an eight-year-old Polish Jewish immigrant boy on Ellis Island (Immigration 2011). The other recounted the experience of a seven-year-old Chinese immigrant girl on Angel Island (Asian Pacific American Heritage 2003). My preservice teacher restated her major objective "to ask students to think about the similarities and differences between these two immigration stories." In particular, she examined the living conditions, nature of medical and legal entrance examinations, average length of detainment, and magnitude of the separation of families at both immigrant stations. Students were asked to write diary entries (see appendices A and B) from the perspectives of the Polish and Chinese immigrants. Sarah succeeded in teaching a lesson that demonstrated the analytical and cognitive dimension of multiple perspective-taking.

An Example of the Affective Dimension of Multiple Perspective-Taking

Another preservice student decided to look at the topic from an alternative perspective. Danielle decided to examine the topic of Angel Island focusing on the perspective of attitudes, values, and feelings. She wrote that students will be able to understand and appreciate the suffering and conditions of the Chinese immigrants on Angel Island by analyzing selected poems and writing their own poems. She selected two curriculum thematic strands to guide her lesson (National Council for the Social Studies 1994). First, she selected **Power, Authority, and Governance**, claiming that her goal was to stimulate understanding that the Chinese immigrants were detained for lengthy periods and treated inhumanely at Angel Island by the United States government, which at the time had the power to do so. Second, she selected **Civic Ideals and Practices**, reasoning that students needed to empathize with the fact that the Chinese immigrants were not treated as potential citizens and that they were immorally kept on Angel Island for unjust reasons. Danielle used a children's book entitled *Landed* (see appendix C for other suggested children's books on Angel Island) (Lee 2006). In this book, Sun, a twelve-year-old Chinese immigrant told of his experiences leaving China, his voyage on the boat, and his arrival, detainment, and interrogation on Angel Island. The storybook mentioned the poetry that the detainees wrote on the walls of the barracks but did not include specific examples. Danielle provided examples of selected poems from another source (Lai, Lim, and Yung 1980, 68). She read them aloud to Alyssa, a fourth grade student. Danielle asked her student to express her feelings about the poem. Then she asked her to select which of the poems would go best with the pictures. Alyssa matched an illustration of Sun and other young boys standing behind prison bars with a poem by a Chinese immigrant (see appendix D). At this point, Danielle encouraged her student to write a poem pretending that she (the student) was a Chinese immigrant who was held against her will on Angel Island. Alyssa wrote her own poem (see appendix E). At the end of the session, Danielle commented satisfactorily that Alyssa "tried to put herself in Sun's shoes, and this really helped her gain a greater understanding of the story." My preservice teacher felt that she had succeeded at initiating the empathic dimension of multiple perspective-taking. Moreover, in line with the revised and updated National Standard 10 (Civic Ideals and Practices), Danielle helped Alyssa recognize that the unjust treatment of Chinese immigrants on Angel Island conflicted with basic democratic values. In fact, the immigration saga revealed that America's civic ideals needed to be more fully aligned with actual practices. This is in accord with the revised social standards of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS 2010).

Multiple Perspective-Taking and Social Justice

I never knew that Chinese people had a hard time getting into America. I thought everyone was treated the same. I was surprised that those mean officials had to ask all those questions. How could a kid remember all that stuff? I am eleven, close to Sun's age (main character in *Landed*) and I do not know the answers to some of the questions he was asked (during the interrogation proceedings).

The above remarks by a fourth grade student to the Angel Island story reveals how concerned children are about matters of social justice. Children are very interested in talking and learning about topics that deal with fairness and rights, especially when the historical characters themselves are children (Barton and Levstik 2004). Immigration is one of those topics.

Young students are particularly sensitive to social conditions in which children have been forcibly separated from their parents. History researchers have reported that fourth and fifth graders became angry when they learned that children were separated from their parents during immigrant processing at Ellis Island (Dulberg 2006). In like manner, my own preservice elementary school teachers reported how upset their own students were to hear of the extended separation of Chinese immigrant families while detained on the Angel Island immigration station in San Francisco during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Elementary students can benefit from exposure to historical case studies that encourage developing the skill of perspective taking (Fallace, Biscoe, and Perry 2007). This article focuses on developing alternative perspectives regarding the experiences of American immigrants. It presents the theme that America's immigration history has a complicated past that includes conflicting elements of welcoming, restriction, and exclusion. The celebratory story of millions of immigrants coming through Ellis Island welcomed by the beacon light of the Statue of Liberty is not the full picture of America's immigrant heritage. That story must be told in light of other more restrictive and exclusionary experiences such as those practiced on Angel Island. The American immigration epic is more a tale of diversity than uniformity. Indeed, one can say that Ellis Island served as a *gateway* entering America, whereas Angel Island served as a *gatekeeper* protecting America (Lee and Yung 2010).

It must be kept in mind that multiple perspective-taking is a complex skill and will need require extensive teacher scaffolding and modeling. Young students will need to be taught the complex skill of multiple perspective-taking in civics education as they advance from grade to grade (Field 2001).

Is it worth the effort? Senator Barack Obama, attending a naturalization workshop for immigrants and future

United States citizens in Chicago, had some very relevant things to say. A young Hispanic girl named Cristina was attending the workshop with her parents. She told Senator Obama that she was studying government in her third grade. The Senator remarked later that “the danger to our way of life will come if we fail to recognize the humanity of Cristina and her family, if we withhold from them the rights and opportunities that we take for granted. I hope Cristina and my daughters will have all read about the history of this country and will recognize they have been given something precious. America is big enough to accommodate all their dreams” (Obama 2006, 420–421).

Recognizing the diversity of the American immigrant experience is a major value of American democracy and our pluralistic heritage. It is a civic ideal that is worth teaching and learning again and again.

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Appendix A. Sample diary entry of an immigrant on Ellis Island

Dear Diary,

Today we finally got to leave the ship because we arrived in America. The Statue of Liberty welcomed us as we came into Ellis Island. Once we got here the doctors examined us and if we were found to be healthy, we only had to wait a couple of hours and then we could enter America. Dad and I were both healthy so Uncle was allowed to come and take us back to his apartment. We are going to have a very good life here in America.

Appendix B. Sample diary entry of an immigrant on Angel Island

Dear Diary,

Today is day 67 for me here at Angel Island. I don’t like it here at all. I feel like I am in prison. I am in a tiny room with lots of other people and here is a guard standing outside of our door. I am happy that my sister is here in the room with me, we can keep each other company. I feel bad for daddy he is all alone without any family in the man’s barracks. Hopefully we will be reunited with him soon. I hope life in America is better than life at Angel Island. I hope we will leave here soon.

Appendix C. Juvenile books on Chinese American immigration and Angel Island detention

- Tamara Britton 2005. *Angel Island* Edina MN: ABDO Publishing.

Helen Chetin. 1922. *Angel Island Prisoner, 1922*. Tiburon, CA: Angel Island Association.

Katrina S. Currier. 2004. *Kai's Journey to Gold Mountain: An Angel Island Story*. Tiburon, CA: Angel Island Association.

Milly Lee. 2006. *Landed*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

Li Keng Wong. 2006. *Good Fortune: My Journey to Gold Mountain*. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publications.

Lawrence Yep. 2008. *The Dragon's Child: A Story of Angel Island*. New York: HarperCollins.

Appendix D. Angel Island poem

Imprisoned in the wooden building day after day,
My freedom withheld; how can I bear to talk about it?

I look to see who is happy but they only sit quietly.
I am anxious and depressed and cannot fall asleep.
Note. The poem for this appendix was taken from
Lai, Lum, and Yung (1980).

Appendix E. Student poem

I am a lonely immigrant.
I am a young girl who misses her family.
I came here for a better life.
But instead, I spend my days like a prisoner.
I did nothing wrong.
This is so unfair.
Now, I just want to go back home.