

## **Passport to Class: Immigration in the U.S., Houston, and Fourth Grade**

*Lensi Goad*

Isaacs Elementary School

### **INTRODUCTION**

Number 1: New York; number 2: Washington D.C.; number 3: Chicago; number 4 . . . , number 4 . . . , which city should I place as number 4? I grew up in the Los Angeles area, and have lived the past five years in the San Francisco Bay area, so I've already experienced the next two obvious choices. All rural areas in this country are not choices for me, so . . . Is there another metropolis in the United States? Is there another city, chosen as part of the Teach for America mission, where I can work toward the goal of attaining an equitable education system? The only other placement listed as urban is Houston. Houston, I think to myself, as in TEXAS? Texas is urban? O.K. Number 4: Houston.

I remember when I was rating Teach for America placements across the U.S. that making the top three choices was obvious. At that time, I found it difficult to believe that Houston, Texas was in fact urban, and furthermore a multicultural, multinational city. Having grown up in a very multicultural environment, I shuddered at the possibility of being sent into homogeneity. Thus far, I had traveled quite a bit internationally, but had very little exposure to the South. I wasn't excited about the prospect of going to what I considered the "suspiciously urban" city of Houston. I was to be sent, however, to fill the void of ESL teachers where they were most needed: good old Houston, Texas.

I spent months before the move reading information about Houston, learning that it is fast approaching a multicultural status much like that of New York and Los Angeles. I also learned that Houston Independent School District is one of the largest school districts in the country, with a largely minority student population. In "Facts and Figures," published by Houston Independent School District (2), the largest student population is Hispanic, totaling 58.1%, with another 32% representing African Americans and other non-white ethnicities. Even more promising than the diverse ethnic composition was the fact that 55.8% of the students are identified as LEP, ESL, and/or Bilingual students: great prospects for an ESL teacher!

I was excited by the possibility of working in a school much like the ones I had attended with students of many ethnicities and cultures. My peers were Chinese, Indian, Middle Eastern, Mexican, African American, Filipino, and more. However, what I found in Houston was not a culture of ethnic diversity in the schools. On the contrary, I found schools and communities segregated on ethnic lines, with many schools being largely, if not totally, of one ethnicity. This observation got me thinking about intercultural relations in the city, and the relationship between the large ethnic populations.

With Houston being a new territory for me, I set out to explore as much of the city as I could. What struck me was that communities were largely mono-ethnic and mono-cultural. In a short drive around the inner loop, one can map neighborhoods with ethnic boundaries almost as clear as fences. As I became more cognizant of ethnic segregation both in the city and in schools, I remembered a line from “Facts and Figures” on HISD’s website, which explains how the district is divided into regions “encompassing ‘vertical teams’ of schools in which the majority of students in a given community move up from elementary school to middle school and on to the high school located in their neighborhood,” (2). I was stunned to find that the district is organizing itself with the agenda to limit movement between neighborhoods. Consequently, students stay in *their* neighborhoods and attend *their* schools.

As I began my teaching position in the notorious 5<sup>th</sup> Ward, I was wondering how such ethnic stratification would affect the students, personally and socially. I also became interested in the relationship between the school and the neighborhood, and curious about the influence they have on each other. Little did I know then how these interests and curiosities would evolve and become the foundation for my curriculum writing endeavor.

### **Introduction to Isaacs Elementary School**

At Isaacs Elementary the immigrant population is Latino, primarily Mexican. African Americans make up the resident population, with students attending the same elementary school their parents did, growing up across from, or in the very house their predecessors were raised in. According to the other teachers who have been working at the school for 20 plus years, the Mexicans are the immigrants (as well as the minority). The relationship between the residents and immigrants is one of co-existence. The two groups seem to live side-by-side with minimum interaction. While both groups have fairly strong community values, they do not share them with one another.

The Latino is the immigrant. The Latino is the minority. The Latino is the Other.

My discussion deals with black/brown relations within the school. Mexicans attending Isaacs comprise about 51% of the student population, the other 49% being comprised of African Americans. However, the school’s demographics seem quite different from the community’s. Thus, the following question arises: Are the school’s demographics a true representation of the community’s demographics?

As an immigrant population, the Mexicans have little or no English education. Without a bilingual program offered at the school, students of non-English speaking parents are put into the ESL program. Structured as a sheltered, English only immersion program, LEP (Limited English Proficient) students are placed together. As such, each grade level has one ESL class and two mainstream education classes. How does this look? One class brown, two classes black. Three fourth grade classes lined up side by side create a color pattern; and we arrive at the question that will set my endeavor in

motion. How does the structure of the ESL program affect black/brown (resident/immigrant) relations?

Observing how the two populations interact doesn't go far without an understanding of how the students perceive themselves. During my first week at the school, I was walking my ESL class to the bathroom, catching gawking gazes from the other students. I wasn't sure if they were looking at the students or me. In an equally confused state, one of the students in the mainstream class shouted, "Ooh, you got a WHITE teacher!" With no response, we continued to the bathroom. Not thinking anything of it at the time, I was not imagining that my own students were attempting to understand "what" I was. A couple of months into the school year, I was telling a story about my time living in Thailand. Speaking to my unusually contemplative class, one boy, overtaken by an epiphany, shouted, "I get it Ms. Goad. You're Brown!" The rest of the year I tried to convince them that I am not Asian. What I realized was that their experience with Caucasians and Asians was so limited; they might as well be the same thing.

What these experiences, along with countless others, have shown me is that the students are trying to define or categorize the community they live in. They aim to identify themselves in relation to others. They possess a notion of social stratification based on race and ethnicity, but their perception of these categories is muddled and undefined.

The students are not alone in their inability to classify themselves and others along race and ethnic lines. A common academic point-of-view now holds that racial and ethnic categories are social constructions rather than natural entities. In a world becoming ever more global, one's ethnic and racial identity is becoming even vaguer.

The students' observations prove the need to explore this topic. As educators, we must first ask the questions and do the research to understand how the new Houston affects our classrooms and students. Then we must synthesize this information so as to decide how to address it in the classroom. From this point we will be able to accomplish the mission of our district, which is to embark on "the best ways to promote communication, intercultural awareness, and social acceptance or tolerance among the different groups of [students] that make up our classrooms."

## **UNIT BACKGROUND**

The design and implementation of a curriculum unit that addresses this topic is not only pertinent to my student population, but also necessary for their community. The next phase, then, is to design a curriculum unit that teaches mandated objectives using available resources. This will be "Passport to Class: Immigration in the U.S., Houston, and Fourth Grade," a cross-curricular unit, specifically meeting English Language Arts and Social Studies TEKS objectives, and spanning Math and Science objectives as well. The students will explore, first, the cultures of those in the country,

then of those in the city, and finally the cultures of the community and school. The unit will focus on the following key questions:

Who lives in America?

Who lives in Houston?

Who is in our class?

How do these statistics compare?

“Passport to Class” will be divided into four parts corresponding to the four key questions mentioned above. Each part will begin with general statistics to set a framework for understanding the bigger picture. After a general introduction, the class will focus in on a different group at each level, studying their culture; reason for immigration; success; and influence on the resident society. The unit will be taught over the ELA units: Expository Text, Folklore, and Realistic Fiction. It will include a plethora of culturally diverse written texts, as well as culturally diverse alternative texts (such as music, film, art). The unit culminates in a long term project that encourages student autonomy (perhaps a culture anthology, personal or class produced), in writing, film, or otherwise, on a chosen immigrant population other than their own.

Undoubtedly, the unit will lend itself to exploration of the city and include at least one field trip: to explore the class-chosen immigrant population in Houston.

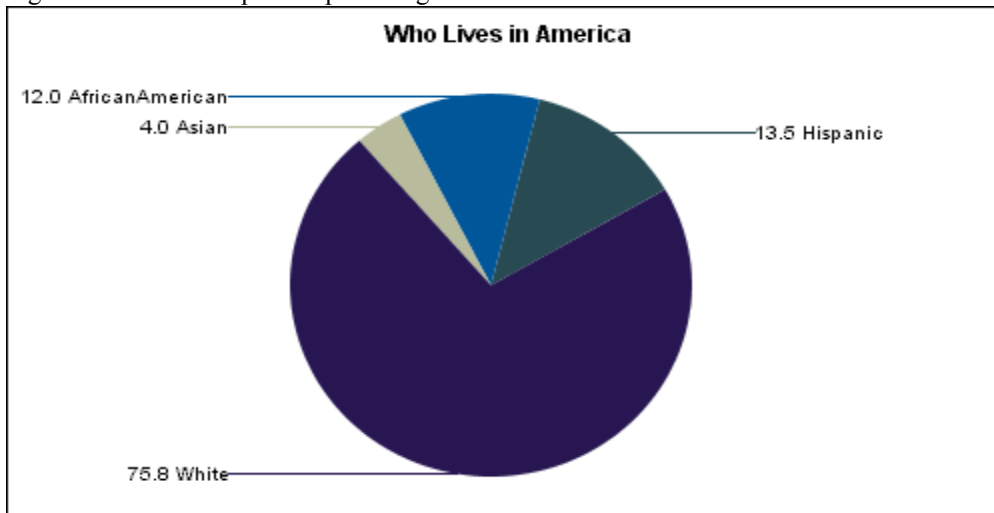
## **PART I: WHO LIVES IN AMERICA?**

Perhaps we should begin our endeavor by stating the obvious: America is changing, especially its racial and ethnic composition, along with the socio-cultural world created by prior European immigrants and their descendants (Migration, Globalization, and Ethnic Relations 118). While demographic projections state that those of European descent will become the minority within the next century, many cities, including Houston, have already surpassed this prediction. How does a change like this affect American society? Does it look different? Talk differently? Act differently? The answer is yes, yes, and yes. America is far from demonstrating homogeneity, and getting even farther still, from a definite identity. Who does live in America?

At the onset of the curriculum unit, the students will study tables and graphs of population/race/ethnicity. They will also be expected to interpret information in a table and construct a graph to represent that information, and vice versa. The following statistics will be highlighted:

Of the 280 million people living in the United States, 212 million are white; 34 million are black; 2 million are Native American; 11 million are Asian; 38 million are Hispanic. As shown in Table 1: 75% white; .7% Native American; 12% black; 4% Asian; 13.5% Hispanic (General Demographics Characteristics 2).

Figure 1. Numbers represent percentages.



We will also study the census results for “Nativity, Citizenship Status, and Year of Entry,” to examine what percentage of the population are immigrants. According to the tabular data, 31 million people in 2000 were foreign born. That number comprises 11%, almost half of the non-white population in America. Of that 31 million people, 5 million came from Europe; 8 million from Asia; 16 million from Latin America (Nativity, Citizenship Status 1).

At this point it is apparent that the overwhelming majority of the American population continues to be white, followed by Hispanics, then blacks, then Asians. While it may seem to be most logical to study Hispanic groups, we will wait and study Latin American immigrants during the Houston examination, taking the time during the national study to focus in on the second largest immigrant population: Asians.

The reason I wanted to choose an Asian group to study as a class is because the students’ exposure and interaction with Asians is little to none. According to statistics, Asian Americans are the fastest growing minority group in the country, comprising 4% of the total population in the 2002 census. “The Asian population in the U.S. is increasing faster than the total population... growing 72 percent between 1990 and 2000, compared to 13 percent in the total population” (Race and Ethnicity-American FactFinder). Before that the Asian American population doubled in the 80s and now sits at over 11 million (Migration, Globalization, and Ethnic Relations 144). Coming from an area whose majority population is Asian, I find my students’ lack of exposure to Asians almost incredulous.

Asian immigrants are notably the most economically successful immigrant populations in America. Something to be noted at the onset of a discussion of Asian immigrants, however, is that “Asian” alone is not indicative of culture, language, nationality, or ethnicity. It also should be noted that great disparity of wealth exists

between specific Asian populations. For a frame of reference: Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Indians (of Southeast Asia) account for most of the wealth attributed to Asian Americans. While Southeast Asians, primarily Laotians, Cambodians, and Vietnamese are achieving significantly less wealth.

That said, Asians achieve significantly more economic success than other races. The median family income for Asians is higher than that of American whites. Asians have a median family income of about \$53,635 compared to \$46,305 for Whites (Income and Employment 1). Remember, though, the great inequality that exists among Asian groups. Take into account the Japanese median income, which is \$51k compared to the Hmong median income, which is \$14k. When considering this, you quickly begin to see the insufficiency of grouping all Asians into one immigrant population (Migration, Globalization, and Ethnic Relations 144).

In order to gain a better understanding of the breadth of Asian cultures, the students will conduct group studies of the five largest subgroups – Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Korean. Each group will research their assigned subgroup for the following four topics: culture, immigration history, success, and the group's influence on resident society.

## **PART II: WHO LIVES IN HOUSTON?**

The next step is to examine the population of Houston. As one of America's largest metropolitan cities, Houston provides a good reference for looking at the effects of immigration at a local level.

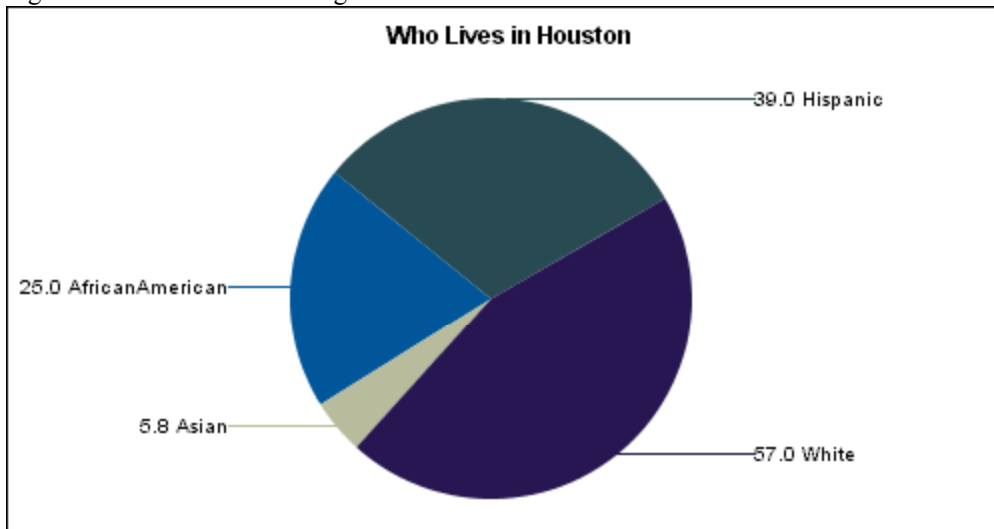
Again, we begin by looking at population statistics from the census. As shown in Figure 2, there are 1.9 million people living in Houston; 764,000 Houstonians are Hispanic; 466,000 are black; 113,000 are Asian; with the rest of the population identifying themselves as part of some other race, or a combination of races. Because Hispanics make up 40% of the total Houston population, the class will look at Hispanic immigrant groups at the city level.

### **Hispanic Migration**

The history of Hispanic immigration to Houston begins at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when “the first major immigrant wave into the city” took place (Rodriguez 1993). The Mexican Revolution in 1910 sent many Mexicans fleeing to Houston, where railroad and ship channel construction, agricultural work, and manufacturing opportunities abounded. In 1920, a second wave of Mexican immigration took place. Again prompted by turmoil at home, Houston's booming economy, construction, and industrial jobs attracted Mexican families (Religion and the New Immigrants). The third major wave of Hispanic immigration happened in the late 1970s, this time bringing Central Americans (fleeing civil war) as well as Mexicans, to Houston. By the early

1980s Central Americans were arriving to Houston by the thousands, and by 1990, the census counted immigrants of 26 different nationalities from Latin America (Religion and the New Immigrants 32). Made evident by this fact, the Hispanic race is spread among many nationalities, and specific Hispanic subgroups will be discussed later.

Figure 2. Numbers in Percentages.



### Hispanic Economical Attainment

As of May 2004, 19,313 Hispanics in the U.S. were working in the labor force, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Table A-3). That number equals 69% participation in the labor force. In 2001 the real median income of Hispanic households was \$33,500, almost \$13,000 less than the White median family income. The term “Hispanic” encompasses a huge population of people of different ethnicities and nationalities from several countries in the Americas. Hispanic immigrants, therefore, embody a myriad of different immigration experiences aligned with their nationality. In other words, there is not one Hispanic experience, nor is there a Hispanic success or failure. Each Hispanic subgroup has their own success (or not) story.

### Hispanic Subgroups

Mexicans, the largest Hispanic population in the U.S. and Houston, have high participation in the labor force. However, “because of their lower overall educational attainment, they work for very low wages” (Migration, Globalization, and Ethnic Relations 142).

Puerto Ricans, the second largest Hispanic population in the U.S., show slightly lower levels of success. The same census information found 31.7% of Puerto Ricans to be living under the poverty line, with 60% working in the labor market. Surviving on a

median family income just under \$22,000, Puerto Ricans do exceptionally badly in terms of employment and income (Migration, Globalization, and Ethnic Relations 142).

Cubans, the third largest Hispanic population in the U.S., have the highest levels of success among the Hispanic immigrant populations. With only 14.6% of the population living in poverty, and 65% of the population working in the labor force, Cubans were able to earn a median family income of \$32,417 (Migration, Globalization, and Ethnic Relations 142).

For continuity, the class will again conduct group studies of Hispanic subgroups: Puerto Ricans (who make up 1%), and Cubans (a mere 7,000 in counting) because they are the largest Hispanic groups, and Salvadorians and Guatemalans because we have a small population of those subgroups represented at the school. They will research culture, reason for immigrating, success, and influence on resident society, as they did before with Asians on the national level.

### **PART III: WHO IS IN OUR CLASS?**

At this point in the unit, we narrow our focus to Isaacs and 5<sup>th</sup> ward. Again, we will begin with statistical data to look at the demographics of the community and the school. In the community outlined by the 77026 zip code (wherein lies Isaacs Elementary), the demographics are quite different from those of the school, city, and nation. African Americans make up the majority of the neighborhood, at 69%, while 35% is Hispanic and the other 16% is White (Community Details 1). As mentioned earlier, the school population is 51% Hispanic and 49% African American.

To ensure relevance for the students, numbers for the class demographics should be compiled together. After studying statistics of the community and school, the class will conduct a survey and compute percentages of ethnicities in the classroom. Had my class conducted such a survey this year, they would see that the numbers don't correlate with either the community demographics or the school's. This year, 79% of the class was Hispanic, 16% were African American, and .04% (one child) was biracial.

This part of the unit will lend itself to the study of Mexican culture, since the major immigrant population in the school is Mexican. Please note that each teacher should adjust the organization of their unit to focus on the predominant immigrant population of their school at this point in the unit in order to elicit meaningful discussions that the students can contribute to from a personal perspective. Students should be encouraged to share their culture with their classmates.

### **PART IV: HOW DO THESE STATISTICS COMPARE?**

As you may have already observed, national population statistics vary quite a bit from city statistics, with the largest discrepancy noted among the percentage of Hispanics



living in the country compared to the number of Hispanics living in Houston: 13.5% of American population is Hispanic, while 40% of Houstonians are Hispanic. Looking at the facts in Figure 3 should raise questions among the students.

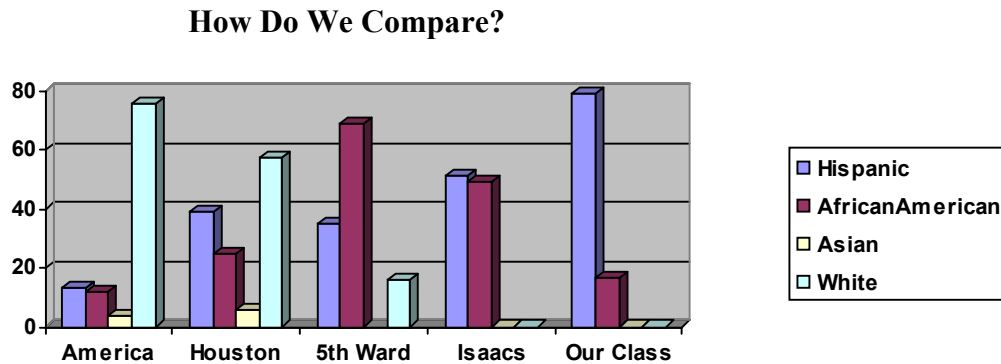
Why is there such a large number of Hispanics living in Houston?

Why do Hispanics immigrate here?

Does that mean that there are not Hispanic people living everywhere in the country?

Does that mean that other areas of the United States look different from Houston?

Figure 3. Numbers in Percentages.



Conducting a map study should prompt the students to theorize that many Hispanics immigrate here because of close proximity. They should also note the same explanation for the large number of Mexicans and Central Americans. Students should extrapolate other probable cities of large Hispanic populations seeing the relationship between population and geography.

Although the percentage of the Hispanic population in Houston is almost thrice the national percentage, the Hispanic subgroup populations have similar statistics at both levels, with Mexicans being the largest subgroup, followed by Puerto Ricans and Cubans.

The percentage of Asians in Houston (6%) is only slightly higher than the national percentage (4%). I expect that students living in certain areas will be surprised by the large percentage of Asians living in Houston, while students living in other areas of the city will be surprised at the relatively low number of Asians living in Houston. At this point, the students should think to look at a map to try and explain the high percentage of total Asian population living in Houston. The students may find it frustrating as they are unable to explain Asian immigration trends using geography as they could with Hispanics. However, they should deduce that that may explain why there is a much lower number of Asian immigrants than Hispanic immigrants using geography.

At this point, I want the students to see that there is a discrepancy between their perception of people and the society they live in and the reality of the society they live in.

Even though they don't know and have never interacted with Asians, there are a lot of them in their city and country. They live in a biracial community, yet they know very little about their neighbors and classmates. They may have never been encouraged to discuss their cultural differences, and therefore by and large, don't understand them. My hope is that by this point the students are excited to research and report their findings about different immigrant populations. From here, they will continue with the independent project.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan I: Passport to Class**

The students will begin with a general introduction to the main ideas and themes of the unit.

#### ***Objective***

Students will define thematic terms: *passport* and *immigrate* and use their knowledge of prefixes and suffixes to decipher the meanings of *immigrant* and *immigration*. Students will create a "Passport to Class," and journal about where a passport could take them.

#### ***Materials***

*Coming to America, The Story of Immigration* (see bibliography)

Construction paper

Scissors

Coloring utensils

Actual, or copy of, passport

Chart paper

#### ***Introduction***

Before beginning the read-aloud, the teacher will introduce the students to the vocabulary, reviewing the pronunciation and syllables.

#### ***Instruction***

Begin the lesson with a read-aloud titled *Coming to America: The Story of Immigration*, by Betsy Maestro. During the read-aloud students should be listening for the vocabulary terms reviewed and interpreting their meanings using context clues in the story. Allow students to share their reactions to the story with partners so that the students become intrigued about the topic. Once the story is finished, elicit definitions for the vocabulary terms from the students and post them in a designated area. Be sure to encourage students to use knowledge of suffixes –ion and –ant to define immigrant and immigration. During the discussion about the terms some key questions to consider are:

- Why might people immigrate to the United States?
- What might be some problems immigrants have in the United States?
- How do you think you would handle immigrating to a new place?

- Why is having a passport important?

After discussing the importance of a passport, allow the students to share where they would most like to go with their passport. Tell students they will make their own passport in class today and begin the passport construction.

### ***Independent Practice***

Distribute materials to students, allowing them to sit in groups and share if they need to. Provide students with an example, preferably an actual passport, with the information inside copied onto a transparency to project for class use. Then let them create their own.

### ***Extension***

Students should journal about their future travels, being sure to use new vocabulary terms.

## **Lesson Plan II: Example of Research Lessons**

As outlined before, the students will conduct research at three points in the unit. The example research is intended to provide a model for students to use in their future research of Asian and Hispanic subgroups. This example is “real time”, meaning the students will repeat exactly the same steps in their independent research. The lesson is taught after a lesson discussing *Who Lives in America*, and assumes student knowledge of national race statistics.

### ***Objective***

Students will be able to research certain nationalities for specific questions. Students will organize notes in the manner specified by the teacher.

### ***Materials***

Sources for each key question (see ***Instruction***)  
Chart paper

### ***Introduction***

Introduce students to the four key questions that will frame all ensuing research in the unit:

- What is the culture of the immigrant group like?
- What is their immigration history?
- What has been their success in the United States?
- What is their influence on people living here?

Lead students to recall the statistics discussed earlier, and point to the second largest immigrant group, telling students Hispanics (the largest immigrant group) will be discussed later. Create a KWL chart with the class to activate students' prior knowledge,

which will also serve to dispel misconceptions about Asians on the part of the students as they learn more about them.

### **Instruction**

Begin by sharing all of the compiled resources you will use for your research. Remind students that you are researching the four key questions. As you share each source, have students predict which questions they will research using each one.

Begin by reading the source chosen for culture (perhaps *The Way We Do It in Japan* by Geneva Cobb Injima and Paige Billin Frye). As you read the story to the children, elicit discussion about Japanese culture. After completing the story, begin a list of notes under the heading of the first key question.

Repeat the process with the next source chosen for immigration history (“Immigration, The Journey to America”), then with the source chosen for success of Japanese immigrants (“The History of Japanese Immigration”), and lastly with the source chosen for influence on resident society (“Immigration, The Journey to America”). During the research model lesson, the teacher should post all of the notes with their respective key questions. You may choose to meet one of the research and organizing standards, such as outlining, during this lesson.

### ***Independent Practice***

Allow the students time to peruse the resources used in the model lesson. Challenge them to find points that you overlooked to add to the class notes posted in the classroom.

### **Lesson Plan III: Class Survey**

This Lesson should come toward the end of the unit, and build upon knowledge about graphs and statistics acquired throughout.

### ***Objective***

Students will conduct a survey and construct a graph about the demographics in the classroom.

### ***Materials***

Independent surveys  
Overhead materials

### ***Introduction***

Begin the lesson by recalling statistics and graphs from previous lessons and research. Discuss how they were compiled and how the class could conduct their own survey, modeled after those previously studied. The class should come up with a poll about race.

### ***Instruction***

Explain how surveys are taken allowing student questions and discussion to arise. Lead the class in writing a survey to be distributed among the class. Discuss ways the class might organize the information after it is collected (pie graph, line graph, table).

***Independent Practice***

Distribute independent surveys, or post the survey questions, and allow students to complete them. Collect and lead the class in calculating the results. Allow students to organize themselves into pairs or groups and create a graph or table to present the data.

***Extension***

Students will make a class presentation using their illustrations. They will use the graphs later to compare statistics to those at the national, city, and community levels.

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