

## **We, They, Our Environment, and Houston, Our City**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

My interest in the topic of immigrant and ethnic relations is without limits. As an immigrant living in this country for eight years – six in Oklahoma and two in Houston – I have learned about and experienced immigration in several ways in the United States, as well as in my country, Mexico. I understand the complexity and the dynamics of the topic, and I believe that I will never learn enough about human relations and how ethnic interrelationships shape a very complicated web in Houston. After several years of working with adults, I decided to return to work with Spanish-speaking children because I thought that I had something to contribute to their education. To my surprise, I have found myself learning and receiving new knowledge from them. I think that, as a bilingual teacher, I owe my students more knowledge about their situation as immigrants in Houston, how they can benefit from the diversity that the city offers, and in which aspects they can connect with Houstonians, regardless of their origins, without losing their pride and cultural identity.

I think that, as teachers of immigrant children, how we teach is often more important than what we teach. As teachers, we have to be aware of and honest about our own feelings regarding immigration and immigrants coming to the United States. Children are very perceptive of our most intimate beliefs. Even if they do not understand what is going on in our minds, they perceive our most intimate feelings. If we resent or dislike them, they can tell, and they won't work for us. Besides ordinary student problems, immigrant children often have an additional burden to bear, a sadness caused by their loss of a stable environment, and its associated loss of learning energy.

Daniel Goleman, in his book, *Emotional Intelligence* (25-26), says that a very important function of sadness is to help an individual to adapt himself to a significant loss. All our immigrant students have suffered a significant loss in one way or another. Even in the best cases, they have experienced the loss of home, family, friends, and environment. On the other hand they may be suffering the consequences of not understanding English and the threat of unknown surroundings. Goleman says that this sadness produces a loss of energy and enthusiasm for life activities. As teachers of immigrant children, we have to be conscious of the state of mind and the individual characteristics of our students in order to help them make these difficult times easier for adaptation and acculturation.

Young students like to talk about themselves. They want to believe that they are important, that we are interested in them and in what they have to say. This is one of the reasons why I am calling this unit topic "We." I am including myself in the project by

analyzing my own attitude toward my students. I hope every teacher will analyze his or her feelings toward their immigrant students. It will be important to reflect on and analyze our own stereotypes, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and experiences. After an honest reflection it is important to know all that we can of the student's culture and social background to be able to understand and help our students in their new journey.

It is inappropriate to limit time for this unit because it can be used as reinforcement as frequently as necessary in the regular HISD program. I will dedicate the first unit of social studies to the first part of the subtopic I am naming "We: We Get to Know Ourselves."

The unit will mainly depend on the children's research and life experiences about immigrants in Houston. Research is the key to being successful in the academic life. I will place special emphasis on observation and analysis by the students. I will also teach them to look for information in books, magazines, dictionaries, textbooks, interviews, TV and radio programs, newspapers, and on the Internet. Even though my students lack modern devices for researching and learning I will teach them skills of observation and specific ideas about how to use what the city provides without extra cost to their families.

From previous experiences in teaching research I have used Gestalt and Operative Groups theories, and both have enhanced the dynamics of my classes.

In the process of educating immigrant children it is important to teach them to accept themselves, their families, and their history. The Gestalt theory of Fritz Perls has been defined as awareness training, "the concern for experiencing a Here and Now state, of experiencing the reality of the instant and avoiding any involvement in the past or future which would replace or distort the awareness of the present" (Brown 24). Perls explains Gestalt as a process to gain responsibility for what we are and what we do. He suggests two specific objectives, to be complete physically and emotionally. These objectives will help students to be aware of their surroundings, as well as to help make the most of their immigrant experience. This process will make them stronger and more tolerant.

My class is composed mainly of recent Mexican and second-generation immigrants, born in Houston. In order to adapt ourselves to our new entity, we have to learn about our new environment and decide how we can make use of all the choices that it offers. Thinking about the past and longing for what we left behind will not help us live a better life.

I will use one of my favorite ways of teaching, forming small groups in my classes. Our social structure is formed by groups, starting with the family group, developing into communities to perform jobs or services. It is good training to start working in groups at the elementary level to teach our children to solve problems within a group, learn to interrelate with different people, play different natural and assigned roles, and to get a sense of belonging and responsibility. I wrote my thesis on the subject of groups,

*Operative Groups: A Pedagogic Alternative* (Macouzet and Rojas). It is a similar teaching strategy to the cooperative groups used in HISD. The most important issue of a group is the **task** and the basic constituents of the group are the **students**. Each member has a different role in the group, but every member is responsible for the final product. It has been very rewarding to watch my students learn, little by little, the distribution of duties and materials, independence (they do not need me in order to work), self-motivation and interest in certain topics, the value of a job well done, the pride of solving problems by themselves, and the opportunity to trust each other.

The method I use to teach, working in groups, has unexpected and implicit outcomes, regardless of the topic. Group strategies give students the tools to solve real life problems, such as problems with relationships; changing of roles, like leadership, you can be good at art and lead projects that are about art, but someone else can be better at writing; therefore the leadership role would naturally change to another student. When we use groups in our classes several dissociated concepts will become useful to the groups, for example the use of mathematics to understand and make graphs, or the way we classify objects in the science class could be used when we work with social studies. I expect this to happen when working with this unit.

I want the reader to understand that in this curriculum, teachers and students can be creative and take a part or a whole of an idea and recreate it to their own or students' needs. Each group has different needs and expectations. I believe that the HISD Project Clear program can be adapted and transformed to use the student's natural desire for learning.

The knowledge and understanding of oneself will lead us to a better understanding of others. When we are aware of our capabilities, likes, and dislikes; and on the other hand we realize that those things that are difficult for us we can experience as a challenge; we will strengthen our character and our potential for learning. New, young immigrants in Houston have to learn very fast to adapt themselves to a new environment and sometimes to a new language. In the process of learning more about themselves and their new lives, students can learn about their new surroundings, how to live in them, and start the process of acculturation. The College of Letters and Science in the University of California at Santa Barbara defines the educated person as "one who is able to fulfill his potentialities and deal effectively with his environment" (Brown 7). Continuous awareness will fulfill the students' potentialities, and in order to deal effectively with the environment, new immigrants have to learn all the resources and possibilities that in this case HISD and the city of Houston provide for newcomers.

After several conversations with my students, and by reading their compositions, I have learned that they do not know too much about the city of Houston. Their activities are centered in their neighborhood. They have family and friend reunions. They go to Fiesta supermarket, the flea market, and to small convenience or dollar stores located in the same area where they live. After some motivation they have visited the library, also.

Last year, all the third graders of our school went on a field trip to the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. Some of my students used the escalator for the first time in their lives. They were fascinated by the building and all the treasures they were able to see. They were connecting previous lessons to many of the things they were admiring, then. For some of them, it was their first visit to a museum! The museum's guide, a lady from Chile, told me that she was very happy to see so much enthusiasm and desire for learning in my students. She was very pleased with their overall knowledge. This experience motivated me to take my students to the Children's Museum on a Saturday. None of them had ever been in this museum before. The experience was very enriching for my students and for me. In order to gain a complete education, students should have more opportunities to visit important places in Houston.

I intend to link this unit to mathematics, social studies, art, reading, and writing. The students will work in heterogeneous groups to experience diversity, generate ideas, and to create group tolerance. When the topic requires individual work I will encourage the students to share their final work with their classmates.

I attempt to divide the unit into three parts, as the title shows. In the first part we are going to analyze who we are, our family origins, and our community. The second part will deal with other groups living in the city of Houston. We can start with our school. We will make a survey to investigate who comes to our school, including teachers, principal, and other workers. What is their origin? Do they have a different culture? Do they speak different languages? Simultaneously we are going to investigate other cultural or ethnic groups that live in the city. The last part of this unit will consider what we have in common with other groups, where we differ, and what we want to learn from them. It will be important to analyze what we can do to improve our way of life.

The Hispanic population is growing fast, and is already the major ethnic group in HISD. Moreover, diversity is evident in the city of Houston, as Stanley Karnow describes in his article "There goes the (lily-white) neighborhood" in the *Houston Chronicle*. He mentions that "today, 30 million Americans are foreign-born." I consider it of capital importance as teachers to acknowledge this situation, learn what we can do to improve our teaching to immigrants, and improve the contribution we are making to the Houston area by imparting a high quality education to immigrant students. I believe high quality education is essential for the benefit and future of our very diverse city. Houston will become a better place to live by our educating our young immigrants, understanding their struggles, helping them to recreate a better self by becoming more creative and productive, and never underestimating their capacity and skills to learn, regardless of their origin. I would like to quote Dr. O. D. Curtis, Superintendent of the Northeast District of HISD, in his remarks at a meeting (2004) of the district: "Educate these children as if they were your own children or grandchildren."

## **A LIFE EXPERIENCE IN A CLASSROOM**

I have in mind not only to teach a unit on immigration, but to make it a life experience. It will be an unpredictable and exciting adventure for the student, analyzing his/her own family life, putting him/herself in another person's shoes, learning more about other ethnic and cultural groups, and observing and living the diversity of the city. Working in groups will make this experience more meaningful and interesting. As a final product of their work the class will make a scrapbook, or album, with clippings, interviews, graphs, writings, brochures, drawings, photographs, and a bibliography. Parents will be invited to participate in this project in several ways.

### **We: We Get to Know Ourselves**

I plan to start the first part of the unit: "We," by describing ourselves. The students will work individually, writing their self-portraits. Who am I? Where do I come from? How do I look and dress? Do I look like someone in my family? What are my favorite things? What things do I like and dislike about myself? What things would I like to change that I do not like about myself? How do I feel about living in Houston? We can add some questions the students would like to include.

When the portraits are finished we are going to read them aloud without knowing whose portraits they are. The class will be challenged to recognize the author. We can add to this activity what the students think about me. They can work in pairs adding other opinions to their own stories; they will learn how to formulate questions in order to learn more about each other without hurting feelings. They can also explain with drawings all that they cannot express with words, and paste photographs or magazine clippings to explain themselves better. We will make a section of our album containing our own stories in a binder with the purpose of adding more during the following months.

How we see ourselves is an important start to improving those issues that need help. A teacher will have more alternatives to help those students with low self esteem or any other problem. A very important component of this activity is to accept ourselves as we are. I cannot go further with this activity without quoting the Gestalt principle:

I am not in this world to live up to your expectations  
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.  
You are you, and I am I . . . . (Metz)

In this same unit, "We," we shall work with our classroom, families, and community. Our surroundings are part of us. We can transform them into a better place to live. Our classroom should have the class's personality. The children's work is the best choice for classroom decorations. Our students will feel that their work is important and worthwhile. The environment of our classroom during this unit should reflect the personality of our students. It will be important to have all the materials we will need accessible to facilitate

the development of the unit. We will be receiving all kinds of guests in a natural way, such as other students, teachers, and parents who visit our classroom for one reason or another.

## **Our Environment**

Our classroom should be like our home, a place where everyone is welcomed. In this unit I intend to have some of our parents working with our students. Parents are very important for students to understand themselves. Why is the family living in Houston? Why did they pick Houston? How long have they been here? Are they planning to stay? How is the family getting along in the city? Did they have family living in Houston before they came? All these questions, besides helping the students to understand their own existence, will help me to understand what we are learning in the course, “The New Houston: New Immigrants, New Ethnicities, and New Inter-Group Relations in America’s Fourth largest City,” seen from the child’s perspective. Usually, if not always, we teachers learn from the scholars’ and government’s perspectives, but what about the perspectives of the children and their parents’? These are important points of view. These are the perspectives from which we teachers can know and understand the problems of the immigrant child.

In the subdivisions of the unit we will continue discovering aspects of our surroundings, analyzing our classroom and things in it, as well as the origins of the food we eat. My intention is to teach the students how to think ahead of what they see with their eyes, adding questions about perceptions, feelings, sensations, asking also about the materials with which things were made, and how these materials were transformed into finished goods. What was a chair before being a chair and who helped in its transformation, the cost of things, and going beyond that, I will make them think about who made them, where they were made and how they came to be here. As an example, one of my students brought to class a list of thirty-three countries. She explained to me that those were the countries where her family’s clothes were made. She told me also that most of their baby clothes came from Thailand.

I want to motivate the teacher who reads this example to analyze what wonderful material he/she has, already distributed throughout the community, to develop a web of lesson plans for teaching math, science, geography, reading, vocabulary, spelling, and art. We can start with a map, finding the countries where our clothes were made. We tell the students, “Pay close attention to where these countries are and how far from Houston they are in miles or kilometers.” Now it is time for them to think about what kind of transportation people use to bring their goods to our city. We can analyze the cost of materials, labor, and other costs, such as leasing buildings, electricity, machinery, and transportation. Children will understand and appreciate more about what they own by understanding all that it takes to have a product in a retail store. We can add as much as we want to this topic. We can illustrate in graphs which countries manufacture certain kinds of items; children can search the minimum salary of workers from the list of

countries the student has. They can arrange the wages from least to highest, and compare incomes between countries. Finally, after processing all that information, they can deduce why so many items are made in other countries and not in the United States. This example can lead us to develop the students' curious minds. They will be more interested in learning because they are studying a subject they brought to class themselves.

My objective is to create a permanent curiosity and a mind opened by research. I have experienced in my classroom the joy of my students when they find in a book, atlas, or any other source, information that adds knowledge to a former topic. I agree with the idea that there is a natural desire to learn.

After they have described themselves and their classmates, students will study their families and neighbors through interviews and observation. They will draw, photograph, record data, graph, and write about the knowledge they have gained. With this type of exercise I will develop their faculties of observation and analysis. I will use several techniques to help them experience the joy of learning. One important technique, as we have seen in previous paragraphs, is to make learning significant to them. They will learn that their families are an important element of the community. I ask a student a question, "Are we making history?" The student's first answer is usually, "No!" Then I prove to him/her that we are. We are part of the census, of the working population, of the Hispanic percentage; we are changing the culture of the city, and so on and so forth. My students sometimes add more to what I say. We will look for more examples in the newspaper, and by listening to the radio, watching the news, looking for Hispanic businesses like restaurants and stores, and by being aware of news and events in Latin America, and thus we will add to what we have learned.

All this research will be recorded. We will make graphs and paste articles, graphs, and photographs and draw decorations to add more information to all that we cannot say or understand with words.

After all this research, each student will write a small essay entitled "How My Family Is Participating in Enhancing the City of Houston." We will add all this information to our album, giving special importance to how their families are contributing to the city of Houston. I expect them to talk about how their parents work. One child's father is a yardman; he makes yards look tidy and beautiful. Another student can say that his/her father works building new houses. Another student probably will say that his/her mother cleans houses so other people can have more time to work outside the house in other jobs. This part will be an important activity and can have unexpected answers. I hope they will appreciate their families more, and their family's hard work. They will realize that they are making history, and that they are an important part of our Houston society.

In the seminar we have talked about acculturation and assimilation. After eight years living in the United States, studying a master's degree at the University of Oklahoma, working at an American oil company, and working as a bilingual teacher in HISD, I have

learned very much about the American culture, but I have not been assimilated in it. After a presentation in our seminar by Mobasen M. Mobasher, co-editor of *Migration, Globalization, and Ethnic Relations: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, I have a better understanding about acculturation and assimilation. He said, "I am not in favor of assimilation but I am perfectly acculturated." It was very revealing to hear someone giving words to my feelings. It also enlightened one of the characteristics of Mexicans living in the United States. I have heard and read several criticisms about Mexicans who continue speaking Spanish and keeping traditions in spite of being second generation or more, living in the United States.

After listening to Mr. Mobasher, I understand that there is nothing wrong with this. I am also in favor of diversity and against assimilation. I have been thinking about this and I have arrived at a conclusion about the city of Houston. Houston is so rich in its economic, artistic, religious, and cultural activities because of its diversity. Diversity is developing a multiphase city. When we visit different parts of the city we can see street names written with Chinese symbols, other areas have boutiques with saris from India; we can see Persian stores with beautiful rugs, as well as African art, and people dressed in their traditional garments from different parts of the world. We can eat food from Thailand, Mexico, Argentina, India, China or Italy. We find all kinds of worship centers, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, and Moslem. I hope this reflection, will help teachers of immigrant children in Houston to respect and appreciate diversity. Appreciating and encouraging our students from all over the world, we will make them feel proud of their origin, and never ashamed. These thoughts made me include in this unit the subtitle, "Houston, The city where we live."

I have developed the students' power of observation, and I will continue to. Houston offers a great variety of opportunities to learn about other cultures. We do not have to go very far in Houston to see diversity. Even though our school, Pugh Elementary, has mainly a Mexican population, nevertheless, there is some diversity. There are a few students from Central America. The great diversity is among the faculty. There are teachers from Nigeria, The Philippines, and Mexico. We are all colors: black, yellow, Caucasian, Mestizo, and Natives from America (Mexico and Central America).

Professionals I have worked with believe that it enhances a person's education to live in foreign country, especially if it has a different language. When we experience living in an unknown environment we have to use higher order thinking to solve survival problems. The environment of immigrants changes as soon as we enter the United States. How we come to the United States, by land, water, or air, is not important. The first time we are shocked! We find more difference than similitude. The first time I was in an American airport, I understood what "First World" meant. I can imagine my young students and their parents, who come from rural areas of Mexico and Honduras. They can walk the Houston streets without seeing a human being afoot, or a dog. There is no one to ask anything of. When you come by car, if you do not know the exact place where you are going and have studied a map, it will be almost impossible to get where you want to



go. Yes, we have maps in our countries but we do not use them as much. We will always find someone to ask where the places are, and believe it or not, sometimes by the name of a person we can get to their house or business.

Let us teachers put ourselves in the shoes of our students and their families. We can make their lives easier by understanding all that they go through in the journey to “the promised land,” showing our students and parents how to live in Houston, and all that this city has to offer, and especially recognizing the great cultural baggage that each of our immigrant students brings to make this city a land of opportunities.

### **Houston, Our City**

I will teach this part of the unit after spring break, when the reading TAKS and “Aprenda” tests are over and we can have more time for learning different things. Ben Vera, our HTI fellow, said, “I look at my bookshelves and I see what I can use from them.” I think it is a very good idea: I will look at my “bookshelves” and I will try to use all that it is available to guide my students around Houston.

By this time of the year the students have some knowledge about Texas geography and history. We will read a biography of Sam Houston and learn why the city of Houston received this name. I consider it important for the children to learn about Texas History. Some of my students, I have seen, do not know that Texas and other states belonged to Mexico. It will be interesting to review that Alaska was part of Russia; Puerto Rico of Spain; and Hawaii was an independent country. After they learn the background of Houston and Texas we will investigate who lives in Houston.

I will first bring up the population of our school. We will invite some students and teachers to come to our classroom for half an hour to talk about their country. This will be an opportunity to learn how to write invitations, explain what we want to learn with his/her visit, mail them, and wait for a response. In the meantime we will learn basic notions about the country where they come from, its location, and form of government, national products, income, language, and part of its culture. Before he/she comes to our class, we will prepare some questions to give to our guest before he/she comes. After our visit, we will send a thank you letter and drawings or compositions about the things we learned. I expect to have at least two guest teachers, one each week; and two guests from outside the school. As the Indian population is growing very fast in Houston, I will invite one of my friends from Mexico who was my student there. Bringing one of my students from Mexico will be a good experience for my students for many reasons. First of all, she is an immigrant too; married to an Indian young man she met in Australia, active in the Indian-American Community, very sports oriented, working at the University of Houston, and a volunteer in Pacifica Radio. My other possibility is one of my nephews, who came to Houston at age 11, sick with cancer. He lost his left leg, stayed here with all his family, studied at Rice University, earned a scholarship for his Masters in robotics, worked at NASA and in Belgium, and now, he has his own business.

I strongly believe that a child can only learn by him/herself, we cannot learn for them. We can only guide their steps. When I studied at the Autonomous University of Mexico we studied the pedagogy of Paul Freire, a Brazilian educator. I have always remembered his teachings, and one of the things that has stayed with me is that we cannot move anyone, students or our own children; we can only help them or show them the way. They will move themselves. I am inviting these four persons to show my students that there are many different ways for immigrants in Houston to move forward and be positive: two teachers, one active young wife and mother, and one scientist who ended up opening his own business with his parents and brother.

These examples of only four immigrants can teach a valuable lesson to all of us. We can plan a variety of activities in the city of Houston and here we are, in the “here and now,” principle of the Gestalt theory that I was writing at the beginning of this paper.

For the last month of classes, I intend to take my students on three field trips: one to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston; one to the Ship Channel, port of entry to Houston and exit to the rest of the world; and one to the Galleria Mall, example of a first-world retail business, where the children can see people from all over the world, visit the lobby of one of the finest hotels in Houston, look at the ice-skating rink, use an escalator and an elevator, and admire the architecture of the buildings.

## **HOW TO TEACH**

Never be afraid to try different ways of teaching. We have to take risks and be creative in our daily work. The one, two, three method in education does not exist. No one has discovered the perfect technique. For example, I believe that we in HISD are not using all the accumulated knowledge and experience diverse teachers have brought to Houston from all over the world. We teachers know that what works for one child will not work for another. Each child (and each teacher) brings his/her own history to the class. Our histories are an accumulation of cultural generations. Our bilingual and ESL classes are formed by many different histories of immigration. Each history is an enriched contribution for our classes. Immigrant children and teachers always have interesting experiences of life.

### **Gestalt Theory**

I have chosen to teach this unit with the Gestalt approach. I want my students to live and appreciate the “Now, and Here.” What are we going to do with our lives? Today! Every day we repeat the Students’ Creed: “Because today is special, and will never come again.”

In my teaching I will work with the holistic approach. Gestalt means a whole. This theory matches the HISD method of education, where the children become active

learners. In Gestalt the students will take responsibility for learning. This does not mean individually. Each student is part of a whole class. His/Her achievements are individual, but at the same time are parts of the rest of the group. This approach makes everyone responsible for the learning of the rest of the class. Gestalt helps children to be aware of themselves, but also will help them to think about others.

It is relevant to consider feelings and thinking. Teachers must be aware of the feelings of our immigrant children, of their own stories, and their own feelings toward each student in the group. “Children in classrooms are growing – physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually” (Brown 15). I will add that teachers are growing with their students in every aspect, too.

Our students and teachers come from different cultural environments. The teacher and the students have to learn about each other’s cultural backgrounds, and honor each other’s differences. We have to be aware of who we are, what we are able to do, where we come from, what is the reason we come to school, why we are living in Houston, how we can get the best from our immigrant situation, and how I behave. This list of awareness topics can grow as needed. I have an interesting example about awareness. One of the boys asked why “Isabel” gets a hundred in everything. My answer was, “you are asking the wrong person; ask her.” So, he asked her. She answered without delay, “Because I always do my best.” Teachers have to be aware of all these opportunities to help the students to develop awareness, and as teachers we have to give the students all the opportunities we can for them to answer all kinds of questions that help them to be aware of who they are.

Most of the academic system is based on competition. Competition brings aggression and discomfort to our students. Using the Gestalt theory, we try to create an environment of cooperation, and not of competition. I have in my third grade bilingual class many examples of cooperation between the students. I have two excellent students willing to help one of the students who has trouble learning, whenever she needs the help. She has improved her reading from kindergarten level to a fourth grade level, her handwriting was quite difficult to read; now she is writing clearly and with a beautiful hand. She is able to ask questions now, and tries to participate in class. These two students are proud of her and they want me to pay attention each time she makes a little progress in order for me to congratulate their disciple. She passed her TAKS with 80%! It is fair to say that these two students have been keeping their excellent marks. One of them wants to be a teacher. I believe she is a teacher now.

### **Operative Groups**

Since my first day of teaching, I have been analyzing my practice as a teacher. I was always worried about the techniques and methods we were using in the Mexican system of Education. In 1984, while studying at the Autonomous University of Mexico, I learned about a new way of working, Operative Groups, a theory developed by Pichon Riviere,

an Argentinean psychologist (Macouzet and Rojas). I took that class and then later, I went for three years to a school staffed by people from Argentina, who opened an Operative Groups Institute.

Operative Techniques implies a true conception of the educational process. All assimilated and incorporated information should be an instrument that allows the students to learn and relearn, as well as creating alternatives to solve problems related to the task in a group. This technique does not contradict the Gestalt theory as we can see. In the operative group technique the main objective is to teach all group members to think by expressing their thoughts and ideas. Operative group techniques do not make teachers' job easier. They create a constant challenge of creativity, study, imagination, understanding, problem solving strategies, and relationship problems among the members of the group. I am inclined to write extensively about the operative group because I have seen teachers struggling with the idea of working with groups. I have talked with some of my colleagues and they have expressed their concern about working in groups, and have trouble doing it.

The elements of operative groups are:

1. Group – We form heterogeneous groups. I have worked with four to six members.
2. Frame – I provide each group with information to help them understand the task, the task objective, time allowed to accomplish the task, how they can use this task in real life situations, authority to decide who will be the leader, and who will be responsible for each aspect of the task. The setting has to be prepared by the teacher with parents' help (when necessary) and students' help. It is important to provide the group, one way or the other, with the materials they need to accomplish the task. Time should be set by the teacher and must be respected.

Note: In operative groups there should be an observer of the group. This is not possible, unless we have a teacher aid, so the teacher should record all that he/she considers relevant. The observer's role is very important because all notes that we take will help to reconsider all activities, learn from our mistakes, and recreate all that is not working properly. A teacher's journal could be made with all these notes to improve and reflect on our job.

3. Conceptual, Operative, and Referential Frame, (ECRO, Esquema Referencial Operativo) – This is what each member brings to the group, including experiences, knowledge, feelings, and family ties. I consider this element the most important because I think that it contributes to the holistic approach and that is very important to consider with our immigrant students. This element will be what will eventually govern the relationships formed in the group. Each member will have a different way to relate to the group and a different way to target the task. This will be the best learning that the students can get. They will learn to deal with different personalities and cultures.
4. Roles – Pichon Riviere names four important roles in the group; each group member will naturally assume one or more of these roles during a project:

- The leader: the group will decide he/she is the best person to lead the group, a special trust is put on the leaders.
  - The scapegoat: the group will blame this member for all the things that go wrong in the group.
  - The saboteur: this member hinders the group in accomplishing the task
  - The emergent this member motivates the group to bring results to the group. He/She is focused on the task and motivates the group to stay on task, expresses the needs of the group. He/She is the group's guide.
5. Group Operative Skills: all roles will change according to the activities of the group and the task at hand. The ECRO will determine who will play what role at different times in the task. The teacher's observations will be very important in leading the group to accomplish the goal. Each member should learn what has been his/her role during each session. An evaluation of the group should be made periodically with the participation of the members.
  6. The teacher or coordinator: He/She should know when to interfere, giving ideas to keep the group focused on the task. The teacher will be an example of responsibility, commitment, punctuality and attendance, as well as permanent researcher of the topic the students are developing in order to help them look for the information they need. The teacher should keep the group centered on the main target. The teacher has to become a good listener and a good appreciator of the students' work
  7. The observer: As we cannot afford to have a full time observer, the teacher should become one when the groups need it. The observer is silent and takes notes on the group behavior. These notes will help the teacher to solve daily problems and have individual sessions with the students to talk about their progress.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Overview: We**

This lesson plan deals with the first part of my unit. The same objectives, materials, and setting will be used throughout the unit at different times in all lesson plans.

### ***Objectives***

- Develop the students' observation in order that they become good researchers.
- Increase the desire for reading.
- Appreciate our culture and be proud of our origins.
- Be positive about our situation as immigrants and get the most out of it.
- The teacher will learn important and valuable information about his/her students in order to better help them reach the HISD objectives.

### ***Materials needed for the three lesson plans***

- Small library with biographies of immigrants and books about immigration (some are in the Annotated Bibliography)

- Student and family photographs
- Special objects they own
- Camera and films
- Different kinds of calendars
- A flip chart
- Different concept map graphic organizers
- Newspapers
- Thermometers, clock
- Maps and globe
- Poster of “Students Creed”
- Big blue poster with a cutout of a boy and a girl
- Poster boards
- All kinds of paints
- Magazines
- Scissors, glue, pencils, tapes, brushes
- Dictionaries, index cards, index card file boxes
- A notebook used as journal
- Teacher’s short autobiography
- A special place to keep all the material we need (it can be storage boxes)
- Notebook paper, colored paper
- Three-hole punch
- A binder for each student
- Different graphic organizers
- One evaluation chart for each student
- Suggestion box (a bragging box does not agree with all cultures)

***Setting for the three lesson plans***

- The classroom will become, little by little, a place where the students and the teacher can work comfortably. In the beginning set the tables in a U shape. Later change the tables very often in agreement with how we are working: individually, as a whole class, or groups.
- Maps and a globe should be accessible all year long.
- The small library has to be open to the children, where they can reach the books whenever they need them.
- All work material should always be stored in the same place and accessible.
- I think that the children should be in charge of the classroom decoration and not the teacher. It is very rewarding for the students to have a permanent exposition of their work. Change it as necessary.
- The calendar will be the children’s job and can include several things: The news of the day, the temperature, the work of each day by different students, a flip chart page for each day. (That can be part of the story of our class.)
- All the HISD classroom management requirements.

- Photographs taken by the children during the year

### ***Time***

Each lesson plan can take about a week or we can make it a project for the whole year, adding subjects like writing, social studies, vocabulary, orthography, reading, and ESL.

### **Lesson Plan One: Creating Our Own Story**

In order to be successful in this lesson plan, it will be important to have previous reading of biographies about immigrants and immigration in the United States, including the teacher's biography. I will encourage the children to read biographies from our own classroom library, school and public libraries. I consider it important to read about people that can set a good example for our children. Examples follow:

Go to the people. Learn from them, live with them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. The best of leaders are those when the job is done, when the task is accomplished, the people will say, "We have done it ourselves.

-Lao Tsu, 604 B.C.E.

I knew for two years that my family was planning to go to the United States. I came home from a fiesta late one night and I saw my mother packing. She said that the papers finally came and we were leaving the next morning. We packed until early morning. That was confusing and sad because I never got to say goodbye to my friends.

- Girl from Mexico, age 12, in *The Inner World of the Immigrant Child* (Igoa 42)

### ***Objectives***

- Create awareness of who we are *here* and *now*. "Here" is our classroom, our teacher and our classmates and "Now" is today.
- Be conscious of what we are today. Everyday, after the student's creed we are going to reflect for a moment why this day is important, and how we will work to do the best we can. If last year someone was not a good student or did not do his/her best, today it is not important. It is important how he/she is going to work and perform today in our class.
- Discover what each one's responsibility is for us and for our class in the school year. At the end of the day we will reflect about our own commitments and evaluate if we did our best. (We can do it all year long.)
- Discover themselves. Learning is discovering. Students will understand that nobody can learn for them. They are responsible for their own learning.
- Learn who their teacher is. I will write my autobiography, and I will read it to the students the first day of class to introduce myself.
- Learn to communicate by writing, gestures, and drawings.

- In groups, analyze one biography.
- Write his/her autobiography.

### ***Procedure***

After reading biographies we will open a class discussion about the elements of a biography. We will talk about the biographers' purposes in writing about other people or about themselves.

Then we will work in groups. Please read the sections about "Operative Groups" and Gestalt in this paper to get an overview of the techniques and elements of Operative Groups and Gestalt and in order to get the most out of it. The task of each group will be to analyze one biography. The group will make a list of generalized information that the writer gives in the biography. It is very important to be sure each group understands what the task and the objectives are. The information teachers expect to get after reading and analyzing some biographies will be the following:

- Place and date where the person was born
- Places where the person lived through his/her life
- Something about his/her family
- Description of their house
- Childhood through adulthood
- Studies
- Important activities
- Interesting facts
- Likes and dislikes

Give each group 30 minutes or more. The important issue is that each teacher knows how much each group will need to complete this task. Time must be respected. While the children are working, the teacher visits each group and observes how they are working and writes some notes while she is observing. Children should solve the problems that the groups face while they are working. When the time is up the teacher will ask the groups about their conclusions and the information they are ready to give, as well as asking about group and individual performance. Have a flip chart ready with the title "What we can find in a biography? The children raise their hands to participate with the information. The teacher should praise all the work done well. The teacher writes the information the students are providing on the flip chart without saying what is wrong or right. When the groups finish giving the information, all the class checks the results and reviews if they are correct. They can add or delete information from the chart. After the class agrees that the information is complete there is a class and individual evaluation of the task. Then one or two of the students can write a description of the complete work in the computer, print the paper, and add it to the class binder (the binder that will hold most of the classroom work; the class journal).



I will add to their lists some important issues about biographies: We have to know very much about the person we are writing about. We have to be interested in their lives and have different feelings toward that person.

I will talk about autobiographies and explain to my students that no one can know more about our lives than we do.

After all this preparation the children will be encouraged to write their own biographies. We shall follow the writing process starting with a map about their lives, followed by a draft that I will read and check. When the draft is finished they will start writing their biographies. They will have time in class as well as homework in order for their parents to help them with information they do not know or do not remember. They can add photographs: when they were little, house, hometown, family, or pets. They can enhance their biography with drawings (we can ask the art teacher for help). We can add as much as we can to the biographies during all the year. All work done by the kids will be organized in individual binders during the year.

### **Lesson Plan Two: Our Family's Contribution to Our Society**

Everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life.

- John F. Kennedy

#### ***Objectives***

- Create family pride.
- Understand that we are part of history.
- Learn about immigrant families from other parts of the world.
- Value family's support to the city of Houston: jobs, attitudes, morals ...
- Learn more about their own family.
- Be aware of the reasons why their family came to live in Houston
- Be aware of their parent's contribution to the city of Houston.
- Learn more about their parent's jobs
- Continue their learning about writing
- Learn more about biographies
- Practice preparing interview questions
- Gather information from other members of their family about their parents
- Increase vocabulary about jobs and tools,

#### ***Procedure***

In order to create self esteem and make the students be proud of their families, I start this lesson by asking all the class if they think their family is making history. Most of the students have answered "no" to this question. At this point I have some books ready for the class to read. These books talk about real stories of immigrant children and their families, and the Statue of Liberty; I am adding to the unit several websites where the teachers and students can search for information and activities on the topic. I have some recent magazines and newspapers where we can find some stories or news about

immigrants. Another thing I like to show them is HISD maps with the percentages of the immigrant population in the Houston schools. We analyze this material with the whole group and then I divide the class into groups. Each group will talk about how they think their family is contributing to making history and to make Houston a better place to live.

The questions each group will work on are the following: What are our parents' jobs? What do they do on their job? Are our parents' activities helping the City of Houston to be or look better? Is their job important to the Houston society and why do they think so? Do you think that your parents' job creates other jobs? For example, food stores and markets, restaurants, importations of different items, convenience stores, tools for working, leasing apartments, used or new car dealers, churches, and charity organizations.

We will analyze how our parents have enhanced the life of Houston by analyzing the influence of the Hispanic culture in the city of Houston: Mexican food, bilingual education, increased economics by inexpensive labor, art and entertainment.

### **Lesson Plan Three: Creating a Perfect City for Our Needs**

#### ***Objectives***

- Emphasize the holistic approach. Learn to think about, feel, and sense our environment: setting, time, and people.
- Create a sense of responsibility of how Hispanics can make Houston a better place to live.
- Create awareness about the place we live and how people transform the environment.
- Analyze what people need to have a perfect city. Design a perfect city.
- Learn *about* the needs of a community.
- Increase vocabulary
- Use their imagination

#### ***Time***

To accomplish the entire project could take about two weeks with homework activities.

#### ***Materials***

- Different shaped pieces of wood
- Broken toys
- Milk cartons, cardboard rolls of different products: toilet paper, aluminum foil
- Different sizes of cardboard boxes
- Clipboards
- Straws
- Hay, stones, sand, clay, and branches or whatever natural material is available
- Some leftovers of materials used by their parents at work.
- Different kinds of remnants: gunny sacks, wool, cotton, or canvas.
- Different blueprints and house specifications from different companies in Houston

- Magazines clippings of houses from different parts of the world

The teacher's enthusiasm for this theme is very important. The children should be motivated and excited about building the perfect city.

First we will analyze the cities or rural areas where the students have lived. We will make a list of all the things we liked of each one of those places.

Immediately after, I will form groups of 5 children for a 30-minute discussion. Each group will have a different task about the creation of a perfect city:

- Group 1 will make a project of a perfect house with recycle material.
- Group 2 will make a list of services people from the perfect city need.
- Group 3 will describe the perfect citizens of this city.
- Group 4 will analyze what facilities the perfect city needs like parks, schools, stores, etc.
- Group 5 will think about the activities of people in the city.

The children will record their information on flip chart sheets. The next two days each group will pass to the front of the class to explain to the rest of the groups how they planned each topic to build the perfect city. After each exposition the other groups can add their own ideas to complete the job.

Several activities can follow to complete this subject. Each group can build from recycle materials a model of the perfect house. The perfect house will be different for each group. All groups will make a written description of the house with blueprints and specifications. The group has to explain in their project where the house will be and according to that, the house must have the necessary requirements for the people that will live in it: structure, foundation, roof, rooms, and the necessary facilities. Each group will have to make their own blueprints before they start the building of the houses with a written list of the house characteristics like those done by the builders. We can ask the art and science teacher to help finish this project. When they finish the construction of the houses each group will make a thorough and critical observation of each one of the houses. They will check if they have all what a house needs to accomplish the needs of the inhabitants. Do they have a structure to withstand the weather, is the roof well built, are they beautiful? After the activity is finished, the children will take photographs to add them to the classroom journal.

Each group can put into writing the final needs for all their group discussions adding maps and concept maps of the organization of the city, drawings of different facilities, charts with jobs and responsibilities of the citizens, rules for the citizens, and family structure.

These plans can be used throughout the year as needed to add materials and use former knowledge. It will be interesting, also, to change some concepts or ideas for new conceptions of a perfect city.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Works Cited

- Brisk, Maria Estela. *Bilingual Education from Compensatory to Quality Schooling*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998.  
This book will explain the pros and cons of bilingual education and how we can improve the quality of our ESL and bilingual teachings.
- Constantine, Madonna G., and George V. Gushue. "School Counselors' Ethnic Tolerance Attitudes and Racism Attitudes as Predictors of Their Multicultural Case Conceptualization of an Immigrant Student." *Journal of Counseling and Development* 81.2 (2003): 185+. Questia. 14 Feb. 2004.  
<<http://www.questia.com/>>.  
Deals with American and Mexican American students.
- Curtis, O. D. "Stanford 10/Aprenda 3 In-Service." Houston ISD-NE District Office, 19 Oct. 2004.
- Deck, Allan Figueroa et al. *Perspectivas: Hispanic Ministry*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1995.  
Considering that most of Latin American immigrants are Catholics I believe this analysis will help to understand the complexity of the Hispanic ministry, as well as the diversity among the Latino population in the United States.
- Fernández, C. Julieta and Guillermo C. Cohen-DeGovia. *El Grupo Operativo, Teoría y Práctica*. Mexico: Editorial Extemporáneos, S.A., 1986.  
It is relevant reading and studying this book to understand how operative groups were developed. This book explains the methodology of the operative groups.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Inteligencia Emocional: Por Qué Es Más Importante Que el Cociente Intelectual*. Mexico: Ediciones B. S.A. de C. V., 2000.  
I highly recommend this book to all teachers who are interested in how our minds work. It will help teachers to identify their learning skills and those of their students in order to improve the quality of classes in everyday life.
- Hardaway, Robert M. *America Goes to School: Law, Reform, and Crisis in Public Education*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1995.  
Most of this book is historical and will provide information about school segregation. It helps to understand public education in the USA.
- Igoa, Cristina. *The Inner World of the Immigrant Child*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995.  
This book was written by a teacher like many of us about immigrant children and

stories. We can learn much from her experiences and teachings to immigrant students, regardless of the language they speak.

*Innovation through Confluent Education and Gestalt*. Eds. Thomas Yeomans Brown and Liles Grizzard. New York: Viking Press, 1975.

This book can be used as a support or an alternative to educate our students to grow, know themselves better, accept themselves, and become more responsible. Teachers will become more sensitive to respect and worship diversity and individuality.

Karnow, Stanley. "There Goes the (Lily-White) Neighborhood." *The Houston Chronicle*. 7 Mar. 2004, A1.

Macouzet, Claudia and Lilia Rojas. *Grupo Operativo: Una Alternativa Pedagógica* Diss. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1989.

As a teacher of many years, I have been looking for alternatives to help me guide my students in a natural environment. People belong and grow in groups. "Operative Groups," a theory developed by the Argentinean psychologist, Enrique Pichon Riviere, has given me the tools to enhance the dynamics of my classes and education more meaningful to my students.

Metz, G. "Gestalt and the Transformation." In *The Live Classroom: Innovation through Confluent Education and Gestalt*. Eds. George Isaac Brown et al. New York: Viking Press, 1975.

This important article, quoted above, appears in a volume of essays centered on how to incorporate concepts from Gestalt psychology into the classroom.

Miville, Marie L., et al. *Exploring the Relationships between Racial/Cultural Identity and Ego Identity among African Americans and Mexican Americans*. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 28.4 (2000): 208. Questia. 15 Feb. 2004. <<http://www.questia.com/>>.

Considering the problems developed among African Americans and Mexican Americans, this article will shed some light on racial and cultural identity of a sample of university students. Participants completed scales measuring racial or cultural identity and ego identity.

Mobasher, Mohasen M. and Mahmoud Sadri, eds. *Migration, Globalization, and Ethnic Relations: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: 2004.

We used this book as a textbook. It is very useful because it has been published in the present year. It contains valuable and recent information about immigration and globalization from immigrants' points of view. It will enlighten the reader on various issues of immigration experienced by immigrants.

Mobasher, M. M. Guest lecture, Houston Teachers Institute, 8 Mar. 2004.

## Supplemental Resources

### *Web Sources for Teachers*

*Kinds of Concept Maps*. 2004. U of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign. 1 May 2004.

<<http://classes.aces.uiuc.edu/ACES100/Mind/c-m2.html>>.

There are several websites to get ideas or use graphic organizers. This is a set of seven organizers that can be used for concept maps in the three lesson plans.

*Congress's Immigration Website*. The Library of Congress/American Memory. 1 May 2004. <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/nd/pedu/features/immig/resources.html>>.

This site has valuable information about the story of immigration in the United States. I am interested in art of immigrants because children, by analyzing paintings, can recreate their own story and create their own drawings as a valuable expression of their inner world.

*Learning Adventures in Citizenship: From New York to Your Town*. 2004. PBS Online/Thirteen Online/American Experience. 1 May 2004.

<<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/newyork/laic/index.html>>.

On this site, kids can explore the intriguing history of New York, do activities to learn more about the history of their own towns, and participate in their communities. There are special sections for teachers and parents to learn how to get the most out of this rich resource. Also, See our Eddie Award. I consider it important to copy the exact information from their web page.

*Marcopolo*. 2004. MCI Foundation. 1 May 2004. <<http://www.marcopolo-education.org>>.

This is a wonderful web site for teachers. There are original lesson plans, ideas to teach all related subjects, exercises, graphic organizers, links to other interesting sites,

*Prints and Photographs Online Collection*. The Kennedy Center. 1 May 2004.

<<http://artsedge.Kennedy-center.org/bridg/?type=INT&url=http://meny.org>>.

In this site are breathtaking photographs of early immigrants that we can use in class for discussion.

*Teach and Educate Website*. Polaroid Works. 1 Apr. 2004.

<[http://www.polaroidworks.com/listing.jsp?FOLDER<>folder\\_id](http://www.polaroidworks.com/listing.jsp?FOLDER<>folder_id)>.

On this site we can find more photographs from the Museum of the City of New York. Students can compare and contrast different photographs and write about the differences they found. The ultimate motivation is that they take their own photos.

*Celebrate Hispanic Heritage*. 1996-2004. Scholastic Inc. 1 May 2004.

<<http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/hispanic/index.htm>>.

This site has several subjects about Hispanic Heritage. It includes biographies, celebrations, history, lesson plans for all the subjects and grades. We can also find teaching strategies, games, and web links.

### ***Materials for Students***

All the following books are to be read by groups or individually during this unit. Students do not have to read all the books, but they have to summarize each one they read and present it to the group using the SFA Reading program and the Reading Clear Project Unit, Research: Fluency, vocabulary, spelling, and standard patterns of an essay. The children are free to look for more bibliography. I included the social studies book because it has valuable information, and the children use it as a reference book.

All books that teachers use in their classroom library should be well picked. It will help the students stay focused on the topics. I will also use maps, National Geographic magazines, Houston newspapers and magazines, museum's brochures, information of Houston's celebrations of several ethnic and cultural groups and movie clips where diversity occurs.

Abella, Tomás. *S de Solidaridad*. Barcelona: INTERMON, 2000.

Boyd, C., et al. *Comunidades*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc, 2003.

Crimmins, James C. *The American Promise*. San Francisco: KQED Books, 1995.

Das, Prodecepta. *I de India*. Barcelona: INTERCOM, 1996.

Kindersley, Barnabas and Anabel: *Niños como Yo*, México: Editorial Diana, S. A. de C.V., 1996.

Menchú, Rigoberta, and Dante Liano, *El Vaso de Miel*. Mexico: Alfaguara, 2003.

Onyefulu, Ifeoma. *A de África*. Barcelona: INTERCOM, 1993.

So, Sungwan. *Ch de China*. Barcelona: INTERCOM, 1997.

### ***Biographies***

Gravois, Michael. *Hands on History: Immigration*. Scholastic Professional Books, 2004. This is a good book to start reading about biographies of immigrants. In this book the teacher will find hands-on activities creating interest in the students about the topic, and it will help the children to understand their own lives.

Davis, Lucile. *Cesar Chavez: Una Biografia Ilustrada Con Fotografias (Leer Y Descubrir--Biografias Ilustradas Con Fotografias)*. Bridgestone Books, 1999.  
Reading the biography and observing the photos of Chavez the students will see an example of honesty and hard work of an activist struggling for the rights of migrant farm workers.

Ochoa, George. *Amazing Hispanic American History: A Book of Answers for Kids*. New York: The New York Public Library, 1998.  
Great book for research and reference, from the “colonizadores” to modern times. It is easy for the children to find biographies of many Hispanic Americans, who have made all kinds of contributions to the United States as well as any other topic about Hispanic American historical and cultural experience, using the question-and-answer format.

### ***Filmography***

*American Cultures for Children Video Series*. Narrated by Phylicia Rashad. Schlessinger Media, 1997. (300 minutes)  
There are several movies (12) about different cultures. In 25 minutes the student can get an idea of the similarities and differences of their culture and that of the film.

*In America*. Dir. Jim Sheridan. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002. (107 minutes)  
Jim Sheridan, a storyteller, made a breathtaking tale of a family finding its soul in America. The author changes a tragedy to a story of love, encounters, and starting all over again. It is a story of an Irish immigrant family, who must face a new future. The story of this movie can be positive for our students because they might face the same struggles of the Irish family, and at the same time look for positive solutions (students’ creed).

*Pocahontas*. Dir. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg. Walt Disney Pictures, 1995. (81 minutes)  
This movie deals with the first immigrants arriving in Virginia with John Smith. The students will analyze and compare fiction with history, and investigate what parts of the movie are historically accurate and which are only meant to entertain.