

On Teachable Moments

An illuminating exchange about immigration numbers and population growth

by Tim Aaronson

[“ProjectUSA” tries to inform the public about the need for immigration reform by setting up billboards alongside congested highways with the message that uncontrolled immigration is affecting the quality of life in our country by contributing to rapid population growth with its attendant pressures on infrastructure and resources. The following exchange was prompted by a note from a teacher in Brooklyn, New York, upon seeing, along with her students, a Project USA billboard.]

Dear ProjectUSA:

We all enjoy freedom of speech in this country, but how do you explain the message presented in your billboards to a group of children whose parents or themselves are immigrants?

I am a schoolteacher who recently went out on a trip in a school bus through Brooklyn. One of my fourth graders asked me what the billboard about immigration was trying to say. As I tried to explain it to her it dawned on me that she herself, her parents, and grandparents are immigrants. I became very embarrassed and asked other students to help me explain what the billboard was saying. My students began a discussion based on the message in the billboard.

They all decided that the billboard is not helping our society. The message is creating conflict among the children of different backgrounds and hatred against a group of people. These fourth graders stated that people who see the billboard will think that immigrants are

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bad people and will act violently against them.

In school I asked some of my colleagues their opinion about the billboards and your web site. We would like to know what do you mean by “American people?”

According to you, who is a true “American Person?” Is it Native Americans, People from North and South America or United States citizens who entered the U.S. before 1970?

When you say that Americans have their own culture, can you describe and explain that culture? Isn’t everything in this country adopted from foreign countries?

I’d like to end here and ask you to think and research why the number of immigrants is increasing so dramatically. Why does every working class person in every other country in the world dream of coming to this one for a better life? What has happened to the world that no one is happy at home? Who is truly to blame for their unhappiness?

Zulma Hernandez, 4th grade teacher.

Tim Aaronson responds:

As one who has spent his career in education, I recognize good teaching technique — in this case your seizing the “teachable moment” and discussing immigration with your students. I would also like to thank you for the tone of your inquiry. It is in stark contrast to the many who are unable to distinguish concern from hatred. I hope I succeed in convincing you that it is the former and not the latter that motivates ProjectUSA to put up billboards.

First, let me try to explain the concerns many of us have. The U.S. is growing at a staggering rate. Americans are the greatest consumers of world resources so it is particularly important that we act responsibly and “tighten” our population belt. At first glance there is great news — American families typically

have just two children, the number needed to stabilize the population. Yet our population is growing at the rate of an India. How can that be? Most of our population growth is now due to immigration. The U.S. Census Bureau confirms this in a report issued in early January. The *Dallas Morning News* (January 14, 2000) reported this with the headline: "U.S. population projected to double in next century." The subtitle of the article reads: "Immigrants will fuel growth, Census Bureau says." The

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story contained a graph that shows the U.S. could reach 1.2 billion over the next century. Since the Census Bureau has often underestimated the number in the past, the prospects are truly frightening!

I am sure you teach your children about conserving resources and about recycling. Isn't it reasonable to also look at conserving our own numbers? And what good does it do to recycle when all those efforts are wiped out by adding more and more people? Those who are genuinely concerned about America's children - including your fourth graders - don't want to see an America of one billion people. There is a simple solution at hand: Reduce the current unhistorical rate of immigration to a more traditional and sustainable level. Your letter spoke of helping society. Isn't slowing the current mass immigration level an important way to help our society? It is, of course, not easy talking about this with students. It may well be embarrassing, for both immigrant child and native-born, but we do a disservice to our children if we teach them to avoid looking at difficult things. Not talking

about something does not make it go away.

Now to your question, "How would I explain the message to a group of children whose parents or themselves are immigrants?" What a challenging question! Let me give you some thoughts off the top of my head. Immigration is closely tied to population issues, so I suggest you check the Zero Population Growth (ZPG) web site for some of their excellent teaching resources designed for elementary teachers. Some of their materials are free. They also conduct workshops for teachers (<http://www.zpg.org>).

Here are some questions I can think of that might spur some discussion:

- What would it be like if we doubled the number of students in our class; our school?
- Many farms are being turned into houses and highways as our population grows and grows. How will we feed people if we lose our farms?
- Are there any limits to the number of people who can come to our country?
- What would be more helpful to people living in other countries: inviting them to leave their country to live in America or helping them to make their own countries a better place to live?
- Would it be better to help 80 people in foreign countries or invite one person to live here? (Reflects world population growth vs. U.S. immigration numbers)
- If someone left the faucet on and our classroom was flooding and you could do only one thing — grab a mop or turn off the faucet — which would you do?
- Should people talk about things that are disturbing, e.g. immigration?

As a teacher I know the joy you must experience seeing the progress made by children recently arrived. You could not be a loving and effective teacher otherwise. Yet, let me leave you this thought to consider — in an avalanche, every beautiful snowflake pleads not guilty!