5th Grade Lesson
America at the Turn of the Century:
Immigration, Labor and Resistance among Filipino Nurses
Created by Sohyun An

Georgia Standard of Excellence (GSE)

SS5H1 Describe how life changed in America at the turn of the century.

c. Explain how William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt expanded America's role in the world; include the Spanish-American War.

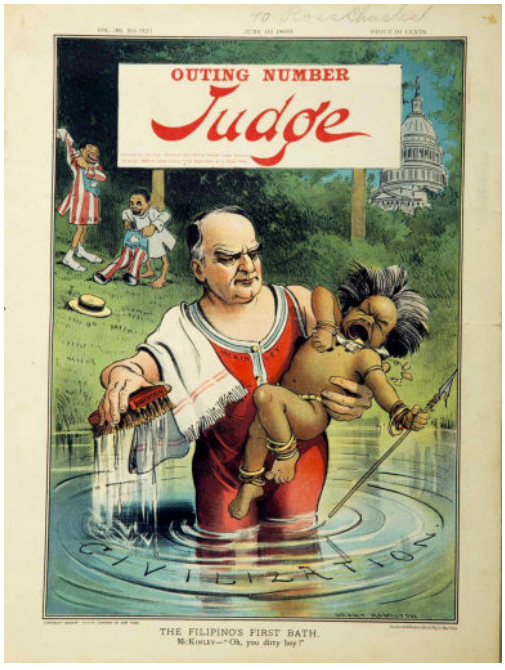
d. Describe the reasons people immigrated to the United States, from where they emigrated, and where they settled.

Background Information

This lesson explores the long-term human legacies of U.S. imperialism at the turn of the century by connecting the Spanish-American War to subsequent waves of Filipino immigration, labor, and community activism in the United States.

Spanish-American War and U.S. Colonization of the Philippines

The Filipino American community is the third-largest Asian American group with a population of over 4.2 million. Although Filipinos in North America were first documented in the 16th century, mass migration did not begin until the United States seized control of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War of 1898.



Prior to becoming a U.S. colony, the Philippines had been a Spanish colony for more than 300 years. When the United States came to the Philippines during the Spanish-American War in 1898, Filipinos had already begun an anti-colonial revolution against Spain for their liberation. Filipino revolutionaries believed that the United States was their ally and therefore helped the U.S. win the Spanish-American war. However, when the war ended, the United States ignored the Filipino people's desire for independence and colonized the

Philippines. According to then-president William McKinley, U.S. colonization of the Philippines was necessary to “educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize them.”

As you can imagine, Filipinos resisted and the War of Philippine Independence (1899-1902) began. Although commonly called “the Philippine-American War” in the U.S., this war was, for Filipinos, a war of independence that continued their fight for sovereignty against foreign empires—first with Spain, then with the United States. This three-year war was brutal, involving mass killing, torture, and the burning of villages because many U.S. military leaders dehumanized Filipinos and viewed them as barbaric savages. After winning this war, the United States ruled the Philippines until 1946 when it finally granted independence to the Philippines. The four decades of U.S. colonial rule Americanized the Philippines, transforming its language, education, political system, and economy according to U.S. customs.

This historical context is central to understanding Filipino migration to the United States. Between 1903 and 1939, many young Filipinos went to the U.S. to pursue education. As poverty increased under colonial rule, more Filipinos came to the U.S. for work. Unlike other Asian groups who were banned by a series of anti-Asian immigrant laws in the early 1900s, Filipinos could still travel to and work in the U.S. because as subjects of a U.S. colony, Filipinos held special status as U.S. nationals who pledged allegiance to America and lived under U.S. rule.

Most early Filipino migrants worked in canneries and fields along the West Coast. They suffered from racism and discrimination similar to what other Asian migrant groups faced. And like other Asian migrant groups, Filipinos were not powerless. They fought against workplace exploitation and demanded justice in solidarity with Mexican migrant workers.

The History of Filipino Nurses



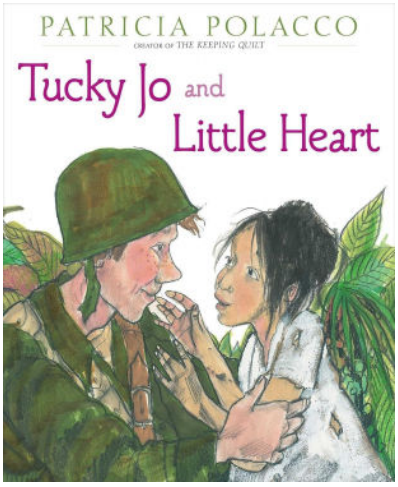
The US colonial administration established Western-style nursing schools in the Philippines to implement U.S. medical standards. Because these nurses were trained in English and educated using U.S. curricula, they were highly compatible with the U.S. healthcare system.

Mass migration began mid-century via programs like the Exchange Visitor Program and was expanded by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which prioritized skilled healthcare employment to meet severe nursing shortages in U.S. hospitals. The labor demand in the United States led to the rise of a labor export system in the Philippines in the 1970s, with the overwhelming majority of nurses trained there ultimately working abroad. By the 1980s, almost 80% of foreign-trained nurses in the U.S. were from the Philippines.

Filipino nurses frequently stepped into high-stress, bedside, and critical care roles in urban and understaffed facilities. Far from passive victims, however, they also organized for better working conditions through groups like the Philippine Nurses Association and the Foreign Nurse Defense Fund.

The COVID-19 Connection: This legacy of working on the medical frontlines exacted a devastating toll during the COVID-19 pandemic. While registered nurses of Filipino descent make up only about 4% of the registered nurse workforce in the United States, they accounted for a disproportionate 25% to 31.5% of all COVID-19 related deaths among registered nurses nationwide. This was primarily because they were vastly overrepresented in high-risk bedside placements, acute intensive care units (ICUs), and emergency settings.

Suggested Teaching Activity



Part 1: Literature Connection & Colonial Context

1. **Prerequisite Knowledge:** Students should already be familiar with the imperialist expansion policies of Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, including the Spanish-American War.

2. **Read-Aloud:** Read the children's book *Tucky Jo and Little Heart* by Patricia Polacco. The story describes a young US soldier from Kentucky deployed to the Pacific Theater during World War II who befriends a young Filipino child he nicknames "Little Heart".

   As their friendship deepens in the Philippines, a U.S. colony that was occupied by Japan during WWII, Johnnie shares his rations to help her and her starving village, only to later face the heartbreaking task of evacuating them right before an impending U.S. bombing campaign on the Philippines in the fight with Japan during WWII.

   After the war, Johnnie went back to the US. Decades after they are separated in the chaos of war, the two are miraculously reunited at a Veterans Affairs hospital in the US, where Little Heart, who is now grown up and working as a nurse, gets to care for the aging soldier who once saved her life.

3. **Guided Discussion & Analysis:** Help students connect the storyline of *Tucky Jo and Little Heart* back to their prior learning on turn-of-the-century imperialism. Explain that when Japan attacked and occupied the Philippines during WWII, they were attacking a **U.S. colony**, not an independent country. Guide students to see what the book leaves out: the reason US soldiers were fighting alongside Filipinos in the 1940s is directly linked to McKinley's decision to colonize the islands back in 1898.

Part 2: Focus on Filipino Nurses (Immigration & Contemporary Frontlines)

1. Explain to students that "Little Heart" represents the generations of Filipinos who grew up under an Americanized healthcare and education system in the Philippines. Reveal that many young Filipino girls like Little Heart grew up to become frontline medical workers: **Filipino nurses**.

2. Use a teacher-led slideshow to illustrate the timeline of Filipino nurse immigration. The U.S. set up nursing schools in the Philippines. Later, severe shortages of nurses in the U.S. (especially during the creation of Medicare/Medicaid in 1965 and the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1890s/1980s) caused U.S. hospitals to actively recruit them. Alternatively, have students watch the video entitled, "Why the US has so many Filipino nurses".

3. Share an excerpt from a report highlighting the heavy toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on these communities. Alternatively, have students watch the documentary trailer, "Nurse Unseen." Have students analyze the staggering statistic: Filipino nurses make up only 4% of U.S. nurses but accounted for over 25% of all nurse deaths during the pandemic. Ask students to write down a reflection on what this reveals about who works on the frontlines of caring for our country.

Part 4: Synthesis & Wrap-Up

Conclude the lesson by asking students to complete a 3-2-1 Exit Ticket:

- **3** Reasons why life changed or connected between the U.S. and the Philippines after 1898.
- **2** Contributions made by Filipino Americans.
- **1** Connection between turn-of-the-century imperialism and the faces of modern immigration today.

Images Used:

1. Hamilton, Grant E. "The Filipino's First Bath," in Judge Magazine, 36, no. 921 (June 10, 1899). Via Wikimedia Commons
2. Photo of Nursing class of 1929, St. Paul's Hospital, Intramuros, Manila, Philippines: Misses Yadao, Fink, Andaya, Abuan, Peralta and Tapaoan. Photo courtesy of University of Southern California Libraries/J. Tewell.
3. Polacco, Patricia. Tucky Jo and Little Heart. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2015.