

Building a Learning Community and Studying Childhood

Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy

THE WEEK BEFORE SCHOOL STARTS, each of Mrs. Paul's soon-to-be second grade students receives a letter in the mailbox at home. The letter is addressed to the student, not to the parents. This letter, personally prepared and signed by their new teacher, communicates high expectations for all students. It speaks of building "a learning community." It includes a preview of the formal curriculum—the content to be learned and the overarching goals to be achieved. It mentions some special events and activities—planned field trips and visits by guest speakers and presenters. It also addressed the "hidden" curriculum—what students learn at school about living with peers and the wider society. It describes the civic values that will define the learning community—fairness, rights and responsibilities, caring, and sharing, and the celebration of differences.

Opening Day

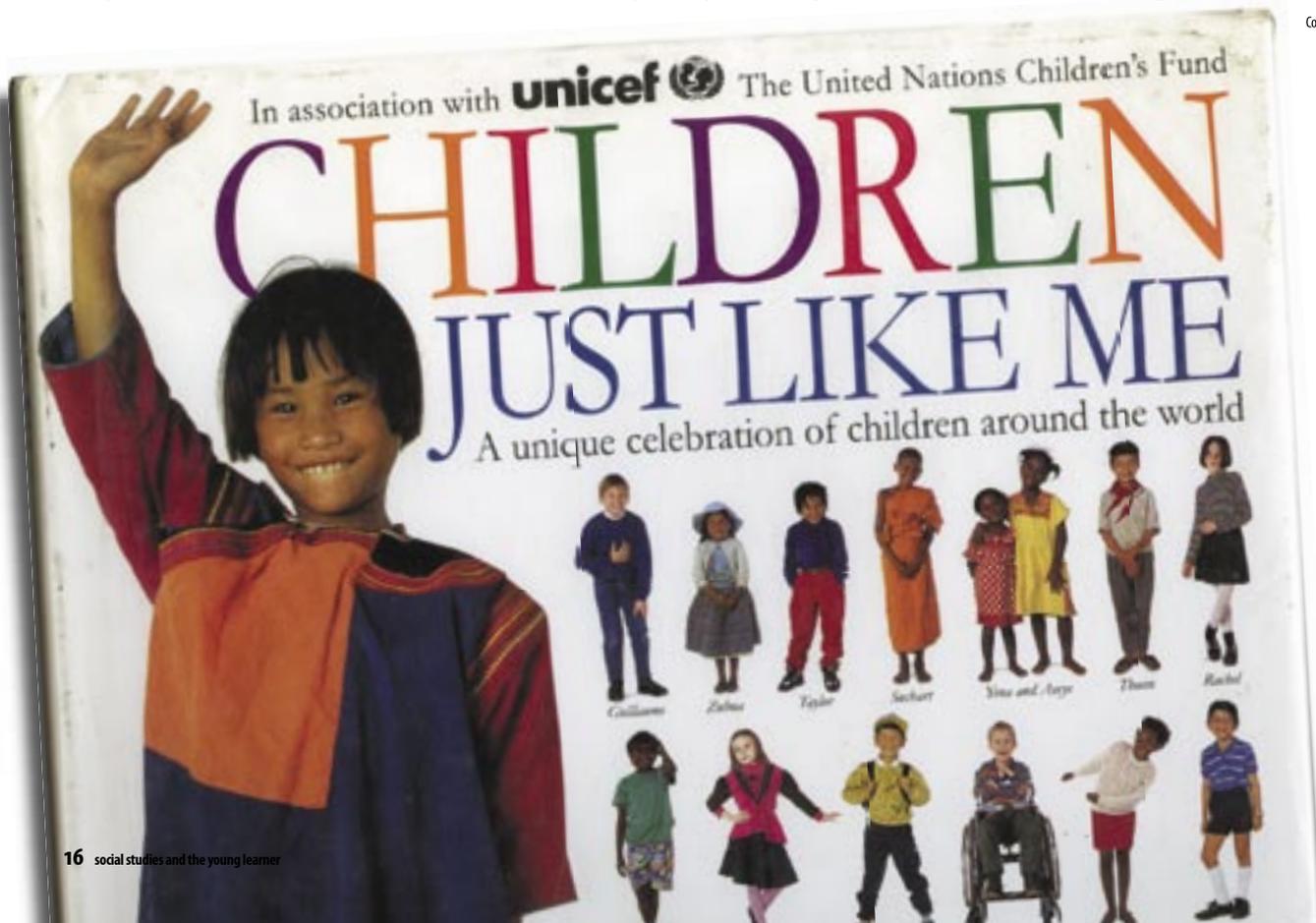
On the first day of school, Mrs. Paul's students are greeted with a welcome doormat, soft music, a partially decorated room, and other unique features that reflect a communal voice. On looking closely,

students notice that the room's decoration includes a section of the bulletin board depicting the personal history of the teacher herself, including a funny baby photo, a primary school assignment, and a well-used recipe card.

In the first hour, Mrs. Paul introduces herself, then asks each student to stand in turn, introduce him or herself, and describe a favorite summer activity. Then Mrs. Paul describes her ideal learning community. She is quick to follow this description with questions, asking to hear about her students' ideas of what a friendly and creative learning space might look like.

Mrs. Paul talks to her students about her role and responsibilities as a teacher. She explains that she receives a paycheck for assuming the role of head educator who orchestrates learning opportunities for all students. She makes no excuses about being the designated leader in charge, but she likens her role to that of the President of the United States, who needs the cooperation of the people around him to be an effective leader. She explains that a teacher needs lots of cooperation and assistance in order to promote democratic values

Continued after the pullout



in the classroom.

Think about beginning the school year as Mrs. Paul does by putting forth a vision of your classroom as a learning community, using past class events, work samples, and personal stories to seize the interest of your students. Each new class, however, should be encouraged to generate its own ideas about how a democratic and creative classroom would work. If “the learning community” is described on a series of posters that are on display the moment that students first walk in the door, then the opportunity is lost. When it comes to democracy, the process must be part of the message.

Three Aspects of Personhood

The classroom community provides a forum for learning social studies in a safe, orderly, and enjoyable environment. It serves as a natural way for connecting cognitive, social, and emotional development. A good curriculum is one that respects and balances the need to educate “three people” in each individual: the worker (in this case, the child whose work is to attend school and prepare for adult responsibilities), the citizen (the child interacting with the social and physical environment), and the private person (the child exploring his or her own unique talents and moral landscape). All of these dimensions of “personhood” can be experienced first hand in a classroom that is defined as a learning community, a safe setting for academic, social, and emotional learning.

Universal Aspects of Childhood

A unit of study on childhood provides a natural segue into substantive social studies content that will draw heavily from the social science disciplines and deepen students’ understanding and appreciation of their community. Lessons about childhood fit well as an introduction to the year because they personalize learning for both the teacher and the students in multiple ways; they can be adapted to a range of grade levels (for upper grades, one shifts the focus from childhood to adolescence); they provide an array of learning opportunities for students; they afford opportunities to take a close look at what seems to be familiar; and they appeal to students because the content places children at the center.

A childhood unit of study is also a perfect place to focus on the idea that all people share some common experiences as they progress through and beyond childhood, yet everyone is also unique in some ways. A learning community also provides an ideal environment for addressing the academic side of social studies. All of the children in the community have places where they live and work (geography), a set of experiences across time (history), needs and wants (economics), a culture that provides meaning to their lives (anthropology), and the need for governance, which in America means participating in creating government as well as obeying rules (civics). Through structured discourse, students will begin to realize that social studies is dynamic and is an integral part of their lives, both inside and outside the classroom.

Alike and Different

While children all over the world are alike in many ways, each one is also unique (e.g., fingerprints, voice, cells of the body, face, the ways

Figure 1

Topics within a Unit of Study on Childhood

1. Elements of Childhood
2. Specialness
3. A Day in the Lives of Children Around the World
4. Birthdays
5. Rites of Passage
6. Children and Work
7. Early Schools
8. Today’s Schools
9. Toys and Entertainment
10. Children as Consumers
11. Adults Provide for Needs
12. Childhood Talents and Interests
13. Children Can Make a Difference

Source: *Social Studies Excursions*, Volume 3. See reference 2.

s/he thinks, feelings about things, and talents). Lessons addressing the factors that contribute to uniqueness such as inheritance, culture, or environment, serve as another optimal place to continue conversations about tolerance and prejudice—topics that need to be revisited regularly in authentic ways instead of simply on designated holidays or when there is reference to the term in a sidebar in a textbook.

There is a host of children’s literature sources that you might consider as you develop and implement lessons about children around the world. *To be a Kid, Wake Up, World! A Day in the Life of Children Around the World* and *Children Just Like Me* are great examples illustrating how children’s lives everywhere are alike in many ways, yet different in other ways due to culture, geographic conditions, economic resources, personal choices, etc. Authentic children’s literature laced with interactive narrative, electronic pen pals, and resource people in the community, can be used to deepen children’s thinking about culture, especially as these resources connect to their own lives. Attention to chauvinism will occur naturally as you engage in conversations about cultural borrowing, tolerance, or uniqueness.

Birthdays and rites of passage are other useful topics. Children all around the world have birthdays, although they may have very different celebration customs from ours and there are places in the world where birth dates go unnoticed and instead people have group birthdays when everyone becomes one year older. Also, people all over the world celebrate major happenings in their lives. Creating lessons that focus on these big ideas build empathy and tolerance and go a long way in ridding the classroom community of prejudice.

Labor and Learning

Designing lessons that focus on children and work can add both an historical and a cultural perspective. For example, in pioneer times, children in America worked to help support their families; later some worked as apprentices; still later some worked in factories. Today, however, there are laws against this and all children in America go to school, which is considered their work, until they reach at least age 16. Most complete high school by the age of 18. While in many

Figure 2

NCSS Position Statement (excerpt)

SOCIAL STUDIES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Prepared by Elementary/Early Childhood Education Committee. Approved by NCSS Board of Directors, 1984. www.socialstudies.org/positions

A major goal of the social studies for young children is the development of a positive self concept. They need to understand that they are unique in themselves, but that they share many of the same feelings and problems with other children. They need to understand how they can as individuals contribute to the society. ... The early years are the ideal time for children to understand democratic norms and values (justice, equality, etc.) in terms of smaller entities (the family, classroom, community). Applying these concepts to the nation and the world will be easier if one understands and appreciates them on a smaller scale.

parts of the world children also go to school as their work, there are places where, due to limited resources, children work, at least part time, in factories and fields. Exposure to these ideas will broaden your students' thinking and foster empathy and appreciation for children around the world in new ways. Subsequent lessons might address early schools and schools today, focusing on changes over time and how economic resources are a major factor everywhere in determining the amount and quality of schooling available to children.

Toys and Technology

A series of lessons on toys and entertainment also might be included, again using historical, economic, and cultural threads to build meaningfulness. Main ideas you could incorporate include: children and their families long ago often combined work and entertainment; families made everything themselves including toys; toys and entertainment have become big businesses in our country; there are places in the world where resources are limited, so children's games and entertainment are still much like those enjoyed by American children long ago. These lessons would provide an ideal place for addressing issues associated with history. For example, as you share your family story about toys and entertainment, perhaps beginning with your great-grandparents and using an interactive timeline accompanied by drawings, photos or props, you can talk about changes that have occurred including the many during your lifetime—and the trade-offs associated with them. You can explain how technology and new resources trigger change, bringing both progress and new challenges. After the change, we still have most of the things we had in the past, but the older things are used or played with less often. Some old toys become collector's items, and the best specimens are treasured and put on display for us to observe in museums. A related big idea is that the availability of resources, as well as values and personal preferences, influence one's choices of material resources and products.

Family as a Resource

Create home assignments that match the goals of the lessons and link the main ideas developed in the classroom to out-of-school-settings. These assignments allow applications of the content and can fit well to the notion of classroom community, especially if you (the teacher) also complete them. For example, "Interview a grandparent, neighbor, or friend about toys and entertainment when s/he was a child as compared to today. Use the interview schedule provided," or "Talk with a family member about one new feature you would like to add to your next birthday celebration, given what you have learned about birthdays in other cultures. Ask family members about how they celebrated their birthdays as children."

As you share your responses and talk about how you experience the big ideas in out-of-school settings, you and the students learn about one another and your families. This creates an intimate element within the classroom community and fosters appreciation of diversity. An added bonus is that the teacher learns something about each home situation, which creates expanded opportunities for personalizing school content in the future by relating it to the work, hobbies, and cultural backgrounds of your students and their families.

Conclusion

These are just a few examples of how one can take childhood as the main topic of a unit of study and create interesting lessons that cover many aspects of social studies. (See figure 1 and its source for more topics that fit within a unit of study on childhood.) In summary, the classroom learning community is a place for helping students practice democratic life, in addition to addressing the academic subjects (Figure 2). Social studies content developed around the topic of childhood offers an opportunity to bridge the formal and informal, to enrich and deepen personal connections within the community, and at the same time, to develop networks of connected ideas associated with geography, history, economics, culture, and citizenship—with the child at the center. 📖

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